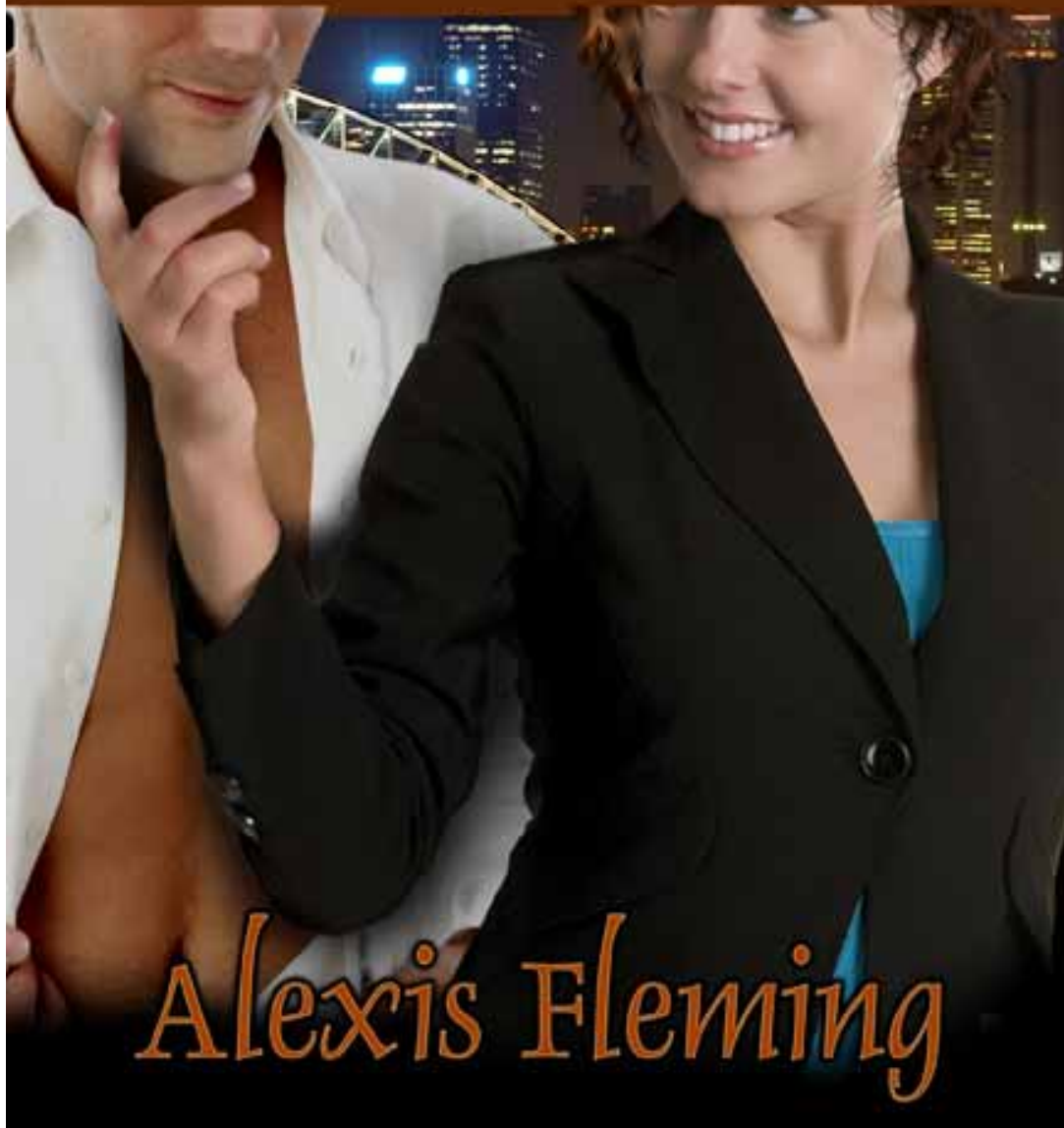


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Mortified MatchMaker



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Mortified Matchmaker

Alexis Fleming

Dedication

For Sue Seeley, a terrific friend, the perfect reader, and a whiz at titles. Thanks for your help on this one, Sue.

And special acknowledgements to my fantastic editor, Angela James. I might grumble when I get the edits in, but you make my work better than I dreamed possible. Thank you.

Chapter One

“Come on, boss, you can’t be serious.” Matt dropped into the chair in front of the desk and ran his hands through his hair. “What’s wrong with one of the others doing it?” Bloody hell, he’d just finished one big undercover operation and had been looking forward to being himself for a while. Plain Matt Campbell. Otherwise, it was too easy to get lost in the characters he assumed for the sake of work. He needed time to reinforce his identity.

The last thing he’d expected when he’d walked into the Special Investigation Unit this morning was to have to turn around and start on a new job. He should have known something was up by the smirks on the faces of the other agents.

“What about Hennessey?” he said, thinking out loud. “He’s not on a job at the moment.”

“You’ve got more on-ground experience than anyone else in the unit as far as undercover work goes so, sorry, but you’re it.” Bob Morris, the inspector in charge of the unit cast him a quick look under lowered brows before he flicked open the file in front of him. “Besides, Hennessey will be looking into the Lifestyle Introduction Agency.”

Matt stood and strode across the office to gaze out the window on downtown Sydney. It was lunchtime and from thirty-three floors up, the crowd of workers and shoppers looked like scurrying ants, each focused on its destination.

He suddenly wished he could join them. Damn it, he was getting stale. It was time for a holiday—away from the dregs of humanity he encountered in his work as a federal officer.

With a sigh, he turned to face his boss. “I thought the Office of Fair Trading was investigating this shonky dating business.”

“And so they will be,” Bob snapped, “but we’ve got a part to play, too. There have been numerous tip-offs and complaints from clients over the past six months. In fact, one poor bastard shelled out twenty grand and didn’t receive one introduction. No, Fair Trading can deal with those. We have other issues to look into. Something else—something even more serious—has come to light as a result of their investigations.”

Hmm, the boss never uses that tone unless something big is about to break. “Okay, let me have it.” He left the window and marched back to his seat, turning his attention on his superior.

“Fair Trading has discovered there’s more than just overcharging taking place here. One agency in particular seems to be going in for a spot of credit card fraud. Debits the cards twice for services not supplied, as well as having employees pose as clients.”

“But surely that’s a state problem?” Matt shook his head and tried to come to grips with what Bob was telling him. Fuck it, he really needed that vacation. He was still confused about the whole issue. “How come we’re involved?”

“There has been a complaint—a very discreet complaint—from a high profile personage who feels he has been ripped off. The agency matched him up with a woman who turned out to be an employee.”

“Who’s the guy? And why should it bother him the woman wasn’t a registered client? Workers are entitled to have relationships, too. Maybe she fancied him.”

“We’re talking a Supreme Court judge here and this went way beyond a simple date. Now it’s blackmail.”

Matt raised his eyebrows. *Fucking hell.* Okay, this *was* serious. A judge at the mercy of a blackmailer? It raised a whole series of ugly scenarios. Perverting the course of justice. Throwing cases. Overturning jury verdicts. Sometimes a man involved in a blackmail threat would do anything to hide his dirty little secrets.

“I can’t believe a judge would be stupid enough to get caught up in something like this.” *Bloody idiot.* Matt shook his head in astonishment. How could anyone in a position of authority be so damned moronic? “Are

you going to tell me who he is, and which matchmaking agency we're talking about?"

"The company is called Dreams Unlimited and the judge is Terry O'Ryan."

"Holy shit..." Matt shook his head. "Hang on a minute. O'Ryan's at least fifty years old, with a wife and teenage children. What the hell is he doing going to a dating agency?"

"That's where the problem is. The man *is* married and the dating agency has photos of him and his *date* in... Well, let's just say, in *flagrante delicto*." Bob Morris gave a disgusted snort. "Not certain who's fucking who, but yeah, right in the middle of doing the dirty."

"Crap," Matt muttered. "The man's a fool."

"Be that as it may, *we* have to clean up his mess."

"Jesus, I hope you don't mean that literally."

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation before Matt could ask any more questions. He turned his head to see his colleague and friend, Adam Quinn, enter the room, a case folder clutched in his hand. Adam pulled a chair up to the desk, lowered his lanky frame into a comfortable position and placed the folder in front of him.

"Everything you need to know about Dreams Unlimited is in here." He tapped a long finger on the cover of the file.

Before Matt could respond, Bob jumped into the conversation. "Just give us a rundown. Matt can read the details later."

"Okay, let's see." Adam flicked open the folder. "Company name Dreams Unlimited, situated 23 Willby Street, North Shore. Offices downstairs, self-contained apartment on the next level. Registered directors are a Jane Melissa Morgan and Mitch Rivers. Morgan goes by the name of Mel for business purposes. She lives in the apartment above the premises."

He turned over two glossy, eight-by-ten photographs and slid them across the desk.

Matt glanced down at the first of the photographs. Mitch Rivers was the type he'd seen women drool over—blond, blue-eyed, strikingly handsome looks...if you went for that kind of thing. Dressed in a dark tailored suit, Rivers presented a debonair, sophisticated image. Matt tapped a finger on the surface of the photograph. "What do we know about this guy?"

Adam consulted the case file. "He's been in trouble in Victoria. Did time there for a roof-cleaning scam. He'd pick older women on their own and offer to do work on their homes, preyed on their vulnerability. Of course, it was always money up front and then he wouldn't turn up to do the job, just disappeared with the cash."

"Hmm, slimy character. Can't stand the type of crim who targets the elderly. Anything else?"

"There were one or two other scams the local police suspected he was responsible for," Bob chimed in. "The sale of bogus shares and insurance policies on companies that didn't exist. The boys down south could never prove it. Others were involved and they took the fall, while Rivers walked away as free as a bird. And no one would speak out against him."

Matt turned his attention to the second photograph. The woman looked to be in her late twenties. Shoulder-length, wavy brown hair with blonde highlights, brown eyes and a bright, sexy smile. She was dressed in a figure-hugging, strapless number that left a large portion of her breasts exposed. Matt wondered in passing how she managed to keep it up.

She was the type of woman he'd normally gravitate to at a social function. A woman who knew the score.

"Dynamite package." He indicated the photo. "Any record on her?"

"No, she's clean," Bob said.

"Any ideas on how they got into the extortion business?"

"The company caters to the more well-heeled end of the market." Adam closed the file with a snap. "Best we can make out, if you don't earn in excess of one hundred and fifty grand a year, you don't get in. It

appears they have more male clients than female. Professional people. Doctors, lawyers, politicians—”

“Judges,” Matt interrupted.

“Right, judges,” Adam agreed. “The actual introduction side of the business seems almost legit. Apart from the complaints of overcharging and not coming up with the full number of introductions.”

“What about the blackmail? How did that come about?”

Bob stood and, hands clasped behind his back, paced about the room. “Rivers approached our judge, and one other prominent businessman we know of, at a social function. From what we can gather, he runs a little business on the side. He offered them the services of an escort. Perhaps their wives were ill and they needed a partner for a special function. That type of thing.”

“Oldest game in the book,” Matt interrupted. “Fuck their brains out then go for their wallets. Bet it’s only married men or prominent public figures they target.”

“As I was saying...” Bob flung an impatient look Matt’s way. “All very kosher and aboveboard. Or so it seemed. Problem is, the woman took them back to the dating agency and talked them into having sex. After that, it’s pay up or the liaison becomes public.”

“I take it the escort involved is the partner?” Matt glanced at the glossy photo of the woman.

Bob shook his head. “No, we believe it’s the receptionist at the agency. Your job is to go in as a client and find out if Morgan is part of the scam. *And* to locate Rivers. He went to ground after Fair Trading got a whiff of his dirty little game.”

Matt reached over and slid the photographs back inside the folder. All thoughts of a holiday pushed to the back of his mind, he stood and tucked the file under his arm. Time to get to work.

“Where do we start? I assume you have a cover arranged for me?” He frowned at the grin on Adam’s face.

“Along with Hennessey,” Bob said, “and the inspectors from Fair Trading, you’re about to become a member of the *Love Police*. You—”

"You have got to be kidding. *Love Police*? Who coined that corny title? Couldn't you have come up with something else?" No wonder the guys had all been grinning like Cheshire cats when he'd walked in.

"That's not the half of it, my friend." Adam was having difficulty controlling his laughter. "We've found the perfect cover for you. You're not exactly a troll so we had to come up with something feasible to explain why you'd frequent a dating agency."

Matt ignored the backhanded compliment. "And?" His voice dropped to a deep, ominous tone.

"You're a funeral director. How many females do you know who'd go out with an undertaker? The *ick* factor alone would put them off. What else could you do but go to a matchmaking agency? You want to get married and father lots of little apprentice undertakers. Perfect!"

"I don't believe you guys." Matt groaned. "Why couldn't I be a scientist who's locked up in a lab? Or a geologist with one of the oil or gas companies? They spend most of their time out in the bush or on the rigs and don't get to socialize a lot. Any one of those would have done. And what about the fact I'm supposed to be rolling in money? How many undertakers are wealthy enough to satisfy the requirements of this dating agency?"

"This one is," a sonorous voice said from somewhere behind him.

He spun to face the door. Standing in the entrance was a tall, thin man. He was dressed in a smart black suit with a perfectly pressed and starched white shirt. That wasn't so bad. It was the red and white polka-dot bow tie that made Matt's eyes boggle. Surely this wasn't—

"Good morning. I'm Joshua Cribbs, funeral director and part owner of Cribbs & Campbell Funeral Homes. By the way, we don't use the term undertaker anymore. So outdated."

It was. Matt silently groaned.

The man bent from the waist in a stiff salutation. As he straightened up, Matt studied him. The heavily lined and well-worn face made him seem ancient, but Matt suspected he was somewhere in his early sixties. His cheeks were sunken and his teeth, yellowed with age, were very

prominent. What hair he had he'd slicked back with some type of hair oil. The man could have posed as one of his own clients.

The pungent odor of hair grease, mixed with a heavy aftershave, emanated from the funeral director. As it caught in the back of his throat, Matt struggled not to cough. He didn't want to offend the old codger.

He sniffed discreetly. There was something else. He had to discipline himself to keep a straight face after he'd pinned it down.

Mothballs.

God help him, Matt wanted to laugh. Joshua Cribbs not only smelled as if he'd been preserved in mothballs, he looked it, too. Ah, well, at least it was better than embalming fluid.

He banished his wayward thoughts as Cribbs reached out and shook his hand. Matt had an almost irresistible urge to wipe his palm down the leg of his trousers. There was something macabre about clasping the hand of someone in this line of work. A stupid reaction when he considered he'd dealt with his own share of bodies.

"Good of you to come in, Mr. Cribbs." Bob stood to greet the funeral director.

"No problem at all, my dear sir. Always happy to be of assistance." Cribbs nodded slightly in Bob's direction before turning his attention back on Matt.

"To answer your question, Mr. Campbell, I *am* rich. Cribbs & Campbell is the most affluent of all funeral homes in Sydney. Add to that my own personal fortune and I more than qualify as a client of this dating agency you're investigating."

Matt flicked a quick glance at his boss. Just how much did this guy know?

"It's okay. I've fully briefed Mr. Cribbs. He had to know the details to assist us." Bob gestured to the older man. "Go on, Mr. Cribbs."

"Now, where was I? Oh, that's right. The company." He tucked his hands into the pockets of his jacket and rocked back on his heels.

"Cribbs & Campbell has been in existence since the eighteen hundreds. It started small and is now a thriving concern."

"The Campbell part of Cribbs & Campbell died quite a few years ago," Bob interrupted. "His son, Jason, inherited."

"Unfortunately," Cribbs continued, "Jason wants nothing to do with the business so he's virtually a *sleeping* partner." He broke off and laughed, the sound rumbling up from deep in his chest and issuing forth as a series of asthmatic-sounding wheezes. "So sorry, my dear chap. A little in-house joke. To get back to the point, I run the whole concern now."

"There's no one here in Sydney who knows the son's name so you'll become that son for the duration of this case," Bob said to Matt. "You can use your own name this time around."

Joshua Cribbs ran his hand over his slicked-back hair. Using the other hand, he dragged a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket. Deep concentration on his face, he fastidiously wiped the oil from his palm before he spoke again. "So fortuitous your family name is Campbell. That should make it easier for you."

He paused a moment. One long, tapering finger tapped at his pursed lips. "Oh, I've alerted all the staff at the funeral home. If anyone should call and ask questions about Mr. Campbell, they'll know how to respond. As far as people on the outside are concerned, you've moved here from one of our other branches to begin to take up the reins in preparation for the day I retire."

With raised eyebrows and an enquiring look, he turned toward Inspector Morris. "Is there anything I've forgotten, my good sir?"

"No, I think you've covered it all." Bob moved out from behind the desk and approached Matt. "Mr. Cribbs is going to take you under his wing for a week and give you a crash course on funeral directing. After that—"

"Hey, I won't be doing any actual hands-on work, will I?" Matt's stomach turned over at the thought of preparing bodies for burial. He

had done some creepy things in his undercover work, but that was too much.

“No, no, Mr. Campbell.”

Cribbs laughed again, the sound an ancient wheeze that raised the fine hairs on Matt’s arms. Christ, the guy sounded like a ghoul, or at least what he imagined a ghoul would sound like if it suddenly decided to communicate with the living.

“I have a full staff to do the actual preparation. A funeral director is just that. He directs the funeral, takes care of the business side of things, keeps the books and so forth. Although I do occasionally do the make-up if the family wants an open casket. Just to keep my hand in, so to speak.”

Matt shuddered at the picture this evoked in his mind. It was one thing to deal with the deceased within the confines of his work. This was something else. He was a good Catholic boy with a healthy respect for death. He just didn’t want to be this close to it. Not on a daily basis. Thank God it was only for a week.

Cribbs tucked his arm through Matt’s and turned him toward the door of the office. Matt fought hard to control the shudder threatening to rip through his body at the man’s touch.

“Let us depart, Mr. Campbell, my good sir.” Cribbs smiled, flashing his yellowed teeth. “It’s time to turn you into a funeral director.”

* * *

“Um...are you the lady who’s going to teach me all about sex and romance? I know it’s a lot to ask, but, you see...I’m desperate for a woman.”

Melissa jumped, dropping the telephone receiver down on the cradle. She jerked her head back and stared at the apparition in the doorway of her sister’s office. *Her* office, if you took into account the fact she was pretending to be her sister. She’d expected Angelica to announce their latest client, not just send him along to the office.

Damn Jane for putting her in this position. She'd come down to Sydney for a holiday with her sister, not to fill in for her at the matchmaking agency she owned with her on-again-off again partner, Mitch Rivers.

Melissa had arrived at Jane's apartment to find Jane had disappeared. A scribbled note had awaited her, asking Melissa to take Jane's place as proprietor of the dating agency for a few days.

Shit, Jane, when will you grow up? Melissa couldn't believe she'd allowed her sister to manipulate her like this. Again!

Why hadn't she just turned right around and headed back to Brisbane? She was a kindergarten teacher, for crying out loud, not a matchmaker.

Because your sister needs you?

The words echoed through her mind. Reliability was a word totally missing from Jane's personal dictionary, but regardless of Jane's faults, Melissa had never been able to turn her back on her sister. Despite anything else going on in her life, she always came whenever Jane called.

Maybe it was time to break the pattern, force her sister to stand on her own two feet. Melissa sighed. It had always been this way. She'd been cleaning up after Jane ever since their mother had died, and all because of a promise made to her mother on her deathbed to look after her flighty sister.

The sound of a man clearing his throat brought her back to the present. Pushing herself to her feet, she gave a surreptitious tug on the bottom of the skirt she'd borrowed from Jane's wardrobe. She frowned. Did Jane have to wear her skirts so damn short?

The high heels she'd pilfered at the same time didn't help matters much either. If she weren't careful, she'd end up tripping right over and exposing her fanny to all and sundry.

"You must be Mr. Campbell. Welcome to Dreams Unlimited." She approached the client and extended her hand in greeting.

"Matthew Campbell, at your service, my good lady." He grasped her hand and bowed low over it.

His palm slid against hers and it suddenly felt as if a charge of electricity had zapped up her arm. Melissa dragged in a shaky breath as a delicious shiver feathered down her spine. Her eyes opened wide. *What the hell? Where is this coming from?*

Matthew Campbell straightened and she stared into eyes so dark it was impossible to differentiate between iris and pupil. An ungoverned thought hit her. She could drown in those eyes.

Sexual energy surged through her body, threatening to overload her system. Any twinges of nervousness at filling in for her sister disappeared beneath a blanket of warmth.

The man towered over her diminutive five feet two inches. So much so she had to tilt her head back to look at him. And what she saw wasn't bad. Not bad at all.

His olive complexion and dark hair and eyes suggested Mediterranean heritage. Possibly Italian. He wasn't strictly handsome, but he *was* striking. Strong. Sexy. Lean and dangerous looking. One of those men who just oozed sex appeal without even lifting a finger. So why would a man like this need to find his dates through an introduction agency?

Although, come to think of it, he could do with a change of image. His dark suit and pristine white shirt looked quite smart, but the red polka-dot bow tie didn't cut it. In fact, it made him look downright comical.

Something else caught her attention. Trying not to appear too obvious, Melissa stared even harder. She needed to verify her eyes weren't playing tricks on her.

The man was wearing hair oil.

No one wore hair oil these days. She had a sudden mental picture of running her fingers through his hair and coming away with oil dripping from her hand. *Yuck!*

Cut it out, Melissa. You're here to help the man, not run him down. At least it explained why he needed a dating agency, and *she* wasn't the one on the lookout for a partner, so how he wore his hair shouldn't affect her.

A small smile kicked up the corners of his sensual mouth as if he knew his effect on her. Melissa dragged her hand from his grasp and pointed to the chair in front of the desk. “Would you like to sit down, Mr. Campbell?”

She moved around to the other side of the desk and seated herself in the executive chair Jane favored. As her skirt slid up, she sighed, grateful the lower part of her body wasn’t on show. Somehow, she had the feeling this man had seen it all, but she wasn’t about to give him a free viewing of *her* legs.

Matt tried not to frown as he looked at the woman across from him. Something didn’t feel right. For some reason, she didn’t quite match up to the glossy photograph in the folder back at headquarters. For a start, the hairstyle was different. Instead of the long waves, her hair, warm brown shot through with vibrant strands of copper, was a riot of curls framing her face.

Okay, so that was easily explained—a bottle of hair dye and a visit to the hair salon. But it was more than that. A subtle difference he couldn’t put his finger on. He had a feeling he was missing something. Something important.

The face was the same. Elfin, although less of the gamine look and more of the little-girl-lost. He felt an almost irresistible urge to scrape some of the make-up off her face and expose the beauty beneath. Not that the make-up wasn’t perfectly applied. The only thing marring the flawless camouflage job was a small scar high on the curve of her right cheek. Funny, he hadn’t noticed that in the photo.

She lifted her head and smiled at him. Tension slammed through him, coiling in his gut. His heart started to race. His palms grew sweaty. The blood pounded through his veins, heading south, and his cock hardened in reaction. He squirmed in the seat, trying to ease the constriction in his trousers.

What the fuck... Hell, this had never happened to him before. He’d met women he’d desired, but he’d never felt such a strong instantaneous attraction. *Shit, man, it’s just sex. Deal with it.*

The photo hadn't done justice to the woman. In fact, the photo had downright lied. He'd seen her eyes as a flat brown, but they weren't. They were tawny, the color of rich sherry, but right now, they were staring at him with a look of distrust in their depths.

Now why should that be?

"So, Mr. Campbell, can I ask how you heard about our agency?"

Looks like his cover had held up. Good, although it irked the hell out of him that she should see him like this. He had a sudden need to expose the real Matt Campbell. Show her he was as good as the next man at romancing a woman. And as for the sex...

He blinked and struggled to clear the fanciful thoughts from his head. Amazing how hard it was to remember this woman was the subject of an ongoing investigation. He dragged his attention back to the matter at hand, fighting hard to grasp hold of the character Joshua Cribbs had created for him.

"I run into a lot of people in my business. One of my spouses mentioned they had met through your agency a couple of years ago. Sad, but at least they had two good years before the veil between this world and the next was ripped asunder."

Hands clasped in prayerful supplication, he closed his eyes and lowered his head for a moment, just as Cribbs did each time he discussed his customers. The first time he'd seen Joshua do it, it had made him feel uncomfortable, until he'd realized it was a mark of respect for the deceased.

Let's see how Ms. Morgan receives it.

She was already nervous. He could see it in the way she avoided eye contact, in the faint tremor of her fingers. Even now, the knuckles of her hand showed white where she gripped the pen. Yep, definitely nervous. Very suspicious.

Melissa swallowed the lump in her throat. "Um, Mr. Campbell, you do know one of our requirements is that you be single, don't you?" She frowned at the client.

"Of course, my dear lady."

"But you mentioned spouses. Are you, or are you not, married? And just what *is* your business?"

"Oh, did I not say? How silly of me."

As the dark tones of his voice washed over her, a shivery feeling swept through Melissa. The skin on her arms pebbled. The man might have an unusual way of phrasing his words and he might dress like an old-fashioned undertaker, but his voice was as sexy as hell.

"Matthew Campbell, funeral director and part owner of Cribbs & Campbell Funeral Homes at your service," he said. "And the spouses I speak of are the partners who remain behind when a loved one crosses over."

She couldn't believe her ears. Here she was, silently likening the man to an undertaker and he tells her he actually *was* a funeral director? *Gross.*

"Of course, therein lies the problem."

His deep voice broke into her thoughts. Melissa tried to concentrate. "What problem would that be?" She was still trying to deal with the mental picture that had surfaced on mention of his occupation.

"The members of the fairer sex have a problem with dating a funeral director." He gave a loud sigh. "Which is why I felt the need to approach someone skilled in the matter of relationships. I'm thirty-two years old. It's time I took a wife. I'd like to have children before I'm too old to enjoy them. Every man desires a son to carry on the family name and to follow in his footsteps in the business."

"Um, yes, Mr. Campbell, I can see how your profession could create problems." Damn it, she wished she'd had time to read his file more thoroughly before he'd arrived.

"Okay, Mr. Campbell, how about we fill in the application form?" She dragged the form closer and held her pen poised. "Name: Matthew Campbell." She wrote the name in the appropriate box. "And your address?"

"Private or business?"

"Both," she replied.

“Cribbs & Campbell Funeral Homes in Dilton Street. Right near the Women’s hospital. Location is so important, don’t you think? Oh and my residential address is Rio Apartments, Unit one, Bilyard Avenue, Elizabeth Bay.”

She recorded the information, adding the phone numbers as he rattled them off. “Now this next question is a bit delicate.” She grimaced. “I know one’s earning capacity is normally personal, but you understand, we do cater to the wealthier members of society. The professionals who are too busy to find their own partners.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and sat up straighter in the chair. “Ask away, my dear lady. I have no secrets.”

“Do your earnings fall between the one hundred and fifty thousand and three hundred thousand mark?”

“Do you have a category higher than that? Undertaking is a very lucrative business. People are always dying so my talents are in demand. Cribbs & Campbell is the most well known of all the funeral homes. Plus we have branches in Brisbane and Melbourne. We have a record for gentile service of the most unobtrusive nature. Clients are always returning to us, without the need for advertising.”

Melissa had a sudden visual image of bodies rising from the grave to return to Cribbs & Campbell for a repeat performance because they’d enjoyed the first one so much. Her mouth twitched and she had to fight to school her features into a professional mask. If he thought she was laughing at his turn of phrase, he’d be offended, and rightly so. This was a serious business.

“So shall we say your earnings are in the three hundred thousand to six hundred thousand bracket?”

“Yes, that will do nicely.”

“I hope you don’t see this as an invasion of privacy, but we will have to check your business details. The women who register with our agency expect to be wined and dined in style. We, too, have a reputation to keep.”

Reaching inside his jacket pocket, he pulled out his wallet, extracted a business card and slid it across the desk toward her. "This is my accountant. I'm sure he'll be happy to give you any information you might need, my dear. I'll let him know to offer you every assistance when you ring."

Melissa picked up the business card and glanced at it. *Adam Quinn. Accountant.* She placed it down on the desk.

"Thank you, Mr. Campbell."

She frowned as she noted the details on the application form. If she wanted to find this man a match, she'd have to talk to him about calling everyone *my dear* or *my dear lady*. It made her cringe every time he did it. It was patronizing to say the least. "Now, on to what you require in a partner. Do you have any preferences? Occupation? Hair color, et cetera?"

"Please, call me Matthew, my dear Miss Morgan."

"Then you'd better call me by my first name, too, if we're going to be working together to solve your problem."

"Thank you, my dear lady. Mel it is."

"Ah...I'd prefer you call me Melissa," she managed to say.

He inclined his head and smiled at her. "Melissa. A beautiful name."

She glanced up at him, her gaze locked on the glitter of his dark eyes. Warmth streaked through her stomach and pooled between her thighs. A delicious little ache started right over her clit. Her panties grew wet as the heat concentrated in her pussy. She felt like a bitch in heat. With a shake of her head, she stared at a point over his left shoulder, trying to ignore the outrageous demands of her body.

Clearing her throat, she fought to concentrate on her client and not the flash-fire rushing through her veins. "Um, your preferences? Perhaps we should get back to those. Do you have a certain look in mind?"

"No, no, looks are immaterial. It's what's inside that counts. Although I would prefer a woman who is not overweight and who doesn't smoke, or drink to excess. So unhealthy, and I see enough of the end products of such misguided lifestyles in my line of business."

He crossed his legs and straightened the knife-edge crease down the front of his trousers. “No, what I’d like is a woman who is kind-hearted and generous with her sympathy. Of course, if the relationship becomes permanent, I would expect her to help with the bereaved. At least until the children come. So important for husband and wife to work together and generosity of spirit is a much valued commodity. Of course, I’d like my wife to be a stay-at-home mother after we have a family.”

Was this guy for real? Melissa sighed. Damn, it was going to be hard enough to find him a date given his profession. He was right. What woman in her right mind wanted to go out with a funeral director? *That* was bad enough. His chauvinistic attitudes just compounded the issue. No wonder he had problems.

“And what would you bring to a relationship, Matthew?”

“Let me see.” He clasped his hands together and rested his chin on them.

She waited, almost afraid to hear what he had to say. Whatever it was, it was sure to make her job more difficult.

“Hmm, I’m caring and considerate. Generous to a fault. Money is no object. I can give a woman anything her heart desires. I have an apartment in an upscale part of town and after the children come, I’ll buy more suitable accommodation. What else? Ah, I’m neat and tidy about the house so that won’t be an issue.”

He paused a moment, his lips pursed and a frown on his face. Then the frown disappeared and his eyes lit up. “Oh, and I have soft hands. Women would like that, I imagine. Comes from years of handling formaldehyde. Of course, we don’t use it now, but I still maintain formalin baths remain the best method for preservation.”

This time, Melissa couldn’t contain the shudder rippling through her body. She tried to banish the image his words engendered from her mind, but to no avail. It was time to close this interview. She didn’t think she could stand much more. “Very good, Mr. Campbell.”

“Matthew,” he said with a smile.

“Sorry. Matthew. Once you sign this contract, we guarantee you six introductions over the next three months. Of course, you can sign up for more if the first six don’t work out.”

“And the cost?”

Melissa looked down at the application form and the separate sheet with the price scrawled across it the receptionist, Angelica, had left on her desk. She shook her head and opened her eyes wide as she took in the figure. The woman had made a mistake, added one zero too many. It couldn’t be twenty thousand dollars. That was outrageous.

Assuming it was an error, she knocked one digit off the price and wrote the figure on the bottom of the application form. “That will be two thousand dollars for six introductions. Is that acceptable?”

“More than acceptable, my good lady.” It required all Matt’s efforts not to frown. Something was wrong here. The complaints that had come in had specified the amount of twenty grand for six introductions. So why quote only two?

Okay, he needed to rethink things. Maybe he’d screwed up. Had he let his cover slip in some small way, alerted her to the fact he wasn’t as well-off as he’d made out? Or maybe they were running scared because the Fair Trading boys were nosing around.

If he *had* tipped his hand, he’d have to get one of the other agents to take over the job. With a federal judge involved, they certainly couldn’t walk away from the case. Hell, come to that, he didn’t think *he* could walk away. That’s if he could even walk, given the way his body had reacted to Melissa Morgan.

She leaned over the desk and a trace of floral perfume wafted about him. It teased his senses, sending another wave of testosterone roaring through his body, racing down to his rock-hard cock. *Ah, shit. I am in big trouble.*

What the hell was wrong with him? Whatever it was, he’d better get over it, and damn quick. As far as the case went, he’d just have to continue and hope the operation hadn’t been blown.

With that in mind, he smiled at her, turning on the charm. “This is so good of you, my dear. I assure you, I appreciate your help. Where would you like me to sign?”

Melissa blinked at the thousand-kilowatt smile. Her heart skipped a beat as she basked in the glow. The blanket of heat settled tighter about her, her skin tingling as if he’d reached out and caressed her.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. With a supreme effort, she ignored the sexual energy skipping along her veins and dragged the persona of the professional businesswoman about her. Sliding the form across the desk, she watched as he scrawled his name at the bottom. After tucking it into the top drawer of the desk, she stood, gave her skirt a furtive tug, and ushered him to the door.

“Angelica will take you into the viewing room and help you make a videotape of yourself and your requirements. That allows prospective dates to see what you’re like before they commit themselves.”

She handed him over to the receptionist with a final word. “If you’d like to call before we close today—oh, say, five o’clock?— we should have something for you. We should at least have the preliminary checks done by then and we can search the database for a possible date for you.”

“So kind of you. I look forward to speaking to you.”

Melissa found she had to discipline herself to slide her hand into his for the customary handshake. Her palm heated at the feel of his skin against hers, pinpricks of awareness igniting a blazing fire in her belly. At the same time, she couldn’t get past what this hand did for a living. She tried not to appear rude as she disengaged herself from his hold and disappeared inside the office, firmly closing the door behind her.

“Jane, I’m going to kill you for this.”

Chapter Two

Melissa propped her elbows on the desk and lowered her head into her hands. Eyes closed, she silently counted to ten. She couldn't believe Jane had screwed up her holidays like this. It wasn't the first time. They could have spent time together last year, but Jane had put her off at the last minute. *And* the year before that. This time she'd been left with nothing but a scribbled note.

So where the hell was Jane?

She ran her hand through her hair, tangling the curls even more than normal. Damn it, this was supposed to be her vacation. A time to lounge around in shorts and tee shirts, not doll herself up to the nines in a fancy suit in order to look professional.

Silently cursing her gullibility where her sister was concerned, Melissa rummaged around in the jumbled contents of the top drawer of the desk looking for Jane's address book. Maybe one of her friends would know where she was.

About to close the drawer, she paused as she spotted a small photo of her and Jane. But for the heavier make-up and the long salon-styled waves, she could have been staring into a mirror. Only it wouldn't have been a true picture. At a glance, they might look like flip sides of the same coin, but Melissa knew that wasn't so.

Where Jane was all vibrancy, light-hearted and fun-loving, hers was a much more serious nature and it reflected on her face. Put the two of them together and Melissa felt her image was...oh, less sharp...than her sister's. Colorless, like a photo that had been underdeveloped. Somehow, she'd always felt she was living in her sister's shadow.

With a sigh, she tossed the photo onto the desk and pulled the phone closer. Then she punched in her sister's cell number. Maybe this time she'd be lucky and Jane would have the good manners to respond.

"Come on, Jane, answer, damn it." She drummed her fingers on the polished desktop as she waited. A sigh of relief escaped as her sister's voice came over the line.

"Jane Morgan speaking."

"It's me. Melissa."

"I thought it might be," Jane said.

"Damn it, Jane, I can't believe you're doing this to me again."

"I'm sorry, but I needed a break. I haven't had a holiday for two years. I felt like I was going crazy."

"Well, isn't that what I'm here for, so we can have some time together?" Her frustrated sigh echoed through the connection.

"But I'd still be working. I needed to get right away."

Melissa gritted her teeth at the whining tenor. She knew what that tone meant. She was about to have an argument with her sister. Or at the very least, get embroiled in some problem, real or imagined, her sister wanted fixed.

Their mother had died as a result of a car accident when the girls were barely out of college. Well aware of Jane's faults, she'd made Melissa promise to watch over her sister.

The promise had been unnecessary. She'd watched over Jane since the day they were old enough to walk. Deserted by her husband when the girls were toddlers, her mother had taken up with one so-called *uncle* after another as she tried to fill the void left by her husband. Despite the fact they professed to love her mother, not one of them had stayed around any longer than her father had. Was it any wonder Melissa didn't trust men, or love?

With a shake of her head at the futility of fighting the inevitable, Melissa grasped the phone tighter. "I don't want to hear it, Jane. Give me

a good reason why I'm here at *your* desk, wearing *your* clothes and doing *your* job."

"I work long hours," Jane mumbled. "I was getting burnt out. I needed to get away from the business, just for a few days."

"So you should have contacted me and arranged to come home to Brisbane. Why take off like this? And as for leaving me to run your dating agency, couldn't Mitch handle the business?"

Melissa knew there was a hard edge to her voice. She'd never liked Mitch Rivers. More than that, she distrusted him.

"I wish you wouldn't use that tone of voice whenever you speak about Mitch. I intend to marry him, so get used to it."

The petulant words grated on Melissa. She dragged in a deep breath and released it slowly, fighting hard to hang on to her patience. She wasn't about to get into an argument over Mitch Rivers. She may not like him, but he was Jane's choice for a partner, both in business *and* in her personal life.

"Why *can't* Mitch take over and we both head back to my place in Brisbane for a few weeks?"

"I don't know where he is."

"What do you mean you don't know where he is?" Melissa sat up straighter, a frown pulling at her forehead. "Have you two broken up?"

"No, we have not. At least, I don't...think we have."

She frowned even harder as she heard the hesitation in her sister's voice. A sound, suspiciously like a soft sob, filtered through. "All right." She gave a loud sigh. "What's going on?"

"I just needed a holiday."

"Jane," she warned.

"Okay, already. We had a fight and Mitch has taken off. I had to go after him and apologize. After all, it was my fault."

"What was the fight about?" Melissa gritted her teeth, mentally consigning Mitch Rivers to hell. In the last four years, every time Jane had a problem, Mitch was at the bottom of it. She still hadn't forgiven

him for talking Jane into sinking her savings into this dating agency. Although she had to give him credit, it must be doing okay if the designer suit she'd borrowed was any indication.

"It's none of your business what the fight was about," Jane spat out.

Melissa noted the stubborn tone. Time to try another tack. "Do you have any idea where Mitch has gone?" She kept the annoyance out of her voice.

"One of his friends said he was on the Gold Coast in Queensland."

"Is that where you are now?"

"Yes."

"How will you find him?"

"Don't know yet."

"You're just going to wander around the streets and call out to him? Come on, get real, Jane."

"I know a few of his haunts up here and I have the phone numbers of some of his friends. One of them is sure to know how I can contact him."

I so don't need this. Melissa released a frustrated sigh. If Jane were here right now, she'd have a hard time stopping herself shaking the daylights out of her. At twenty-five years old, it was time she grew up and sorted out her own problems.

There was silence for a few moments before Jane mumbled, "That's if he *will* talk to me."

"I heard that, Jane. What haven't you told me? Just what has Mitch done?"

"Damn it, Melissa, stop acting like you're my mother." Jane started to cry in earnest, the sobs loud and harsh over the phone. "I'm sorry to ruin your holiday, but I have to do this. I couldn't stand it if he didn't come back. I love him," she wailed.

"Hey, it's okay." Melissa's sympathy was instantly aroused. "Come on, don't cry. Forget the holiday. You concentrate on finding Mitch. I'll go home. Your receptionist can look after the business."

"You can't," Jane stated unequivocally. Not a trace of the previous crying tinged her voice.

Melissa felt a moment of disquiet. She marveled at how quickly the tears had disappeared. Jane had done that as a child. Turned the waterworks on whenever she wanted her own way, and off again when she'd achieved her objective.

"What do you mean, I can't go home?"

"I can't close up the agency. Mitch would never forgive me if we lost business and he won't be happy if Angelica's in charge. You have to take my place."

"For how long, Jane?"

"For two weeks? Please, Melissa, you've got holidays anyway and you're already down there."

"I thought you said a few days?"

"Mitch and I need some time. Pleasse."

"Jane, I know zilch about running an introduction agency. I'm a kindergarten teacher, for crying out loud. If it hadn't been for your receptionist, today would have been a disaster."

"Please, you have to do this for me. You told Mum you'd look after me and right now I need you."

Melissa cursed the day she'd made that promise. She knew darn well Jane was manipulating her, but old habits died hard. Once again, she felt unable to turn her back on her sister's cry for help. And all because of a stupid promise made out of guilt, not love.

Yeah, she loved Jane. After all, Jane was the other half of her. The flip side of the coin. Her twin. How could she not love her? But she'd always known, even when they were children, that Jane wasn't...quite right. And her mother had been aware of it, too.

Oh, not that she was mentally handicapped or anything like that, but as a small child, she'd definitely had behavioral problems. She'd fly into a rage if she didn't get what she wanted. Or dissolve into tears, which had been even worse. She used to go from a thundercloud one minute to

sunny smiles the next. Even now, as an adult, she had a tendency to be childlike, with her little girl voice and her temper tantrums when things didn't go her way.

Their mother had made it clear she preferred the more stable Melissa and the problem had been compounded. Jane had gone out of her way to get into all sorts of trouble in order to gain their mother's attention. And all Melissa had ended up with was a load of guilt because she was the favored daughter. She'd been trying to make up for it for years, but maybe it was time to put a stop to it.

"Okay, this is it, Jane. Crunch time. I'm sick to death of being at your beck and call. I'm already ready down here so I'll give you one week only. You hear that, Jane? *One week*. After that, if you haven't found your boyfriend, I'm going back to Brisbane to get on with my own life and to hell with the business. You understand?"

"Oh, thank you, you're the greatest, Sis."

The sulky tone was gone as if it had never been. Melissa could just imagine the grin of triumph on her twin's face.

"You're the best. That will give me time to sort things out with Mitch."

"Hey, don't you hang up yet. I still don't know the first thing about how to run a matchmaking agency."

"You don't need to. Angelica will take over the day-to-day routine and the filming of the clients' videotapes. All you have to do is interview any new clients and arrange meetings for the existing ones."

"Okay, so I check out the clients and find them a match in the database. If it's as easy at that, I don't understand why Angelica can't do it."

Jane didn't respond. Melissa shook her head and sighed in resignation. "So is that all?"

"Sometimes you might have to coach the client a bit." There was a slight pause before Jane continued. "Some of the men have no idea how to dress or to act to attract a woman. You might need to give them a few tips."

Melissa snorted. "I've never had a successful relationship in my life. I don't believe in love and I certainly don't trust men. You want *me* to give them tips?"

As she uttered the words, an old memory surfaced and along with it, a surge of resentment towards her sister. A picture of Brad, her ex-fiancé, formed in her mind, the edges of the image blurred with age. That had been one relationship she'd thought was going somewhere—that was until Brad had fallen in love with her sister. Of course, Jane had encouraged him by constantly flirting with him.

She banished the picture from her mind and the echo of bitterness from her heart. There was no point dredging up past grievances. It was over and done with now. And Jane was...Jane. She couldn't help her nature. Melissa dragged her mind back to the present and concentrated on what her sister was saying.

"You'll do fine. It's not like you're a virgin or anything. Just show 'em a good time, teach them what pleases you."

"*Jane Melissa Morgan!* If you... I can't believe..." She dragged in an outraged breath. "If you think I'm going to fuck your clients just to keep them happy, you can think again."

"Oh, lighten up. Stop being such a goody-two-shoes and have some fun for once."

Goody two shoes! Damn it to hell, she was sick to death of that label. She'd been wearing it ever since she was a kid.

"And there is one other thing you have to remember."

Melissa shook her head and waited. Why did she get the feeling she wasn't going to like what Jane was about to say?

"You have to pretend to be me."

"I thought that's what I *was* doing."

"No, you *really* have to pretend to be me. Most of our clients are rich, influential men. They won't open up to someone they don't know or haven't dealt with before. They expect some type of continuity. They expect me."

“Come on, they’re—”

“No, hear me out,” Jane interrupted. “We’re identical twins and I sometimes use a short wig, so the change in my hairstyle won’t be a problem. Just wear my suits and no one will know the difference.”

With a snort of disgust, Melissa glanced down at the abbreviated excuse for a skirt she was almost wearing. “And what about the fact we have different names?”

“No problem.” Jane started to giggle. “I always go by the name of Mel for business purposes. Anyway, the clients only know me as Ms. Morgan.”

She shook her head. There was more to this than her sister was letting on, but experience told her she wouldn’t get any more information from Jane at the moment.

Say no, Melissa, say no. The refrain resounded in her head, making it difficult to concentrate.

Promise me, Melissa. Her mother’s words came back to haunt her.

With a frustrated sigh, she slapped her hand on the desk in defeat. “Okay, I won’t say anything to your clients about filling in for you, but if one of them asks me outright, I’m not going to lie and pretend to be you. This is the last time, Jane. I’m no longer going to keep cleaning up after you. You got that? And if I screw up it’s your own fault.”

The sound of a car engine reverberated down the line. Melissa struggled to hear her sister’s words.

“Mitch didn’t take his office keys with him. They’re in the top drawer of my desk. Use them while you’re there.”

The engine roared, almost drowning out Jane’s voice. “You’ll be fine,” Jane yelled. “I have every confidence in you.”

She rang off. Melissa sat with the silent phone still held to her ear. *Damn it, here we go again. Another of Jane’s problems to solve.*

She slid open the top draw and extracted a bunch of keys on a gold keychain from the collection of odds and ends. A trace of heavy perfume floated up from one of Jane’s discarded handkerchiefs. It was all that

remained to remind Melissa that once again her sister had gotten her own way.

* * *

Matt sprawled in the chair in front of Adam's desk. The jacket of his dark suit hung over the back of an adjacent chair and the loose ends of his polka-dot bow tie dangled from his open collar. He grimaced as he scratched at his scalp, itchy from the liberal application of hair oil. He could do an oil change on the company cars with what was plastered on his head.

"I don't know how people used to wear this stuff." He fished around in his trouser pocket with his clean hand, looking for a handkerchief to wipe the mess from his fingers. "I can't wait to get home and wash the damn slime out."

"Stop with the complaints, Matt," Adam said with a grin. "If I had to go around unwashed when I went undercover for that month as a homeless person, it won't hurt you to suffer for a few weeks for the sake of duty. Even if you do look like a greaseball."

He settled back into his chair. "What impression did you get of this Jane Melissa Morgan, aka Mel Morgan?"

Matt picked up the glossy photograph on the desk and studied it. He tried to find the woman he'd met today in the flat, one-dimensional image. She wasn't there.

"Hoy, Matt, come back to us." Adam thumped the desk in front of him.

"Sorry. It's... I don't know. Something's not quite right. I have a feeling I've missed some vital clue." He waved the photo. "This woman is drop-dead gorgeous. Presents a sophisticated image, like she knows the score."

He flicked the photo across to Adam. "Look at the eyes. Fun-loving, but knowing. Worldly-wise." He shook his head. "Doesn't even feel like the same woman."

“How do you mean?” Adam glanced at the image, a frown on his face.

“For one thing, although the face is just as perfect, the camera lens didn’t pick up the small scar on her right cheek. Or maybe that photo is air brushed or computer enhanced. And she wears her hair short now. Different color, too. No, it’s more than that. It’s—”

“Come on, man, give. What’s got you worried?”

“I’m not certain I can explain.”

“Well, try. This could be important to the case.”

“The woman I met today seemed...softer. Less sophisticated, despite the fancy suit. Vulnerable. It was as if she wasn’t comfortable. I got the impression she didn’t know what she was doing when she interviewed me. She was very nervous about the entire process.”

“I’d make a bet Rivers is the brains behind this whole operation.” Adam pushed his chair back from the desk and propped his feet on the timber edge. “We know he has a record for being involved in scams. The woman may not be a low-life like Rivers, but she’s still a part of whatever is going on over there.” He paused. “Unless you can prove us wrong.”

“Hmm, you’re right. The fact she was so nervous is suspicious. She’s hiding something. Shame, though, she seemed rather...” His words trailed off as he stared at the captured image of Mel Morgan.

“Rather what?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Matt wasn’t about to let Adam know that, in some inexplicable way, the woman had gotten to him.

“Hey, don’t let your libido get in the way,” Adam warned. “This is an ongoing case. You have to remain focused. Now, haven’t you got a phone call to make?”

Matt glanced at his watch. It was just after five. Time to ring the dating agency and see if his cover had stood up. He dragged the phone closer and tapped in the number he’d committed to memory.

“Miss Morgan, this is Matthew Campbell,” he said as he slipped into his character.

“Good afternoon, Matthew. Thank you for calling. Everything has checked out so I ran your requirements through the computer and came up with two possible matches. If you come by early next week, you can view their tapes and decide whether you think either one of the women would be suitable.”

“Very gracious of you to respond so promptly, Miss Morgan.”

“Thought you were going to call me by my first name, Matthew.”

“Forgive me, my dear Melissa. Just trying to be a gentleman.”

“Now, which day would suit you for an appointment?”

He paused, trying to ignore the grin on Adam’s face. “You know, I would like to get this whole project underway. Is there any possibility I could come by tonight? After all, it’s Friday and I know your establishment closes over the weekend. I would appreciate it.”

There was silence for a moment as she pondered the question. Matt waited to see what her reaction would be. He gave Adam the thumbs-up sign as she resumed speaking.

“Okay, I guess I can understand your impatience. I’ll wait for you at the office and we’ll run the tapes together and see what you think. How soon could you be here?”

“Let’s see.” Matt grinned as he threw himself into his role. “I have to talk to Mr. Casey about whether he’d like rosewood or oak for his beloved wife. A lovely lady. She—”

“Would it be possible for you to be here by seven?”

“That would be perfect, my dear. It will allow me plenty of time to complete my business. I’ll see you then.”

He hung up the phone and grinned at Adam. “We’re on. I’m to meet her at seven. Maybe I’ll be able to get a better handle on what this woman is hiding.”

He stood, snatched up his jacket and shrugged into it. “I’ve got two hours before my appointment. Time to take in a swim. It will give me a chance to wash this gunk out of my hair, if only for a short while.”

Adam called out to him as he skirted around the desks and made for the door. “Hey, Matt, whatever it is about this woman that’s got you so intrigued, forget it. She looks as dirty as Rivers. Just do the job and don’t get involved.”

Matt waved a hand over his shoulder, not deigning to reply. He should have known better than to try to put something over on Adam. They’d been friends for years. The man knew him too well. And he was right about one thing.

Miss Mel Morgan was nothing but a suspect in an ongoing case.

Chapter Three

“Ackkkk, I am such a wimp. Why can’t I learn to say no?” Melissa banged her head on the high back of the chair. Why *had* she allowed herself to be talked into seeing a client at such a ridiculous time of the day, or rather, evening? Particularly this client?

As she remembered the deep timbre of Matthew Campbell’s voice, a shiver vibrated down her spine. For some reason he unsettled her. It wasn’t just his occupation. It was the man himself. For the life of her, she couldn’t understand why she was reacting this way.

She closed her eyes and mentally reviewed her earlier appointment with him. It took a moment for her to work out what it was that disturbed her. He made her feel. Okay, so it was nothing more than a strong sexual attraction. But for too long she’d hidden that side of herself away, and now, with a simple handshake, he had breached her defenses. It was not a state of affairs she was comfortable with. The sooner she found him a partner, the sooner she’d be shot of him.

Melissa jumped as a knock sounded on the door of the office. With a sensuous but strangely predatory grace, Angelica slinked in and lowered herself into the chair in front of the desk.

“How did you go with our newest client?” she purred.

“I’ve found him two possible candidates, but I’m not certain what they’ll think of *him*. He’s a bit strange. Comes of being a funeral director, I guess. And I think I’m going to have to give him a few pointers. If he calls me *my dear* or *my dear lady* one more time, I’ll hit him.”

Angelica laughed. “Get used to it. We get some strange types in here.” She extended her hand. “Can I have a look at the application?”

Melissa slid the form across the desk. There was silence as the other woman glanced over it, then her eyes opened wide and she slapped the application on the desk.

“What?” Melissa cast a worried glance at the receptionist. “Did I do something wrong?”

“I can’t believe it. You’ve charged the wrong price. I wrote the figure on a slip of paper I attached to the application form. Didn’t you see it?”

Melissa rummaged through the clutter on the desk until she came up with the piece of paper. “You mean this? I thought you’d made a mistake. You’re not telling me the fee really is twenty thousand dollars?”

At Angelica’s nod, she gasped. “That’s outrageous. How can you charge some poor, lonely person twenty thousand dollars for six names? Surely Jane doesn’t condone that?”

A haughty expression flickered across Angelica’s face. For a minute, Melissa thought she saw derision reflected in the blue eyes glaring at her. Then the moment passed.

“Mitch set the fees.” Angelica’s tone was as frosty as ice. “Jane goes along with whatever Mitch says. I think I’ll handle all the new clients in future. At least *I* know what I’m doing.”

“Well, I can’t change the contract now.” She shrugged, getting a tad annoyed with Angelica’s attitude. “The man has signed it so it’s legally binding.”

“Mitch is going to be furious when he sees this.” She glanced again at the application form. “Particularly as it’s such a rich client. How could you be such an idiot?”

“You know, Angelica, it’s really not good form to talk to the boss this way.” Melissa was now thoroughly pissed off. “A quick way to end your employment, I would have thought.”

“But you’re not the boss, are you?” Angelica smirked. “Just a carbon copy, filling in time until your sister returns.”

Melissa gritted her teeth. She wanted to remonstrate further with the receptionist, but damn it, Angelica was right. *And* she wasn’t above

making certain Melissa knew it. How the hell did Jane put up with the woman?

“Well, there’s not much we can do about it now.” Angelica stood and smoothed her skirt over her thighs before gliding toward the door. At the last moment, she turned back to face Melissa. Arms crossed under her breasts, she leaned against the doorframe, the position outlining her lush figure. “I’m finished for the day. If the phone rings, the voicemail will pick up any messages.”

Melissa continued to stare at her.

“Oh, before I go, don’t panic if you hear noises in the office tonight. I have a date with Mr. Bishop so I’ll be back here later in the evening.”

“Hey, hang on a moment,” she called out before Angelica could disappear. “Who the heck is Mr. Bishop and what do you mean you have a date with him?”

“Mr. Bishop is one of our oldest clients, and I do mean old, as in age. We haven’t been able to find him a match. He will persist in choosing women who are at least forty years his junior and most women want a relationship with someone closer to their own age.”

“But what’s that got to do with you dating him? And why here?”

“I’m running out of women to introduce him to. He’s had five names so far. I’ll be the sixth.”

“Are you telling me you go out with clients to make up the numbers? That’s deceitful.”

“No, that’s business. Mr. Bishop is quite happy with the arrangement. He’s been eyeing my legs off for ages. Now he thinks all his birthdays have come at once.”

“But it’s not right.” The whole idea horrified Melissa. It was nothing more than a scam. “Do the clients you go out with know you’re the receptionist?”

“Not always. It’s amazing how much I can change my appearance with nothing but a wig and a different style of dressing.” She raised one eyebrow and gave a sly grin. “Most of the time, they know who I am. And what’s wrong with it?” Her voice had taken on a defensive tone. “Why

can't I be a client, too? I'm entitled to find love as much as the next person."

"And Jane knows about this?"

"Mitch asked me to do it."

Hmm, funny how Angelica always defers to Mitch whenever I tax her about how Jane feels. If she were Jane, she'd be having a darn good look at the relationship between Mitch and Angelica. "This Mr. Bishop sounds old enough to be your great grandfather."

"Ahh, but he's rich. I'd marry him in a shot. At his age, I wouldn't have to put up with him for very long."

That was just plain sick. Melissa shook her head, unable to credit what she'd heard. There was something shonky about the whole business. Would Jane would be party to this? She suddenly remembered what else Angelica had said. "Why bring him back here?"

A feline smile flitted across the receptionist's face. "You don't really think I want to be seen out in public with an old geezer like Mr. Bishop, do you? Anyway, I won't be meeting him until ten and the viewing room is set up for social gatherings. Some of our clients prefer to meet for the first time in a secure setting. That's why the stocked bar and comfy couches. Now, I have to go. I have another appointment before I meet Mr. Bishop."

She spun on her heels and disappeared. Melissa just sat there as a surge of foreboding swept through her. *Jane, what have you gotten yourself into?*

The phone rang and without thought, Melissa reached out and picked it up. "Ah, good afternoon. Dreams Unlimited." Thank God she'd remembered to use the company name.

"Who's that?" a gravely male voice snapped.

"This is Melissa Morgan. Can I help you?"

"This is Sid...Jones. One of Mitch's *special* clients."

Melissa frowned at the emphasis on special. And given the hesitation, it was a good bet Jones wasn't his real name.

"Is Mitch there?" Impatience tightened his voice.

"No, Mr. Rivers is away at the moment. Can I help you?"

He ignored her question. "What about Angelica? She there?"

"Angelica has left for the day. Are you sure I can't help?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll call Angelica at home."

Before she could say another word, the man severed the connection. Melissa stared at the dead phone for a moment. Something was definitely fishy.

Maybe she was just being paranoid. After all, she didn't really know how the business was run. Perhaps the poor man was just embarrassed about having to pay for introductions to the opposite sex. It was obvious he didn't want to deal with anyone but Mitch or Angelica.

She'd have to ask Angelica about it tomorrow. Right now, she had to find the tapes for the women she'd selected for Matthew Campbell. The notepaper with the two names scrawled on it clutched in her hand, she walked out of Jane's office and across to the reception area. It didn't take long to work out the client tapes weren't under Angelica's control. Maybe Mitch kept them in his office.

Feeling a bit like a criminal, she tried the handle of the third office. It yielded to her touch and the door slid open with a slight creak. Melissa stepped inside and flicked on the light.

"Oh my gawd," she whispered.

The room was a mess. In fact, it looked as if someone had turned it over, searching for God knows what. Or maybe Mitch had simply left in a hurry. Files were everywhere. Cabinet drawers gaped. Papers overflowed, spilling out and cluttering up the carpet. A large cupboard against one wall stood open to reveal row upon row of videotapes, some of which had fallen onto the floor in an untidy heap.

"Crap, just how many clients do they have?" Melissa shook her head. How sad that so many people would need the services of a dating agency.

She frowned. She couldn't see Jane going away and leaving this type of mess behind. She might be a pain in the ass, but she was at least a tidy pain. But then, how much did she know about Jane's life right now?

Figuring she may as well clean it up, Melissa started with the desk, shuffling the papers into orderly piles. There was no point trying to file them. She didn't have a clue where they went. For the moment, she'd slide them into the desk drawers out of sight. Angelica could deal with them when she came in next.

The bottom drawer was useless, the lock securely fastened. The next two overflowed with files. So much for that idea. With a shrug, she added another pile to the now tidy stacks on the desk.

Next, she turned her attention to the jumble on the floor. Most of it appeared to be completed application forms. She gathered them up and approached the open filing cabinet. Just as she'd hoped. Each client had his or her own file, the name marked across the top of a manila folder.

She shuffled the applications into alphabetical order and took the time to file them in their respective folders. That done, she closed the cabinet with a snap and moved on to the cupboard containing the videotapes. A quick glance showed these, too, followed the same system, all arranged in alphabetical order.

"That should make the job easier," she muttered as she consulted her scrap of notepaper. "Frazer and Betonie." She ran her finger along the line of tapes until she came to the B's. "Ah, here we are. Janice Betonie." She pulled the correct video from the tight-packed row.

It didn't take her long to find the second woman's tape. After placing both tapes on the edge of the desk, she dropped to her knees and gathered up the dozen or so videotapes on the floor in front of the cupboard. Turning them edge out so she could read the names, she prepared to file them away.

"Huh, no names?" Instead, the tapes were numbered. How was she supposed to file them if she didn't know which client they belonged to?

Along with the two she'd selected, she stacked the tapes on the desk and closed the door to the cupboard. It wasn't so easy to shut down her thoughts as she continued to puzzle over the numbered videos.

"Maybe Angelica gives them a number until she's loaded all the information into the database," she mused. "I'll take them upstairs with me and run them when I have time so I know whose tape is whose. Maybe then Angelica won't be so scathing of my efforts." Although why she should give a damn she didn't know. It just galled her to be found lacking.

Feeling like an idiot for talking to herself, she left the numbered tapes where they were and carried the other two into her temporary office. Before she could put them down, she heard a knock on the glass doors at the front of the building.

She glanced at her watch. Seven o'clock on the dot. The man liked to be on time. Not one minute before, not one minute after. An admirable character trait if she didn't get the feeling he'd developed the habit so he wouldn't be late for any of his funerals. As it was, it gave her the creeps.

Her lips twitched in the beginnings of a grimace as he stepped through the door. He was still dressed as the perfect cinematic undertaker, right down to the slicked-back hair. Goodness knows what a prospective date would think of him.

"Good evening, my dear," he said as he extended his hand.

Once again, Melissa shivered as his deep voice washed over her. Good gracious, the man had a voice as smooth as hot, melted honey. Why couldn't the rest of him match up?

She reached out to shake his hand only to have him clasp hers, bow from the waist and place a soft kiss just above her knuckles. The touch was fleeting, but his mouth was warm against her skin. Melissa felt as if she'd been branded. The breath caught in her throat and it took her a few moments to gather her scattered wits.

"How very continental," she said after she'd regained control.

"Despite the name, I do have Italian blood on my mother's side. Such a gesture is quite commonplace among my uncles."

“Well, I’m sure your date will appreciate it. If you’d like to come with me, we’ll go and run these.” She waved the two videos clutched in her hand. “Let’s see if one of these ladies suits you.”

She led the way into the room used for making and viewing the videotapes. She wasn’t certain who’d done the interior decorating, but it couldn’t have been Jane. She had more taste than this.

The whole scene was reminiscent of a high-class bordello. Not that she knew what a bordello looked like, but she had a good imagination.

Scarlet velvet imprinted with gold cupids adorned the walls. The carpet underfoot was lush, a softer shade than the walls. The only window in the room looked out over the side alley. Melissa quickly closed the ivory and gold drapes to shut the dismal sight from view.

Two large sofas, wide enough to be called daybeds, sat at strategic angles so the large-screen television and video player at the opposite end of the room was in perfect alignment. Upholstered in the same fabric that graced the walls, they were piled high with gold satin cushions. Tucked away on one side was a polished timber bar and stereo system. The perfect scene for seduction—Melissa inwardly cringed—if one liked the slightly tacky, that is.

“Make yourself comfortable, Matthew, and I’ll put the first of the tapes on.”

Wobbling slightly as the unfamiliar high heels caught in the thick pile of the carpet, she moved to the far end of the room, slid the video into the machine and turned on the television. Remote control in hand, she joined Matthew on the sofa and started the tape.

“This first lady’s name is Martha Frazer. She’s perhaps a little older than you specified on your application form, but she sounds very much a homebody. Anyway, I’ll let you view the tape and you can tell me what you think.”

As Matthew watched the screen, Melissa tried to find a comfortable position on the sofa. With it being so wide, she couldn’t lean back against the cushions. If she did, she’d have to sit with her legs extended out in front of her like a child. Not very professional.

Neither was the flash of garters high on her thighs as she tried to perch on the extreme edge of the sofa. She tugged at the hemline of her skirt, only to have it ride up again as soon as she released it. Hell, at this rate, she'd be forced to sit with both hands on the bottom of her skirt to keep it in place.

As the video ended, she turned to Matthew, an enquiring look on her face. "So what do you think?"

Matt tried not to grin as her skirt slid up to expose the top of her nylons and gave him a quick glimpse of naked thigh. He'd seen her efforts to tweak it down. If she didn't want her legs on show, why wear such short skirts?

The character Joshua Cribbs had created for him foremost in his mind, Matt clasped his hands together and lowered his chin to tap at his pursed lips with pointed index fingers. "Hmm, she sounds a very nice lady," he said.

"But?"

"I'm not certain she's suitable. Very unfashionable and a lot older than I wanted. Probably set in her ways. Not malleable at all. I don't think I'd be able to mold her into what I perceive as the perfect partner."

He knew his words sounded chauvinistic, but it suited his undercover identity. With his Italian heritage, he was used to a culture where women were revered, feted and looked after. Although that in itself sounded chauvinistic, the women in his family were strong and independent, equal partners in any relationship.

Still, he had a part to play and somehow he had to get Mel Morgan to take him personally under her wing, not fob him off on one of her clients. If he took these women on a date and screwed it up, maybe they'd report back to Melissa. Then he could suggest she teach him how to romance a woman. He couldn't think of any other way to get close enough to Miss Morgan to find out what he needed to know.

"You know, perhaps I've been going about this the wrong way. I think I need someone more glamorous. I'd like to lift the profile of my business, and as I'd want any prospective partner to work with me, at least until

the children come, perhaps I should have someone a bit more..." His voice trailed off for a moment. "I guess sophisticated is the word I'm looking for."

"Let's try the next one then, shall we? This woman's name is Janice Betonie. She certainly looks more the part."

Melissa struggled to her feet, almost catching her heel again in the loop of the carpet. She could have sworn she felt the burn of Matthew's gaze on her rear end as she walked over to change the tape.

It made the sway of her hips feel more exaggerated than normal. Made her aware of her body in a way she never had been before. Why this should be, she didn't know. She certainly wasn't comfortable with the man. Despite that, something about him made her pulse beat faster. Made the blood rush through her veins and generated a fire she hadn't felt in a long time.

For crying out loud, the man was an undertaker of all things. How could she be turned on by someone who dealt in dead bodies?

Regardless of his job, he was as sexy as hell, even with all that grease in his hair. One thing, though, he'd have to change his chauvinistic attitudes. In this day and age no woman would put up with his comments. He was already at a disadvantage, what with his strange mannerisms and the disastrous hair oil. Although the way she felt, she'd even put up with that.

Damn, this wasn't like her at all. She was acting completely out of character. *You're the responsible one, remember, Melissa?* Yeah, goody-two-shoes as her sister would say. So what the hell was wrong with her?

Her brain had gone on vacation. Because right about now, she had one thought and one thought only in her mind. Throw Matthew Campbell down on his back and fuck the living daylight out of him.

Oh my gawd, she was in serious trouble here. She needed to get her mind off her body and onto the business of finding Matthew Campbell a partner.

Matt tried to keep his attention focused on the television screen, but he couldn't help a sneaky sideways glance at the exposed length of

Melissa's legs. She'd either forgotten, or given up, trying to stretch her skirt down. One pale pink, lacy garter peeked out beneath the hemline. On the very end, in what appeared to be silky satin, was a darker pink embroidered rose.

He had a sudden urge to reach out and run his finger over it to check. It took all his self-discipline to ignore the unschooled impulse. He averted his gaze and stared at the screen.

"My name is Janice Betonie and I'm..."

The woman on the screen had a well-modulated, husky voice, but she couldn't hold his interest. Matt tuned out the sound and allowed his attention and his gaze to slide back to the woman beside him. Her skirt had risen another inch. He caught a peek of pale skin above the rose-embossed garter.

X-rated images leapt into his brain, scrambling his thought processes. Heat slammed into him, sliding through his veins and igniting a hungry need inside him. He itched to run his fingers over that strip of skin and see if it felt as soft as it looked. He wanted to taste the creamy texture, slide his tongue across the silky softness and trace the garter up her thigh until he came to her pussy.

He imagined himself down on his knees, head buried between those creamy thighs. Tongue probing at the slick folds of her sex. Then he'd spread her lips and play with her clit until she screamed and begged him to delve deep to taste her honey.

His cock tightened, all the blood driven from his brain and collecting in that wayward piece of male equipment. A raging boner pushed at the front of his trousers. He dropped his hands over his lap to hide the telltale bulge. Thank God he'd worn a suit today and not his normal skin-tight jeans. Shit, he had to stop this, but first...

He leaned closer and dragged in a deep breath. Light, floral perfume teased at his senses. Funny, given the glossy photo back at the office, he would have staked a bet she'd use a heavy musky scent. But he liked this better. Somehow, it suited her. Made a fellow think of innocence and...

Hang on a minute, man, he remonstrated with himself. This woman is anything but innocent. She's the subject of an undercover investigation and you'd better remember that. Get your mind out of your pants and onto your work.

As the videotape came to an end, he plastered what he hoped was an interested look on his face. He kept his gaze glued to the blank screen as if deep in thought when Melissa turned toward him.

"What do you think, Matthew? Are you interested?"

Fucked if I know. I didn't take in anything but the first sentence the woman uttered. "Hmm, it's so hard to make a decision based on a video image."

"Perhaps you should meet Janice, go out with her and see how you feel. I'm sure you'll have a great time with her and once you've had a successful date, you'll have much more confidence in your dating skills. You're a good-looking man. Any woman would be happy to be seen with you. Would you like me to ring her?"

Matt stood and stepped away from the sofa. Even from here, Melissa's perfume reached out to him and made his cock twitch in reaction. "Yes, perhaps that would be best. Meet the woman in the flesh, so to speak. Dial away, my dear lady."

Somehow he had to get Miss Morgan to take him under her wing personally, not fob him off on some other unsuspecting female. How else was he going to find out if she was a part of this blackmailing scam? Time to turn on the pathos.

He smiled at her, laying on the charm. "This is so helpful of you, my dear. You are obviously one of those people who always know the right thing to say and the right thing to do. *And* have the conviction to carry it through. You're a good woman, my dear."

Matt continued to watch Melissa as she dialed the woman's number. She hung up, turning to him with a smile on her face, and he almost groaned.

Ah hell, it looked like the woman had agreed to go out. He was going to have to carry through or risk his cover. What he should be doing was

spending time with *this* woman. How else could he find out whether she was part of this whole scam?

He ignored the little voice inside his head telling him there was a lot more involved here than just a case-in-progress. “So how did we go?” He tried to appear interested in the answer.

“Normally, all our clients are given the opportunity to view the tape of any prospective date to see if they’re interested. However, in this instance, Janice is willing to take my word that you’re serious about finding a permanent partner. She’s free tonight and would love to have dinner with you. She’ll meet you at *La Parisian* restaurant at eight-thirty.”

Melissa took one of Jane’s business cards off the bar and scrawled a telephone number on the back of it. As Matthew joined her at the bar, she handed him the card. “That’s my cell phone number. If you have any problems, please don’t hesitate to call me. Now, we’d best get you out of here or you won’t make your date on time.”

She ushered him out of the viewing room and over to the front door. Before he exited, he turned, grasped her hand and dropped another soft kiss above her knuckles. “Goodnight, my dear, and thank you. I’ll be in touch and let you know how it goes.

“Goodnight, Matthew,” she murmured in a husky voice as he left the building.

As he turned his back and walked away, Matt felt like a rotten bastard. Melissa Morgan really did seem like a nice woman. One he wouldn’t mind spending time with if circumstances were different.

Problem was, this was work, an ongoing case, and Melissa Morgan was a prime suspect.

* * *

Melissa locked the front doors behind Matthew and made her way back to Mitch’s office to retrieve the unnamed tapes. After punching in the alarm code on the panel beside the door, she flicked off the lights in

the reception area and shut herself in the little elevator that gave access to the living quarters above, without going out into the alley.

She entered the apartment and dumped the tapes on the sofa. Plenty of time tomorrow to view the videos and record the names of the clients. Right now, she needed to sort out dinner. Her stomach grumbled right on cue, but she still stood in the middle of the living room and gazed off into space.

Thoughts of Matthew filled her mind. The back of her hand felt hot and she had a sudden desire to have him kiss her again. But this time, sure as hell not on her hand.

“How stupid can you get, Melissa?” she whispered. “You’re supposed to find the man a life partner, not fantasize about being well and truly kissed by him. You’d do better to review the database for more suitable women, but all you can do is stand here and wonder what he’d look like with all that oil washed out of his hair.”

Despite his antiquated dress sense and his outdated ideas about women, Matthew Campbell intrigued her. Maybe it was because she really wanted to help him find a girlfriend. Or maybe it was something else. For some reason, the simple touch of his hand made her pulse race. His very nearness made her feel nervous, agitated, her heart beating hard in her chest.

Even with his chauvinistic mannerisms and the disastrous hair oil, Matthew Campbell turned her on without even trying. Heat zapped through her, making it difficult to think of anything else but fucking the hell out of him until he forgot what he *thought* he wanted in a woman.

Whatever was going on here, she didn’t like it. The sooner she found him a ladylove the better. She couldn’t handle this unsettled feeling.

With a disgusted shake of her head, she turned toward the kitchen in search of something for dinner. Employing all her willpower, she tried banishing Matthew Campbell and his problems from her mind. Fat lot of good that did. It simply wasn’t working.

Without any effort at all, an image appeared in her head. Matthew, in all his glory as he washed the offensive grease from his hair. Steaming

hot water raining down over well-cut muscles. Soapy bubbles sliding across his torso, assisted by the passage of a strong right hand, until—

“Oh my God.” Melissa reached for the kitchen bench to steady herself. She struggled to slow her choppy breathing, appalled that a simple mental image would cause this type of reaction.

Simple, nothing! Look what it had done to her. Her breasts were swollen, the nipples hard and throbbing. Her heart thumped. The blood rushed through her veins. Tension gripped her, coiling low in the pit of her stomach.

She slid her hand down the front of the miniscule skirt. Lifting the hem, she ran the tip of her fingers between her thighs, across the filmy satin covering her pussy.

The fabric was wet, the scent of her arousal strong as her body temperature skyrocketed. She inserted a finger under the elastic and parted her swollen vulva, feeling the creamy dampness.

Her hips jerked as she ran her finger lightly around her aching clit. She applied pressure, seeking to find some relief from the unrelenting heat centered between her legs. She was so turned on she knew it wouldn't take much to make her come.

With her hand cupped over her pussy, she worked her hips, keeping the friction on her clit where she needed it most. The pressure inside built quickly. Her internal muscles clenched. Thighs trembled. The image of Matthew's soap-slicked body sprang fully-fledged into her mind and the movement of her hips sped up, until she climaxed with a hot rush of creamy moisture and a gasping groan.

“Melissa, you have no right fantasizing about Matthew Campbell. You are one sick puppy,” she whispered when she'd caught her breath. Because one thought kept pounding through her head. Men were not to be trusted. Neither on a sexual level nor an emotional one. Legs shaking, she clutched at the kitchen bench and spoke the words aloud in an effort to reinforce the message.

“Remember, Melissa? You don't trust men and you certainly don't need one in your life.”

Chapter Four

Saturday was a perfect day. Not a cloud in the sky. The heat had already started to build, a good indicator of how hot it was going to be. Melissa wasn't about to sit around in the apartment all day in the hope Jane would call. Maybe she'd take the ferry across to the zoo. It was a good way to fill in time.

Impatient now she'd made up her mind, she showered and dressed. Slipping her wallet into the pocket of her shorts, she looked around for her phone. After a futile search of the apartment, she realized she must have left it in Jane's office the night before. Hoping her sister hadn't tried to ring, she took the elevator down to the lower level.

She frowned as she walked through the reception area. The door to the viewing room was wide open, the light still on. Angelica must have forgotten to turn it off after her assignation last night with Mr. Bishop.

Melissa halted at the threshold of the room, her face screwing up in disgust. "Damn it, if Angelica wants to bring her dates here, she could at least clean up after herself, for crying out loud."

Her gaze tracked across the scarlet interior. In the harsh light of day, it really did look like a stage set for seduction, right in keeping with the slightly tacky atmosphere the over-the-top decor suggested.

The cover on the wide sofa was rumpled. Gold cushions littered the floor in haphazard fashion, almost as if a bit of one-on-one wrestling had taken place. A dirty glass lay on its side on the carpet near one end of the sofa.

Empty beer bottles and a half full champagne bottle sat on the polished surface of the bar. Used glasses vied for position among the

debris of picked-over plates of dainty sandwiches and savories. The final insult was the bowl of salted peanuts that had done duty as an ashtray.

Melissa grimaced. "They must have used a new glass for every drink," she muttered. "There's enough here for a whole party, not just two people." She wrinkled her nose at the smell of stale cigarette smoke and old beer.

The first thing she needed was some fresh air. She pulled back the heavy drapes and opened the tiny window overlooking the alley. Sticking her head out, she breathed deep before turning to face the chaos.

How could Jane condone this happening in her place of business? "Christ, Jane, are you such an idiot?"

Grabbing a rubbish sack from under the bar, Melissa tossed out the stale food and emptied the makeshift ashtray on the bar. Then she washed and rinsed the glasses, upending them on a clean tea towel to drain. After that, she turned her attention to the sofa. The cover straightened, she bent down to retrieve the cushions and pick up the glass on the carpet.

Gold glinted under the edge of the sofa. It was a man's cuff link. And laying close by was a man's tie. Very conservative in design, it was the type an older man would select. Had to be Mr. Bishop's.

Well, hell, it didn't take a lot of brain power to work out what had gone on here. "Bloody hell, I know Angelica is looking for a rich husband, but I can't believe she'd go that far."

She tossed the tie and cuff link onto the bar and washed out the last glass. Something else she'd have to have a talk to Angelica about. There'd be no further assignations here at the office while she was in charge. Not that she thought Angelica would listen to her. She seemed to have the run of the place and pretty much did as she pleased. Still, she had to at least make an attempt. After all, she was looking out for her sister's interests and Jane *had* left her in charge.

Angry at the situation her twin had placed her in, she snapped off the lights and closed the door with a decisive click. Collecting her phone from Jane's office, she was about to return to the apartment when the

business line rang. Praying it was Jane, she grabbed the receiver. Before she could say anything, a deep voice boomed down the line.

“That you, Rivers? I need one of your *specials* for tonight. Wife’s out of the country and I’ve got a function to attend.”

There it was again. That heavy emphasis on special.

“Mr. Rivers is not here. The office is closed for the weekend. Um, is that you, Mr....Jones?”

He ignored her question. “Do you know when he’s coming in?”

“No, I—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll try him at home,” the man interrupted, before cutting the connection.

Melissa raised her eyebrows. Just what the hell was that all about? The phone rang again before she could come up with a suitable explanation for the unusual conversation.

She picked up the receiver. “Melissa Morgan speaking.”

“Mel, this is Janice Betonie. Look, I’m sorry to ring you on the weekend. I wasn’t even certain if anyone would answer, but I really need to speak to you. I know it’s your time off and I apologize for that, but—”

“Hey, calm down, Janice, it’s okay. I don’t mind you ringing, although you only just caught me. I was about to go up to the apartment.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t hold you up.”

“Not at all. I’m happy to speak to you. How did your date with Matthew go?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. It was awful.”

“He didn’t do anything he...shouldn’t have, did he?” For all his strange ways, Melissa couldn’t believe Matthew would treat a woman with anything but respect.

“No, he was the perfect gentleman,” Janice said. “But he’s so creepy. I could have ignored the way he was dressed, but all he could talk about was funerals, and the merits of using an oak casket over a pine one. Oak lasts so much longer, don’t you know?”

“Janice, he didn’t!”

“Oh yes, he did. He gave me the willies and he had so much hair oil on, it dripped down the side of his face all night. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he gave the people at the next table a demonstration on the best way to dissect a chicken. I don’t think funeral directors actually cut people up, but he spoke about that darn bird as if it were one of his clients. He’s just too weird for me.”

Melissa couldn’t help it. She started to laugh, although she tried to smother the sound so as not to offend Janice.

“Tell me about it!” Janice giggled in turn. “Talk about the date from hell. If I never hear another word about funerals, it will suit me fine.”

“Did you leave him at the restaurant and go home when it got too bad?” Melissa tried hard to contain her chuckles.

“No, he insisted on taking me home. In the hearse, no less. Then he asked if he could kiss me goodnight.”

“What did you do?” She waited with baited breath for Janice’s answer.

“I didn’t want to disappoint the poor man so I let him kiss me. You know, I don’t think he’s very experienced. He could use some lessons. It was like kissing a cardboard cut-out.”

A shiver tracked down her spine as Melissa thought of the fleeting brush of his lips on the back of her hand. She pushed the memory aside. This was about Janice, not the effect Matthew had on *her*. “I take it you’re not interested in going out with him again?”

“That’s why I needed to speak to you. I’d like to take my name off your files.”

“Please don’t be too hasty,” she said with growing concern. Jane might be a pain in the butt at times, but Melissa didn’t want to be responsible for losing a client. This was, after all, Jane’s livelihood. “Not all our clients are as socially challenged as Matthew. Don’t give up because I made a mistake and matched you up with the wrong man.”

“No, it’s not that.” Janice gave another girlish giggle. “While Matthew was showing our neighbors how best to peel back the skin of that

luckless chicken, I got talking to the waiter. Such a nice man, and around about my age. We're going out tonight."

"So in the end you found your own man. Good for you. I'll remove your name from the files and I hope it works out for you."

"Well, one happy customer," she mumbled as she rode the elevator to the apartment. "But what am I going to do with Matthew Campbell?"

There was no way she'd be able to find him a partner if he conducted all his dates like this. If she didn't find him a date, she couldn't fulfill his contract. And if that happened, he'd be around for a lot longer. For her own piece of mind, she needed to find him a suitable woman as soon as possible.

Matthew's file was down in the office so she grabbed the phone book and flicked through it until she came to the listing for the funeral home. She punched in the number before she had second thoughts.

"Cribbs & Campbell Funeral Homes at your service," intoned a respectful voice.

No wonder Matthew spoke as he did. Seems like it was par for the course for anyone who worked there. "May I speak to Matthew Campbell, please?"

"Mr. Campbell is not available at the moment. If you'd like to leave a message, I'll see he gets it."

"Would you ask him to ring Melissa Morgan? He has the number. I'll be here for the next half hour. If he can't get back to me before then, he'll have to ring the cell number."

"I'll make certain he gets your message, Ms. Morgan."

Melissa hung up and glanced at her watch. She'd try to contact Jane while she waited. Then, Matthew or no Matthew, she was going sightseeing.

She tried Jane's number, with no success. Where the hell was Jane and why wasn't she answering? Before she could speculate too long, the phone rang again. Melissa sent up a silent prayer it was Jane.

“Good morning, my dear Melissa. So sorry I wasn’t available when you called.”

Matthew’s sexy voice flowed over her, bathing her in a warm glow. A shiver raced from the base of her skull down the length of her spine. Goose bumps broke out on her arms and she had to struggle to remember why she’d called him.

“I need to see you, Matthew. We have to talk about...” She hesitated. She didn’t want to offend him. “Um, we need to have a discussion about your date last night.”

“Ahh, you’d like to know how it went, but I’m a gentleman and a gentleman never kisses and tells. However, I will say this. Janice is a delightful lady. I’m about to ring her and arrange another meeting. We—”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t... Maybe we need to talk first.” There was dead silence on the line. Melissa grimaced as she waited for his response.

“I take it you’ve heard from Janice?”

“She rang me.”

“And she wasn’t impressed with her date last night.” He breathed a heavy sigh down the line. “Oh dear, oh dear. It was the hearse, wasn’t it? I *knew* I should have arranged to use another vehicle.”

“It wasn’t just the car. We need to get together and discuss a few issues. Are you free today?”

“Unfortunately, I have two funerals this afternoon. And tomorrow I have to prepare Mr. Lutz and Mr. Ballantine for their big days. Both difficult cases which need my expert touch.”

“Perhaps we should leave it until some time next week.”

“No, no, my dear, I’d like to get this under way and it’s clear I need some pointers. I knew I’d make a mess of it. Maybe I should forget this whole thing. Women just don’t like me.”

“It’s not as bad as all that. You can’t give up so soon. We’ve only just started.”

Melissa felt sorry for the poor guy. His self-confidence was only skin-deep where women were concerned and she could empathize with him.

Her own dealings with the opposite sex in the past had been just as pathetic. Okay, so she wasn't in the market for a relationship, but that didn't mean she couldn't help Matthew achieve his heart's desire.

Through her mother, she'd been conditioned at an early age to see to the needs of others. Championing the underdog was no new thing. Besides, something about Matthew got to her.

So, yeah, you're going to help him, aren't you, Melissa?

She bit back a groan. Melissa to the rescue again. As far as she could see, there was only one way to do this. "Would you be adverse to an after-hours appointment?"

"Not at all, my dear lady. Or maybe you'd allow me to take you out to dinner? Is tonight convenient, by any chance?"

Melissa couldn't help herself. Janice's words played over in her mind. She had a sudden mental image of suffering through the same type of evening Janice had. Besides, if she corrected his dating technique in the middle of a restaurant, there was every likelihood his ego would get involved. Far better to do this in private.

"How would you like to come here for dinner? I'm not a bad cook. I promise you won't go home hungry." It was the perfect opportunity to check out his social skills.

Tension gripped her as she waited for his reply. Anticipation? A desire to see him again? Surely not. She just wanted to help him. Show him what to do with a woman. After all, she *was* a teacher.

But not that type of teacher. She banished the wayward thought from her mind. "What do you think? You game to give it a shot?"

"Are you sure it's acceptable for me to be alone with you in your home?"

"Of course," she said a shade too quickly.

"In that case, I'd be honored, my dear."

"About seven-thirty, if that's suitable." A wave of relief that he'd accepted her invitation swept through her. A delighted grin crept across her face. She felt like a teenager about to go on her first date.

Amazing her how hard it was to mentally pull herself up. *Whoa, Melissa. Remember, this is nothing more than business.* Jane's business, but business nonetheless.

"I live above the office. You can reach the apartment via the alley at the side of the building. There's a set of stairs at the back."

"I look forward to seeing you again, Melissa" he said before ringing off.

Her mind caught up with dinner plans, she headed for the freezer. There wasn't much there. Her sister hadn't thought to stock up before she'd dumped her in the middle of this mess and Melissa hadn't had time to go shopping yet.

One lonely chicken lay on its back beside a small parcel of what could have been mincemeat. Chicken it was. It'd give her a chance to see if he repeated his dissecting lesson. If he did, it was the perfect opportunity to set him straight on a few etiquette rules.

The bird now on the sink to defrost, she returned to the living room. The tapes she'd brought upstairs last night still lay in an untidy heap on the sofa. She stacked them into two neat piles and tossed up whether she'd go through them now or do it later.

"To hell with it," she muttered. "They can wait until tomorrow. Right now, I'm going sightseeing. After all, I *am* supposed to be on holiday."

Chapter Five

Clad in her underwear, Melissa stood in front of the open wardrobe and stared at the contents. “No more damn dolls’ skirts,” she muttered, sliding the hangers across the rail. Surely her sister had something else she could put on, something with a bit more fabric at least?

Her holiday wardrobe consisted of nothing but jeans, shorts and tee shirts, none of which fitted the image she needed for a business meeting. Now if she’d been going on a real dinner date, she had that cocktail dress back home, the one that left her shoulders bare and fitted her figure like a glove. The little black number Brad said had made him fall in love with her.

Oh, yeah, and look where that got you. Besides, she didn’t wear clothes like that any longer. Hadn’t for years. Good old sensible Melissa, that was her. But just for a moment, she dreamed...

Enough, Melissa. This is business.

She flicked through the wardrobe until she came to an apricot-colored dress in a soft jersey fabric. She wrinkled her nose. Not really her style, but at least it would fall below her knees. She wouldn’t have to spend the evening trying to stretch it down to cover her thighs.

Slipping the dress over her head, she settled it about her body and stared at her reflection. The garment was sleeveless, with a plain, round neckline and a straight skirt with a flared hemline. It had looked quite innocent on the hanger, but once on, the soft fabric molded her body like a second skin.

Melissa pulled a face at the image in the mirror. This was not her at all, not any longer. She’d tried that once and it hadn’t worked. She was

tempted to strip it off and find another dress, but by the look of Jane's wardrobe, everything she owned was designed to show off a woman's curves to maximum advantage. This would have to do.

She ignored Jane's impossible high heels and slipped her feet into her own flat sandals. Then she ran a brush through her short curls. She chose to disregard the fact that the apricot tones of the fabric gave her skin a soft glow and seemed to highlight the copper streaks in her hair.

A quick check on the chicken and she settled down to sort the unnamed videotapes while she waited for Matthew. If he ran true to form, he'd be here in exactly twenty-two minutes.

With the first tape in the machine, Melissa pressed the play button. Notebook in hand, she settled back to record the name of the client. As images flickered across the screen, she stared in disbelief. Her eyes widened and her breath escaped in a gasp. "Oh my gosh." She shook her head. For a moment, her brain refused to process the images on the screen.

A naked man and woman rolled on a couch covered in scarlet fabric, gold cushions scattered around them. She didn't need to be too smart to work out where the video had been filmed. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, the shock so great she didn't even have the presence of mind to turn the machine off.

The tape came to an end with the man's head thrown back in the ultimate in sexual satisfaction. His face was clearly visible, although the woman's was in the shadows and unrecognizable.

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "Does Mitch hire that room out so his mates can make blue movies?"

She ejected the tape and tried the next one. It required no more than a few seconds to know it was in like vein. Same woman, different man. And the woman's face was never clear, although there was something familiar about it, perhaps in the shape of the profile.

One after the other, she slotted the rest of the videos into the player and ran the first few seconds. They were all the same. She threw them

onto the sofa as if they were hot coals, rubbing her hands down the side of her dress in disgust.

How could people allow themselves to be filmed like that? Okay, so she didn't have a lot of experience, but making love should be beautiful, not reduced to celluloid images on a pornographic movie.

"Jane, what have you gotten yourself involved in?" she said as she stared at the tapes spread across the sofa.

* * *

Matt felt pretty pleased with himself. He'd worked hard to screw up his date with Janice in the hope Melissa would take pity on him and deal with him on a personal level. Looks like he'd achieved it, judging by tonight's invitation. He turned a blind eye to the fact he'd manipulated Melissa in order to gain this result.

As he recalled his behavior the night before, he cringed. Poor Janice. The lady had an incredible amount of patience, or was it just good manners? If it'd been him, he would have walked out round about the time his date started discussing coffins. He'd have to buy her some roses to apologize when all this was over. He'd hate to think he was responsible for damaging her self-esteem.

He drew his vehicle to a halt right outside Dreams Unlimited. At least he didn't have to drive the hearse around tonight. That was enough to give anyone nightmares.

The small alleyway between Melissa's business and the building next door was in deep shadow. He frowned. He hated to think of her using this in the dark of the night. Anyone could be lurking about. She was an itty-bitty thing, in need of protection. A prime candidate for a mugging. Or worse.

Bloody hell, why did he persist in seeing Melissa as a victim, vulnerable and needy? She was one of the perpetrators in this case, unless he could prove otherwise. And he had a sudden desire to show his boss she *was* innocent.

“Sex, man. That’s all it is. Nothing but sex.” With a strong admonition to his body, or at least certain parts of it, to behave, he climbed the metal staircase and announced his arrival with a decisive knock.

A frown creased his brow as Melissa opened the door. Her face was chalky white, as if all the blood had seeped away, leaving only parchment skin stretched taut over high cheekbones. Her hand trembled as she ran it through her cluster of curls. Then she crossed her arms over her chest as if cold. In fact, if he didn’t know better, he’d say she’d had a severe shock.

He stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. “Are you all right, my dear? You don’t look quite the thing.”

Melissa stepped back a pace to allow him to enter. “I...I’m fine. Just rushing to get dinner ready on time. Come into the living room.”

Matt followed her down a short hallway, his eyes riveted on the sway of her hips outlined by the fabric of her dress. She’d forsaken the suit with the miniscule skirt tonight. For a moment he was sorry he wasn’t going to get a glimpse of those sexy legs and the occasional flash of rose-embossed garters.

He’d fantasized about those peek-a-boo garters all last night. His female cousins assured him panty hose were more comfortable to wear, but there was nothing like garters and stockings to drive a man’s temperature higher.

Although come to think of it, the dress she had on tonight wasn’t so bad. It showed off her figure, hugged in all the right places. Made her seem...softer, more feminine. Not that she wasn’t before. Just that the suit had given more an impression of the hard businesswoman. He itched to reach out and touch. With a concerted effort, he curled his hands into fists at his side so he wouldn’t give into the crazy impulse.

“Dinner is almost ready, but we have time for a drink. I have some white wine. Would you like a glass?”

Melissa’s words dragged his attention back to the matter at hand. Namely, the finding of evidence to incriminate or free her from suspicion.

He prayed it was the latter. He didn't want this woman to be guilty. "A glass of wine would be delightful, my dear lady."

He cast a quick glance over the room. It wasn't a large apartment. The living room was tiny, but comfortable. Through an archway at one end, he spotted the dining room. A dark polished table was set for dinner. Snowy-white tablecloth, sparkling crystal, and silverware that glinted in the light of the flickering candles in the silver candelabra. A bunch of bright flowers in a crystal vase sat in the center of the table.

Melissa liked to do things in style. For a moment, he felt as if he were back in the restaurant where he'd met Janice. A grimace flitted across his face as he remembered his behavior with his *date*. He couldn't believe he'd acted that way. Poor Janice. She was an interesting woman. Not his sort, but interesting nonetheless. He would have enjoyed talking to her in different circumstances. Pushing the thought from his mind, he continued his perusal of the apartment.

Another door opened off the main living area into a bedroom. He could just see the corner of a large bed covered in a deep blue quilt. A lacy bra dangled off the end of the bed, stark white against the blue of the fabric.

His mind started to drift, images of Melissa's breasts confined by soft lace filtering through his brain. He shook his head, dislodging the erotic pictures. Hell, he was a grown man in charge of his libido. He was *not* a schoolboy, turned on by the sight of a girl's bra, on *or* off.

With a mental reminder that this was work, he turned his attention to the living room again. The only thing marring the tidy perfection of the room was at least a dozen or so videotapes in an untidy heap on the sofa, almost as if they'd been thrown there in a hurry. In fact, a few had tumbled onto the carpeted floor.

He bent to pick up the ones on the floor. No names. Just numbers on the spines of the cases. Perhaps Melissa had found him another selection to go over. He groaned under his breath. He didn't want to take out another woman. He wanted to spend time with Melissa. In fact, it was vital to the case.

A little voice inside his head tried to tell him this had more to do with Melissa herself than any investigation he was working on. He ignored it. Professionals don't get involved, emotionally or otherwise, and he was nothing if not professional.

The first of the tapes had just disappeared into the video player as Melissa entered the room with two long-stemmed glasses in her hands. He flicked a quick smile at her, his finger hovering over the play button of the remote control.

She froze just inside the entrance to the room and stared at him, her mouth open. The glasses tilted, the cold white wine sloshed over the sides and spilled onto her hands. Her face blanched as if she were about to pass out.

"No, Matthew, wait!" She slammed the wine glasses down onto the polished surface of the mantle and rushed at him, almost snatching the remote control away from him.

His eyebrows rose. Hmm, interesting to see how much her hand shook as she pushed the eject button on the video player and retrieved the tape.

"I'm so sorry, my dear, if I'm getting a bit ahead of myself. I assumed you'd bought up a selection of videos for me to view. Perhaps another lady for me to date? I thought I'd get a head start on it."

He watched her with narrowed eyes as she hugged the tape to her chest and backed away from him. Rounding the end of the sofa, she gathered up the rest of the videos.

"Um, these are the wrong tapes," she said, almost tripping over the words. "I'll just put them away."

She turned and fled to the bedroom. Matt heard a drawer open and then slam shut. Within minutes, Melissa returned to the living room and picked up the now half-empty glasses, handing one to him as if nothing untoward had happened.

Ooo-kay, that *was* suspicious. The lady was as nervous as hell. Just what was she trying to hide? There was something on those tapes she didn't want him to see.

Matt felt an unaccountable surge of disappointment sweep through him. Damn it, he didn't want this woman to be guilty.

Chapter Six

Melissa eyed Matthew from under the sweep of her lashes. She knew she'd acted like an idiot—he probably thought she was demented—but she couldn't let him view those tapes. She couldn't let *anyone* see them. And she couldn't talk about them either, at least not until she'd contacted Jane.

"I'm sorry I was so presumptuous, my dear," he said. "I thought I was going to see more of your women."

She had a sudden desire to burst into hysterical laughter. *Yeah, right, look at those tapes and you'll see more woman than you expect.*

Taking a deep breath, she struggled for control. Surprising how hard it was to stifle the inane giggle threatening to break free. She didn't think Matthew would see the joke. Truth be told, the joke was on her for being such a sucker where her sister was concerned.

Jane, where are you? She'd tried to call her again, only to have a voice-recording tell her the service was turned off. So not only did Jane ignore her messages, now she couldn't even be bothered with a ringing phone. If she knew Jane, the phone had been turned off for one reason—so Melissa couldn't get hold of her.

Damn it, she was starting to get annoyed with Jane. No, more than that. She was thoroughly pissed off. She should just pack up and head back to Brisbane and leave Jane to sort out her own mess.

So why don't you?

The silent question made her pause. Because she'd given her word to her sister? Hmm, maybe that was a part of it. She *had* given Jane one week. But then there was also Matthew. For some reason, she didn't feel

inclined to walk away from him. Not yet, anyway. She may not be able to do much for Jane beyond minding the store, but here was one person she *could* help.

Why do you want to help him so much?

That persistent little question in the back of her brain was beginning to annoy the hell out of her, but it did force her to analyze her motivations.

She guessed it had something to do with the fact she'd always felt a bit of a misfit, too. Circumstances had forced her to become an adult even before she'd had a chance to be a child. As a result, her nature was far too serious to appeal to the opposite sex.

For a while, she'd thought she'd found the man of her dreams in Brad, but he'd been enticed away by her sister. She'd hated Jane for that. Oh, not because Brad found her attractive, but because Jane had taken up with him. She'd have thought loyalty would have come into play in a situation like that. Under the same circumstances, she would have knocked back Brad's advances because he belonged to her sister, but not Jane.

Jane had been born with a streak of selfishness a mile wide. It was inherent to her sister's nature and she wasn't about to change after all this time. No, it was Brad she blamed now. His desertion had been a body blow. It had shattered her belief in herself and, ultimately, her trust in men in general.

Now here was poor Matthew, totally out of step with the real world. *She* may have been a disaster at love, but if her assistance helped Matthew along the way to a lasting relationship, some good would have come out of her abortive holiday. Besides, she liked him, despite his peculiarities. He was a sexy man with a lot to offer the right woman.

She realized she was staring. With a shake of her head, she gestured to the sofa. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable. I'll just go and serve dinner."

"No, no, my dear lady, I couldn't do that. You were kind enough to invite me to dinner. The least I can do is assist you. Lead the way."

Melissa frowned. His offer of assistance didn't quite gel with the chauvinistic attitude he'd displayed so far. She shrugged. If he wanted to help place a tiny roasted chicken on a serving platter, who was she to say he couldn't?

She entered the kitchen with Matthew at her heels. Picking up an oven cloth, she handed it to him. "If you'd like to take the baking tray out, I'll drain the peas."

"Of course, my dear. Can't have a little thing like you lifting heavy trays. That's what men are for."

It was impossible to contain the grin that spread across her face. Now *that* sounded more like the Matthew she was beginning to know.

Her mouth went dry as she watched him bend towards the oven, his trousers tight across firm buttocks. For a moment, her pulse pounded in her head, drowning out everything but the sight of those tight buns. She took herself to task and pivoted towards the sink. Draining the peas, she quickly tipped them into a bowl.

What is wrong with me? She was supposed to help the poor guy find a partner, not get her kicks by ogling his body, or his rear end in this case.

She turned back to find he'd placed the golden roasted chicken in the centre of the platter and had lined the baked potatoes and pumpkin up around it in meticulous fashion.

"It looks delightful," he said. "So nice to find a woman who can cook a good old-fashioned roast dinner."

Melissa grimaced. More chauvinism. The man had a lot to learn. It was time to get this lesson under way. "I'll just get the gravy and we can eat," she said.

She opened the cupboard where most of the crockery was kept. She couldn't find what she wanted so she moved on to the next cupboard. And the next. "I'm sure she's got a gravy boat," she muttered.

"Did you say something, my dear?" Matt asked, eyes narrowed as he watched her.

“No, just need a gravy boat. I’m sure Ja... I’m sure I’ve got one. I just can’t seem to put my hands on it.”

Matt frowned. Something was wrong here. The lady had almost made a slip. *And how come she doesn’t know what’s in her own kitchen? If it is her kitchen, that is.*

He leaned against the bench and kept his gaze trained on her. His mind slid back over every conversation he’d had with Melissa. Right from the start, he’d felt she didn’t fit the picture, that she was only playing a role.

Even the clothes she wore didn’t seem to suit her, although tonight’s dress was a definite improvement. Provided he could forget the erotic glimpse of rose-embossed garters, of course. Once again, he had a sense he’d missed something important. He’d have to keep his eyes and ears open to see if she slipped up again.

“I’ll just have to use something else,” Melissa murmured. She grabbed a jug from the cupboard and filled it with the rich gravy. “If you’d like to carry the platter, we can eat.”

She led the way into the dining room and placed the peas and gravy in the centre of the table. “You can sit at the end.”

He positioned the platter at the head of the table and turned to hold out a chair for Melissa. “I’ll carve, shall I?” He took his place at the head of the table and picked up the carving knife and fork.

Melissa watched, stunned, as Matthew split the skin down the very centre of the breast and peeled it back. Then he sliced the legs from the bird and removed the skin before he cut off perfectly even slices of white breast meat.

“Such a shame one can’t eat the skin, isn’t it?” he said as he placed chicken portions on the hexagonal-shaped dinner plates Melissa held ready. “So unhealthy, full of fat. One has to be careful these days.”

Her mouth twitched. She suddenly had a vivid picture of Matthew and Janice in the restaurant, with Matthew giving a demonstration on the best way to dissect a chicken. No wonder poor Janice hadn’t been able to handle it.

“Now, would you like me to serve you some vegetables?”

“No, sit down and see to your own meal. I’m quite capable of looking after myself.”

“So sorry, my dear, just wanted to be helpful.”

“Women *can* do for themselves these days, Matthew.” She searched for a sign that she’d offended him.

“My apologies. I was raised to be a gentleman. It’s very hard to throw off the habits of a lifetime.”

Melissa chose not to answer. There was plenty of time later to get into what he needed to change before he could secure himself a partner.

As they ate, she encouraged him to talk about his family and kept the conversation away from his occupation. She didn’t think she could deal with coffins at the moment. Besides, she was fascinated with the tales he recounted about his Italian relatives. He might be slightly weird, but he made her laugh.

It had turned out to be a delightful evening but she had a job to do. May as well start now. “So what was your impression of your date with Janice last night?”

Matthew sobered, the laughter leaching from his face. Before her eyes, he turned back into the staid funeral director.

“I don’t think Janice will go out with me again. I’m rather afraid she wasn’t terribly impressed.” He grimaced. “I’m not very good with women. They make me uncomfortable. I never know what to say.”

“You had no problems with me tonight, did you?”

“Ahh, but you’re different, my dear. You make a man feel at ease.”

“I’m no different from any other woman.” Trying to phrase her words so he wouldn’t feel he was lacking, she asked, “Matthew, have you had many girlfriends? Or even dates?”

“Oh, dear, does it show I’m not very experienced?” He sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

Melissa had to fight to contain a shudder as he dug into his pocket for a handkerchief and proceeded to wipe the hair oil from his hand. She

watched a droplet of oil form on his hairline, fascinated in spite of herself as it swelled then trickled down the side of his face before he caught it with the hanky. Melissa could only be grateful he hadn't used the linen napkin.

He tucked the soiled square of cotton away. "To answer your question, I have been out with a few women, but not for a long while. My father apprenticed me in the business at the age of fifteen. Girls don't like to go out with an undertaker. Although, we don't use that term anymore. *Funeral director* offers more comfort, don't you think?"

She couldn't reply. She was too intent on the new drop of oil gathering on the end of one of his dark locks.

"Yes, women don't like my profession. It makes them feel uncomfortable when I talk about it, but someone has to do it and I'm good at my job."

"Matthew, there are some things you need to change if you want a modern woman to like you." She forced her attention away from his hair and focused on his eyes. "Would you be insulted if I gave you some tips?"

"Not at all, my good woman, not at all. I'm well aware of my lack when it comes to the female of the species. I'd appreciate any help you can give me."

Matt almost crowed out loud. He'd achieved his objective. He'd managed to get Melissa to take him under her wing. Now all he had to do was find a way to get into her bedroom and retrieve one of those tapes she'd been so nervous about.

The case was back on track. For a while there, he'd been a bit worried. During dinner, he'd allowed his guard to slip. He'd enjoyed Melissa's company so much, he'd almost forgotten what he was supposed to be doing here. Sheeze and he called himself a professional.

"Okay," Melissa said. "Let's go into the living room where we'll be more comfortable."

"Would you like me to clear the table for you first? I could help you wash up."

“Don’t worry about the dishes. Ja... Um, I have a dishwasher so it’s no problem.” She led the way into the living room.

There it was again. She’d almost made the same slip. She was about to say someone else’s name. So what did *Ja* stand for? He knew her first name was Jane, but he’d hazard a guess that’s not who she was referring to.

He settled himself on the sofa, back straight, his hands clasped together in his lap. Melissa stood in front of him, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Fire away, my good lady.” *This should be interesting.*

“Well, the first thing is you can’t call women *my dear* or *my good lady*. I kinda find it patronizing and I’m sure other women would also.”

“Easily done, my...ah, Melissa. I wasn’t aware it was offensive.” *Yeah, right, my cousins would kill me if I used it on them.*

“And look at the way you’re sitting. Relax. Make yourself comfortable. How about you take off your jacket for a start?” She walked around to the back of the sofa, reached for his jacket and started to slide it off his shoulders. “Here, let me help you.”

He grabbed at the lapels and dragged the jacket back into place. Bloody hell, another minute and she’d see his weapon. *How the fuck would I explain that?*

Damn, why hadn’t he worn an ankle holster?

He knew why. In the event of trouble, of running into Rivers, he much preferred the larger Glock and not the smaller Smith & Wesson that was all he could carry in an ankle holster.

“A gentleman is never seen in his shirtsleeves,” he uttered in a pompous voice.

“That’s an antiquated view. At least take off the bow tie and open the top button of your shirt. Then you won’t seem so formal. How can your date relax if she thinks you’re feeling uncomfortable?”

She walked around to the front of the sofa again and sat down beside him. A tantalizing curl of floral perfume reached out to him. Erotic

pictures formed in his head and it was all he could do to keep his attention focused on her next words.

“There’s one other thing. You’re very chauvinistic in your attitudes. That’s one sure way to put a woman off in this day and age. Being a gentleman is one thing. Making a woman feel less than capable is not acceptable. You must allow women to do things for themselves. We appreciate the niceties, but we can look after ourselves.”

Matt tapped his pursed lips with his index finger, contorting his face into what he hoped was a worried frown.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I’ve upset you.” She laid a comforting hand on his arm.

“No, not at all. I’m just wondering how I’ll remember all this when I’m in a social setting. I don’t suppose... No, I couldn’t ask that of you.”

“Ask what?”

“Well, I was about to suggest you come out with me a few times and whenever I slip up, you can remind me. How else am I to learn?” He injected a little-boy-lost tone into the question and flicked a glance at her from under his brows to see if she’d taken the bait.

“I don’t see that as a problem. I could take you to a few different venues and coach you on the spot. Yes, I think that’s an excellent idea. Then we’ll find you a match on the database and you can take your date to one of the places we’ve visited. You should feel more comfortable if you’ve been there before.”

Matt had to school himself not to grin at how easily she’d fallen in with his plans. One, he got to spend time with the woman so he could pump her about Mitch Rivers. Two, he got her away from the business so Adam could do a little spying on his own. Nice and neat.

He suddenly felt a blob of oil trickle down the side of his face, forcing him to grab for his handkerchief. Damn, he was tired of this shit. Not only did it stink, but his scalp itched. It also took numerous washings to get it out of his hair.

As he pocketed the hanky, Melissa cleared her throat. “Um, there’s one other thing you have to change.”

“Yes?” He gazed at her with what he hoped was an innocent look.

“The hair oil has to go.”

Matt drew himself up as if wounded. “My father used this very same brand,” he said in a haughty tone. “*And* his father before him. A funeral director is always neat and tidy. Why, even my partner, Joshua Cribbs, uses hair oil.”

“And how old is he?”

“He just turned sixty-one.”

“That’s my point. It’s old-fashioned. No one wears it anymore. And women don’t like it.”

“Hmm...so you think I should wash it out?”

“Oh, yeah!”

Matt pushed himself to his feet and turned towards her. He’d just found the perfect way to get into her bedroom and swipe one of those tapes. Plus, he didn’t think he could wait any longer to get this stuff out of his hair.

“Would you allow me to use your bathroom? I’d like to wash it out immediately. If I’m going to make changes, the sooner I start the better. You’ll be able to give me your opinion straight away.”

Her eyes widened at his request and for a moment, she looked like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. She opened her mouth as if to refuse him and then hesitated. Her gaze slid from his greasy hair and trailed across his face, before moving on to his chest and even further south.

The tip of her tongue appeared and she dragged it across her bottom lip, leaving a sheen of moisture behind. He wanted to bend down and trace the same path. His cock quickly registered where she’d focused her attention. *Yeah baby!* The blood rushed downward, engorging the recalcitrant organ. Matt found himself having to adjust his stance to compensate.

Brows raised, Melissa made eye contact again. Giving a slight smile, she extended her hand toward the bedroom. "Why not? Come on, I'll show you where to go."

He followed as she led the way through the bedroom and into the bathroom, glad to have some time alone to get his body under control.

Melissa opened the door of a large cupboard on one side of the bathroom, pulled out a towel and handed it to him. "I'll leave you to it. There's plenty of shampoo and conditioner in the shower recess."

As she turned and walked out of the room, Matt found himself fixated on the seductive sway of her hips. She closed the bedroom door behind her and he sighed with both frustration and satisfaction. Putting aside the state of his arousal for the moment, he tried to concentrate on the case.

He turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature. The sound of running water would cover his surreptitious search of the bedroom. It didn't take much to find what he wanted. The top drawer of the bedside table yielded up its treasure. Videotapes, each identified by a different number.

His attention fixed on the closed door, Matt grabbed one of the tapes and eased the drawer closed. The evidence in hand, he crept over to the bathroom and shut himself inside. Once he'd slipped out of his jacket, he stowed the video in one of the deep, inside pockets.

Taking his weapon from the waistband of his trousers, he wrapped it in his oil-smeared hanky and pushed it in with the video. He'd have to keep his jacket bundled up so neither slipped out.

That done, he stripped off the rest of his clothes and stepped beneath the shower. A long, heartfelt sigh escaped as the warm water flowed over his body. He hadn't realized how tense he'd become. Now to deal with the crap in his hair.

It took two applications of Melissa's shampoo before he felt his hair was clean. And a liberal dash of cold water before his cock would lie down. He grimaced as the evocative scent of the shampoo hit him. Flowers. Spring flowers. The same type of elusive perfume Melissa wore.

So he was wrong. It was shampoo, not perfume. And he was going to come out smelling the same way.

It was okay on Melissa—in fact, it was downright sexy—but he was a different matter. The boys at the office would have a field day with this one. *If* he told them, and he wasn't about to.

After he'd toweled off, he slipped on his underwear and trousers, leaving the shirt until he'd dried his hair. At the moment, it hung about his face, dripping water down into his eyes. But at least it was clean.

He was tempted to hunt through Melissa's cupboards in search of a hairdryer, but perhaps he should ask first. The towel slung about his shoulders, he left the bathroom and walked through the bedroom to the living area. It was empty, but he heard the clatter of dishes in the kitchen. He followed the sound and found Melissa stacking the dishwasher.

"Excuse me, my...er, Melissa." Damn it, it was hard to remember not to call her *my dear*. Despite the fact she was the subject of an investigation, he wished she was. His dear, that is. And not just for the duration of the case.

Bloody hell, where had that thought come from? Shit, he'd only just met her. Besides, he had no intension of ever getting serious about a woman. He enjoyed their company, but that was as far as it went. Emotions, in particular love, made a man vulnerable to hurt. He had no intention of putting himself in that position.

Life had dealt him his first taste of what it felt like to lose someone you loved when he was only twelve years old. The agony of loss had been unbearable. He remembered the day he'd walked into the local convenience store with his parents. Some young punk, high on drugs, had decided to rob the store. Unfortunately, his mother and father had been in his way and had taken two shots at point-blank range.

His parents had died in that instant and he'd gone to live with his Uncle Sol. It took a long time to surface from the deep sense of melancholy that had swamped him. The person most responsible for his recovery had been Allie, the typical girl-next-door.

Over the years, his relationship with Allie had deepened into love. Then they'd been given the terrible news. Allie was dying of liver cancer. For six months he'd watched her change into a pale shadow of herself. He'd been grateful when she'd finally passed away. He hadn't wanted her to suffer any longer. That was the day he'd decided he'd never allow himself to love again. It hurt too much.

Yet, here he was, his mind full of fantasies about Melissa and how he'd like to stake an exclusive claim to her. It had to stop. No fucking way would he put his heart on the line like that again.

Shaking the memories aside, he cleared his throat. "Ahh, excuse me, my dear."

Melissa spun around at the sound of Matthew's voice. Her mouth suddenly grew dry. A hot flash slid through her body, awakening hormones she thought she'd deliberately put to rest.

Matthew stood there in nothing but his dark suit trousers. A damp bath towel hung around his neck, but it did nothing to hide his well-muscled chest.

A smattering of dark hair angled across his chest and arched down to disappear beneath the belt of his trousers. The muscles in his upper arms bulged as he grasped the ends of the towel. And Melissa didn't need to ask what a six-pack stomach was like. She was looking at one. Matthew was in superb condition.

Her heart went into overdrive as she stared at the ripple of movement when he flexed his hands on the ends of the towel. She tried to gather her scattered wits. An exercise in futility. The man might be strange, but he was as sexy as hell, even with his hair wet. At least the oil was gone. Water she could handle.

Get real, girl, you're not handling anything.

She fought hard to drag her gaze away. The enticing images tumbling through her brain made her feel as if she were about to combust. She ran her tongue over her dry lips and tried to clear her throat. "I'm sorry? Do you need something?"

"I wondered if I might use your hairdryer?"

“It’s in the cupboard under the vanity. Help yourself.”

Her breath gusted out on a sigh as he left the room. She was dumfounded at the thoughts that had taken up residence in her mind. Thoughts of what she’d like to do to the half-naked man wandering around in Jane’s apartment. Thoughts that were hard to dislodge and could get her into serious trouble.

“I must be sick.” She placed her hand over her forehead. “No, no temperature,” she whispered as she shook her head. “Then I’m going mad. For a moment there, I was actually tempted to throw the man down on the kitchen floor and drool all over him.” She closed the door of the dishwasher with a snap.

“Remember, Melissa? You don’t need, or want, a man in you life.” She took the cloth and wiped the bench with unnecessary force. “So why the hell am I lusting after an antiquated, chauvinistic, opinionated male who handles dead bodies for a living?”

* * *

Do you need something? Melissa’s polite query pounded through Matt’s brain as he re-entered the bathroom. Did he *need* something?

Only you, Melissa, only you.

The answer took root in his mind before he could banish it. Shaking his head, he tried to ignore it and concentrate on the mundane.

The hairdryer was where she said it would be. He grabbed it and dealt with his wet hair. Once it was dry, he shrugged into his shirt. The bow tie he crumpled up and tucked in his trouser pocket. With shoes and socks in one hand and his bundled-up jacket in the other, he moved into the bedroom.

Dumping his belongings on the floor at the end of the bed, he decided to take a final quick look around. Perhaps there was some other incriminating evidence hidden in the room. Files, maybe. Or a bank statement. Although he doubted they’d run blackmail money through a legitimate business account.

Liar. That's not the reason you want to check out the room.

He tried to silence the voice in his head, but it wouldn't shut up. Unfortunately, it was right. Yeah, he needed to find out more about this blackmailing scam, but that wasn't all he was after. He was more interested in checking out whether there was any evidence of Mitch Rivers sharing the apartment with Melissa on a full time basis.

He opened the wardrobe doors and flicked through the contents. Just more of Melissa's business suits and long, slinky dresses pushed to one end. The full suitcase on the floor of the wardrobe worried him. It looked as if she were poised for a hasty retreat. Nothing like being prepared.

With meticulous attention to detail, he lifted the first few items in the suitcase, a frown on his face. Nothing but jeans and shorts and summer blouses. Not quite the thing he'd expect the sophisticated Mel Morgan to wear. But then, she didn't really fit the image presented in the glossy photo in her case file.

Mentally shelving the thought to be dealt with at a later date, he checked the remaining drawers in the bedroom. Nothing. Or at least nothing he could use.

Relief flooded through him as he turned back towards the bed. And it wasn't just that he'd found no evidence to suggest Melissa was involved with the blackmail scam. He was smart enough to realize any sensitive documentation would be locked away, not lying around her bedroom.

No, it was more the fact he could find no sign Rivers stayed at the apartment. No male paraphernalia, no shaving gear or men's toiletries in the bathroom. He knew from the case notes Rivers had his own place in another part of town, but he also knew these two were an item.

A shaft of unreasonable jealousy sliced through him. He didn't want Melissa to be involved with anyone, let alone a sleaze like Mitch Rivers.

Time was passing. He'd better get his act together before Melissa came looking for him. Sitting on the end of the bed, he slipped on his shoes and socks. He'd just tied the last shoelace when he looked up and his eyes alighted on a photograph hanging on the wall beside the wardrobe.

Hidden by the open door, it hadn't been noticeable before. He pushed himself to his feet, gathered up his jacket and walked over to stand in front of the photograph.

It was a close-up studio shot of two women. Both wore strapless dresses, their hair piled high. Both had identical gold chains about their necks. A gold twenty-one hung from each chain. Matt closed his eyes a moment then opened them to stare at the photo again.

"Fucking hell," he whispered. "Someone screwed up. They're twins. *Identical twins.*"

Chapter Seven

Matt couldn't believe his eyes. Adam hadn't done his homework. The case file said there was a sister in Brisbane, but not that they were identical twins. Damn it, Adam was one of the best. How could he make such a mistake?

He frowned as he stared at the picture. The women may look mirror-imaged, but only at first glance. On closer inspection, with the two of them side by side, it was easy to tell them apart. The one on the right had long brown hair liberally streaked with blonde. She matched the photo in the file back at the office.

Transferring his gaze to the other woman, he analyzed her features. He'd lay odds this was the sister from Brisbane. Her hair was a soft riot of curls about her face. Even through the make-up, he could just make out the scar high on the curve of her right cheek. This was *his* Melissa.

There was something about the eyes though. Despite the classy evening gown, he had the feeling this elegant woman image was just a persona assumed for the camera. At a guess, he'd say this woman would be more comfortable in jeans and a tee shirt. Which explained the suitcase full of casual clothes hidden in the bottom of the wardrobe.

If she were pretending to be her sister, it would further explain her nervousness and the fact she didn't quite fit the role she was playing. It was also a good reason why she didn't know what was in her own kitchen and the occasional slips she'd made.

Anger hit him. He felt like a fool. She must have been laughing behind his back all this time. He was supposed to be a trained federal agent and he'd fallen for it. A classic case of the old switcheroo. He wanted to march out there and have it out with her. Mouth compressed

into a tight line, he'd stomped over to the bedroom door before his training kicked in and he halted.

Okay, so if the sister was here, where was the real Mel Morgan? Off with Rivers? Wherever she was, *this* sister was covering for her. She must know something and it was his job to ferret it out. After all, nothing had changed. He still needed to find out Rivers' whereabouts, and, like it or not, she was going to help him.

His hands clenched about his jacket as the anger built in intensity. It streaked through his body and lodged deep inside him. How could *his* Melissa be involved in anything shady? He had a good mind to go out there and give her a hard shake for pretending to be something other than what she was.

He chose to ignore the fact he was doing the same. At least he had a good excuse. He was an undercover agent involved in an investigation and he'd better remember it. Banking down the anger, he re-assumed his funeral director persona. As he reached out to open the door, Melissa called to him from the other side.

"Hey, are you okay in there? Do you need any help?"

Matt schooled his features into a blank mask as he opened the door. "Just finished. I had trouble with the dryer. Normally I'd let my hair dry naturally and use the hair oil to keep it in place."

The anger faded at the sight of soft fabric molding the most alluring figure he'd seen in a while. Like a puppy, he followed her into the living room and pushed his folded jacket into the corner of the sofa. A devilish impulse caught hold of him. She wanted to teach him to be a man women desired? Well, let her. No time like the present.

His eyebrows drawn together in a fierce frown, he ran his hand through his tousled hair. "You know, I'm not certain about the new image. I think I've got all the oil out, but it feels so...oh, I don't know...fluffy. Is it meant to be like this? What do you think?"

He angled his head towards her, inviting her to touch. A grin threatened to break through when she complied. Oh yeah, she was just as easy to manipulate as he'd been. He sobered as her fingers sifted through

his hair and a charge of sensual awareness arced along his spine. Ah crap, he was in deep shit here.

Melissa swallowed. She was right. He looked so much better without the hair oil. In fact, he looked downright sexy, a danger to any woman's peace of mind and she was no exception.

She'd thought she was immune to sexual attraction, but Matthew had proved her wrong. If watching her mother and the parade of *uncles* trooping through her earlier life hadn't been enough, her experience with Brad should have cured her for all time.

After Brad, she'd sworn never to get involved with another man. To never rely on love *or* the sizzling attraction that would lead a girl down a path that only resulted in heartache.

More important, she'd vowed to never depend on any man for physical comfort or financial support. She earned a good wage as a kindergarten teacher, but she had a dream to purchase and run her own pre-school establishment.

She was almost there. With the inheritance she'd received when her mother had died, plus her life savings, she just about had enough finance to put her dreams into motion. Another six months and she was on her way. And no man had helped get her there. She'd be her own mistress, responsible for her own happiness.

Yet here she was, with her hand buried in the soft, dark hair of a man who, despite his strange ways, still had the power to ignite pinpoints of sexual awareness within her. She wanted to cup her hands about his head and drag his mouth down to hers. She wanted to—

Pull back, Melissa. You do not want to go down here.

She pushed his hair back from his face and patted him on the cheek, just as she would have done to a child. "It looks lovely. It just needs a bit of styling next time you dry it. Go and sit down. I'll bring in the coffee and we can sort out a plan for your coaching sessions."

After Matthew had moved into the living room, Melissa turned to pick up the tray holding the hot coffee pot, milk, sugar and two large mugs. Her hand still tingled from the soft glide of his hair against her palm, her

heart still thumped in her chest. Although why this should be, she didn't know. After all, she was just helping the poor man.

Entering the room, she placed the tray on the coffee table and sat down beside him. It required an immense effort of will to ignore the prickling of nerve ends as she poured the hot beverage into the mugs. Even now, she wasn't certain how she managed it. Not with Matthew so close his heat reached out to her.

"Do you take milk and sugar?"

"Black is fine, my dear," he said.

She handed him a mug and then shook her finger at him. "Oops, there you go again. *My dear* should only be used as a term of endearment after the relationship is well established."

A grimace chased across her face at her school-teacher tone. She was treating him like a child, but it was the only defense she could come up with. The only way she could think of to guard against the surge of sexual awareness rioting through her body and scrambling her brain.

"I knew I'd forget," he said as he took the coffee from her. "You see how important it is for you to coach me? So where do we start?"

Melissa curled up on the sofa and turned sideways to face him. She frowned when she saw his rolled-up jacket. "Matthew, your jacket will be all crumpled. Why don't you let me hang it up?"

Not bloody likely. For the life of him, Matt couldn't come up with a single explanation for the gun hidden in his suit coat. Or the videotape he'd filched from her bedside drawer. He shoved the bundle further behind his back. "No, it's perfectly okay. I have seven of these suits, all identical, one for every day of the week. It's due to go to the drycleaner tomorrow anyway."

"Um, that's one of the problems."

He raised his eyebrows. "What is? The fact I have seven suits?"

"Do you have any other clothes? Besides the suits? What do you wear when you're at home?"

Matt pushed the hair back off his face. “Well, I have casual shirts and trousers, but most of the time I wear my suits. I guess I think of them as my uniform. One must always be an advertisement for one’s business, don’t you think?”

“Okay,” she said, “I think that’s where we’ll have to start. I’ll take you shopping to get you some new, up-to-date clothing. Do you have any free time on Monday?”

He pursed his lips. “I have a funeral at eleven o’clock, but I’m sure my associate, Mr. Cribbs, would stand in for me.” He leaned a bit closer to her and caught a whiff of the floral perfume. Probably from the same shampoo *he’d* used.

“It’s Mrs. Anthrop’s funeral.” He lowered his voice to what he hoped was a reverent tone. “Such a lovely lady, no make-up needed at all. Her skin’s well preserved for a woman her age. You know, she came to me and made all the arrangements for her funeral long before she died. Very thoughtful of her. Everyone should do the same wherever possible. Relieves the family of so much stress after a loved one has passed over.”

Melissa held up her hand. “That’s another thing you can’t do. You can’t talk about funerals. It’s one sure way to put a woman off. Most people aren’t comfortable with death. It would put a dampener on an evening out.”

Matt wanted to burst out laughing at the pained expression on her face. She was trying so hard to hang on to her composure in the face of his funeral talk.

A sudden noise dragged Matt attention away from Melissa. A loud bang as if someone had dropped something. It filtered up from the office below. More thumps followed the first. The burglar alarms he’d spotted beside the front entrance hadn’t gone off so it was someone who had free access to the building. No way would a crim with the skills to crack an alarm choose a place like Dreams Unlimited. Not enough cash kept on the premises.

Matt placed his coffee cup on the low table in front of him and turned to Melissa. "Perhaps you should call the police, my dear. I do believe someone is in your office."

"Ah, it's just...it's probably the cleaner. Ignore it. She'll be finished soon."

He knew damn well she was lying. He only had to look at her face. Or the way she clenched her hands in her lap. She wasn't very good at hiding her feelings. Plus, he'd read the surveillance report done on the premises earlier in the investigation. There was no cleaner. The only people spotted coming and going at night over the last few weeks had been Mel Morgan, Mitch Rivers and the receptionist.

He kept his gaze fixed on her. She tilted her head to one side, a look of intense concentration on her face. It was obvious she was still listening for sounds from the floor below. Then, as if suddenly becoming conscious of his scrutiny, she rushed into speech

"Back to these lessons. There's one other thing we have to address."

Hmm, a tactic to try to distract him from what was going on downstairs. "And what would that be, my dear?"

"Janice had a few comments to make about your time together."

Matt winced as he waited to hear what Janice had said.

"Matthew, are you a virgin?"

It was the last thing he expected. He didn't know whether to laugh or groan out loud. How the hell was a man supposed to answer that?

"Don't be ashamed about it if you are. It's rather sweet in this day and age."

"Why would you ask that?" Matt knew he was good at undercover work, but not this good. His character was supposed to be someone who'd never had much to do with women. It was clear from her question he'd done a credible job. At the same time, that old thing called male ego reared its ugly head and demanded he redeem himself.

He couldn't. He was supposed to be Matthew Campbell, Funeral Director. A poor excuse for a man who had to frequent a dating agency to

find a woman. He'd have to play it out to the end. He brightened. Perhaps she'd offer to teach him that as well.

"Don't be embarrassed." Melissa placed her hand over his in a gesture of reassurance. "It's just... Well, Janice felt you weren't very experienced at kissing women. That's why I asked."

Turning his hand over, he grasped hers. He shot her an embarrassed look before lowering his head. "I wouldn't normally kiss a woman on the first date, but I felt it was expected of me. I'm very sorry if Janice found me lacking."

"Hey, it's all right. Kissing is a talent that can be learned. So you haven't kissed many women?"

He shook his head, his eyes downcast.

She disengaged her hand and placed it on his cheek, tilting his face toward her. "It's okay. We'll just have to practice."

Matt opened his eyes wide, trying to keep an earnest expression on his face. He couldn't believe it. She wanted to teach him to kiss? He may not be into serious 'till-death-do-us-part relationships any longer, but he'd dated his fair share of women. And not one of them had ever complained about his kissing, or anything else for that matter.

His gaze fixed on her face, he said, "So you'll help me in this too? I really would appreciate it." *Just how gullible can the woman be?*

Melissa leaned in closer. "What I want you to do is kiss me the way you kissed Janice last night."

She sat with her eyes closed, mouth held up to him, and lips pursed as she waited for him to kiss her. He wanted to reach out, grab her and drag her close. He wanted to crush her lips under his, taste all her secrets. His body tightened at the thought.

But he couldn't do any of those things. At least, not yet. He wasn't supposed to be able to kiss. So he pulled his lips into a tight line and leaned forward to place his mouth on hers. The things he had to do in the name of the job.

Melissa felt the touch of his lips and waited. And waited. And...nothing! He pressed his rigid lips to hers for an interminable time

before he pulled back and looked at her expectantly. She may not have had a great deal of experience herself, but she knew when a kiss was a kiss. And that wasn't it. That was like kissing a cardboard cutout.

"Ah, I think we have a bit of work to do in this area." She winced. Who was she to give another person lessons on how to romance the opposite sex?

Goody two shoes!

Jane's comment from their earlier telephone conversation snaked through her brain. Darn it, she was sick of that label. She'd been wearing it since she was a kid.

Indignation rose to the fore and with it, a determination to break out of the pigeonhole her sister had shoved her in. Despite his chauvinistic mannerisms and the disastrous hair oil, Matthew Campbell has a way of turning her insides to mush. The attraction was already there, at least on her part. Why not use it? She'd have some fun as well as teach Matthew what women desired. After all, she *was* a teacher. She'd show Jane. Goody two shoes indeed. No more being a *good* woman.

"Do you trust me?" At his nod, she raised herself up on her knees so she was closer to him. "Do you mind if I try to show you?"

"Not at all, my dear lady. I'm in your hands."

She let the *dear lady* pass. It would take more than one night to change the habits of a lifetime. She reached up and placed her hands on either side of his face. "Relax your lips. Don't hold them so rigid. A kiss is supposed to be mobile, moving, ever changing. Oh, I can't explain it. I'll try to show you."

Melissa lowered her head and let her lips glide along his. At first, his mouth remained tight and unmoving then she felt him relax as she continued to brush his lips with hers. She ran the tip of her tongue along the seam of his mouth before outlining the shape of his lips.

"Open your mouth a fraction," she whispered. He complied and she slid the tip of her tongue into the warmth of his mouth. He drew back for a moment before relaxing again. The tenseness disappeared and he allowed her to continue the lesson.

She delved deeper, tried to coax him into play. She gasped as he touched the tip of his tongue to hers. *She* was supposed to be the teacher, but he sure learned fast.

An explosion of tastes hit her. The wine she'd served with dinner. The trace of flavor from the brandy they'd finished the meal off with. And something that was essentially Matthew. He still allowed her to take the lead, but that made no difference to the feelings springing to life within her.

Her heartbeat accelerated. The blood pounded in her veins. And as his tongue glided along her lips to dip inside, the breath hitched in her throat. Before she totally lost it, she drew back and looked at him.

"See how different a kiss can be?" Her voice was husky, her body held rigid as she struggled for control. After all, it was only a kiss.

Matthew cleared his throat. "It seems I've missed out on a delightful part of dating through my own ignorance. Do you mind if I try again? And may I put my arms about you?"

"Be my guest," Melissa echoed his earlier words.

He slid his arms about her and pulled her closer. She lost her balance and fell across his lap.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't expect that to happen. Will it matter, do you think? As far as the kissing goes?"

"People do sometimes cuddle up like this to kiss," Melissa said after she'd swallowed the lump in her throat. "Although perhaps not on a first date. But we're only practicing so it's okay."

She couldn't help herself. She snuggled closer to his chest. A shiver snaked down her spine as she felt the muscles of his thighs flex beneath her. It did no good to remind herself this was just a lesson. Her head was hearing, but her body was having none of it. She desperately wanted him to kiss her again.

"Your turn this time," she said as she slid her arms around his neck. Her eyes fluttered closed as she felt the brush of his lips. Soft butterfly kisses that made her press closer as she silently begged for more. His

tongue lapped at the corner of her mouth. She opened to him, allowing him access.

This was no hungry possession. Just the gentle thrust of his tongue as he searched out the recesses of her mouth. He tantalized, tempted, drove her into reciprocating in kind. It made her want so much more. She couldn't contain the moan that tumbled from her lips.

Her breasts brushed his chest as she struggled to even out her breathing. Freakin' hell, she was so damn hot it was a wonder she didn't go off like a fire cracker.

Matthew dragged in a shaky breath and rested his forehead on hers. "Was that any better, my dear?" His voice was deep and husky.

Melissa scrambled back to her own side of the sofa, pulling her skirt down to cover her knees. She buried her hands in the soft fabric to hide their shaking.

"Much better," she managed to get out. "Of course, we'll need more practice so we make certain you get it right." She'd just uttered the biggest fib of her life. The man didn't need to practice. One tiny lesson and he was well on the way to being an expert. It would take her the rest of the night to get her heart, and body, under control.

Oh boy, was she in trouble. She didn't want to feel this way over any man. They couldn't be trusted to stay around when the going got tough. It was time to bring this interlude to an end.

She gathered up the coffee cups and placed them on the tray. "I think that's enough for you to absorb in one night," she said, not about to let him see how much his kiss had affected her. "I suggest we finish up here and meet on Monday to go shopping. How about you wait for me outside the post office at the Martin Place entrance? Is eleven o'clock too early for you?"

"Eleven will suit me perfectly," Matthew said as he uncurled his tall frame and stood, his bundled jacket held tight to his chest. "Are you sure I can't pick you up? Quite happy to do so."

"No, it's okay. I'll meet you there."

She walked him to the door of the apartment. After she opened it, he hovered for a moment on the threshold. Then he reached for her hand, raised it to his mouth and placed a soft kiss on her palm. Melissa drew in a sharp breath and fought to get her hormones under control. Much more and she'd cave in and beg him to stay.

Her heart skipped a beat as he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles in an absent-minded manner. Heat streaked up her arm like tiny charges of electricity. This time the softness of his palm didn't repel, it excited. A plethora of raunchy pictures crowded her brain... Matthew beside her on the bed. His hand brushing down her body, sensitizing, creating unbearable tension. Building the heat until she felt she'd burst into flames...

For crying out loud, Melissa, you're supposed to help the poor man, not use this as an exercise in self-gratification, sexual or otherwise.

"Goodnight, Matthew."

"Goodnight, my dear," he said before he stepped outside and shut the door behind him.

She stared at the closed door, one hand cradled against her chest and the other pressed against her throbbing lips. In a daze, she wandered into the living room and retrieved the keys from the sideboard. It took a few moments of fumbling before she found the right key and locked the deadbolt on the door of the apartment.

As she turned, her gaze swept over the elevator. She frowned as she remembered the noises in the office earlier. As an added precaution, she locked these doors as well. She didn't like the idea of Angelica, or any of her dates, having access to the apartment.

She finally entered the living area again. Her mind should have been on tidying up and going to bed. After all, it was late. But all she could do was stand there, her brain caught up with all the things she'd like to do for and with Matthew. *And* how he made her feel.

"The man is positively dangerous," she muttered.

* * *

The rolled-up jacket still clutched to his chest, Matt closed himself in the darkness of his car, glancing up at the apartment as he did so. For a moment, there was nothing. No movement. He continued to sit there, trying to imagine what Melissa was doing. Then he saw her at the window, backlit by the light of the dining room. She hovered for a few moments before pulling the drapes against the night.

He released his breath on a sigh. She was some teacher, even if she did tend to treat him like a small boy in need of guidance. Although there was nothing childlike in the kiss they'd shared.

He'd wanted to crush her close, devour her, savor each delectable morsel. The reaction in his lower body had been hard and furious. If she hadn't ended the kiss when she did, he'd have had a hard time controlling himself. He was supposed to be a novice at this kissing business. If it had gone on any longer, he would have blown his cover. In more ways than one. Just the thought of it made his cock hard.

Matt closed his eyes and willed his body to behave. It was nothing but sex, raging testosterone. He couldn't believe he'd been turned on by a simple kiss. But it was more than that. It was the subtle blend of her perfume. Her very nearness. The caring attitude towards a man she thought couldn't get a woman. A misfit.

She'd been a pushover, falling for the whole package. The poor, misguided male she had to tutor in how to romance a woman. That's what he had to do as an undercover operative. Project an image all those around him believed in. He'd obviously done his job well.

Why then did he feel rotten because he'd deceived her? She was a nice woman, not at all what he'd expected. And she genuinely wanted to help him. How was she going to react when she found out what he did for a living?

He was supposed to be a professional. It shouldn't matter what the investigative subject thought of him, but this time it did and he wasn't certain he was ready to analyze why.

With a shake of his head, he pushed the troubled thoughts from his mind. Unrolling his jacket, he extracted his weapon and the tape he'd *borrowed* and shoved both inside the glove compartment. A quick glance at his watch showed it was only a little after eleven. Adam would still be at work.

He picked up his cell phone and pressed the speed dial button to connect him to the silent number for the unit. Adam answered within seconds.

"You didn't do your homework, mate," he barked before his friend could say a word.

"Matt? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, annoyed with his impatience, but unable to contain it. "But I think you got the wrong woman."

"What the hell are you talking about? Of course it's the right woman. Mel Morgan, part owner of Dreams Unlimited. You saw the dossier. There's no doubt Mitch Rivers is the one doing the blackmailing. That's a proven. But you can't tell me Morgan's not a part of the whole scam. She's as dirty as he is."

Matt held on to his temper with difficulty. He didn't want to hear anyone, certainly not his best friend, speak about Melissa like that. At least, not the Melissa he knew.

"Cool it, Adam, she's not like that. Okay, some things don't ring true. And there's enough here to raise my suspicions, but I don't think her nervousness has anything to do with the case. I still maintain we have the wrong girl." *And I hope to God I'm right.*

"All right, Matt, you'd better tell me what you're on about," Adam said.

"The case file shows there's a sister in Brisbane. But there's one thing you missed."

"And what would that be?"

"The sisters are identical twins and I think the one we have here is the one from up north. This one doesn't match any of the data we have

on Mel Morgan. She's not the least bit sophisticated, although she tries to pretend otherwise. She's kind and thoughtful to a fault. She's—"

"I take it you want me to check out the sister?"

"Right first time. I want to know her name, where she works, what she does for entertainment. A complete run-down. And a photo would be of help." He paused to drag in a deep breath. "And Adam?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to know by ten-thirty Monday morning. I'm meeting Melissa at eleven and I want the information before then."

"No problems," Adam said. "You want me to phone it through to you or will you come in?"

"I'll come to the office. See you then."

Before he could end the call, Adam had one last thing to say.

"A word of warning, my friend. Maybe it's time to rethink this whole thing before it's too late. You're getting too close. You can't afford to get emotionally involved."

Matt didn't answer. He switched off the phone and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

"I have a feeling it's already too late," he mumbled to the darkened interior of the vehicle. A shaft of desire swept through his body, reinforcing his words.

"Way too late!"

Chapter Eight

Melissa placed the phone down and released a pent-up breath on a frustrated sigh. Why wouldn't Jane return any of her messages?

She'd waited around the apartment all day in the hope her sister would call, but no such luck. A hell of a way to spend a Sunday, more so when it was supposed to be her holiday time. She'd thought about going sightseeing, but it was no fun on her own. Jane should have been here to share this time with her.

With a flick of her hand, she turned off the light and stretched out on the bed. She may as well try to get some sleep. It was patently obvious Jane wasn't going to ring.

Overhead, the fan lazily stirred the humid summer air. She reached for the controls fixed to the wall above the bed and turned the fan to high. It didn't do much good. Perspiration beaded her forehead and upper chest. It ran down between her breasts and made her satin nightie stick to her already damp skin.

She sat up and reefed the nightie over her head. Throwing it toward the bottom of the bed, she lay down again, clad only in microscopic bikini panties. The swirling blades of the fan dried the sweat on her body and created a momentary illusion of coolness. Not totally satisfactory, but better than nothing. With a punch at the pillow to mold it into the desired shape, she curled up on her side and waited for sleep to claim her.

Ten minutes later she was still wide awake, her thoughts focused on her sister. *Damn it, Jane. How could you do this?*

They were twins. Where was that special bond twins were supposed to experience? She felt a pang of sadness. Looking back, she realized they'd never been close, even as children.

Perhaps it was her fault. Too much responsibility dumped on her shoulders at too young an age had made her old before her time. That's what this holiday had been about—trying to form a closer relationship with Jane. Even if it meant she had to accept Mitch Rivers.

Mitch! Melissa snorted in a very unladylike manner. If Mitch hadn't taken off, Jane would still be here with her.

She made an effort to push the futile thoughts from her mind. Worrying about her sister wasn't helping matters.

The edges of her consciousness had begun to blur when she heard a thump below her. It jolted her upright in the bed, all thoughts of sleep driven from her mind. Another bang, louder than the first. The breath snagged in her throat and her heart thundered in her chest. An instantaneous fear reaction, until she realized what it was.

"Not again," she mumbled. "Bloody Angelica on another of her so-called dates. This has to stop. I am not going to lie here every night and listen to the woman cavort with desperate men in that over-the-top viewing room. Enough is enough."

A whirring sound cut through her brain. It took a moment to work out what it was. Someone was using the elevator. Either Angelica, or her man friend.

Had she locked it?

Melissa couldn't remember, and here she was, lying in bed in nothing but a pair of red panties. She groped in the dark for her nightie, dragging it over her head as she stumbled through the apartment to the elevator. A sigh of relief escaped when she saw the keys dangling from the lock.

As the elevator came to a halt, a loud clunk resounded through the apartment. The internal doors swished open, the sound ominous in the dark of the night. Melissa held her breath as an unseen hand tried to pry open the remaining barrier. A metallic clang suddenly echoed from the

elevator. A deep male voice cursed violently as furtive scratching came from where the two doors joined.

Someone was trying to get into the apartment.

Fear kicked in again as Melissa tried to flatten herself against the wall beside the elevator. The sweat on her body had turned clammy. The satin of her nightie struck cold against her skin. Her hands trembled, her breathing unnaturally loud and she was sure the person on the other side of the doors would hear her. As the occupant of the elevator slammed a fist into the doors in obvious frustration, the beat of her heart faltered.

“Damn you, I know you’re in there. Open the bloody doors.”

The metal doors muffled the words slightly, but the threat was nonetheless audible. Despite the muted version that had reached her, the voice had the power to drive ice through her body. It pooled in her veins, splinters shivering down her spine. A sense of menace wrapped about her, almost strangling the breath in her chest.

The intruder made another effort to pry open the doors. Metal scraped on metal. The sound screeched inside her mind, like a victim who cried out in anguish.

Melissa clenched one shaking hand into a fist and bit down on her knuckles. The pain cut off the scream as it built up in her throat. Sliding down the wall until she was on the floor, she pulled her shaking knees up to her chest.

She tried to concentrate, to slow down her breathing. *Had* he heard her? Even through the thickness of the metal doors? She didn’t know, but she wasn’t taking any chances.

He continued to pound on the doors as he muttered to himself. Melissa made a valiant effort to push the fear aside and focus on rational thoughts. If this were one of Angelica’s dates, why would he try to get into the apartment?

And what about Jane? Surely she wasn’t into the same sleazy behavior Angelica exhibited? Dating the clients, having sex with them in the viewing room. It was all just too tacky. No, she couldn’t believe it of

Jane... Scratch that! Right now, she'd believe Jane capable of anything, particularly after she intimated it was okay to screw around with the clients.

A particularly loud bang dragged her back to the intruder in the elevator. If this were a client, drunk or sober, then where was Angelica? She hadn't heard a woman's voice at all, so using the same deductive reasoning, there was only one answer she could come up with. Someone had broken into the office.

Melissa frowned. Had she forgotten to set the burglar alarm when she was down in the office today? Oh God, she couldn't remember.

A new wave of tremors wracked her body. She held herself so rigid, she felt as if her spine was about to shatter. As she realized the implications of her reasoning, her throat grew dry. If this person got through those doors, he could well do her harm. She winced as he spat out a particularly nasty word in reference to her.

She had to call the police. Should have done it earlier, when she'd first heard the noises in the elevator. But she'd been so paralyzed with fear, she hadn't been thinking straight at all.

On hands and knees, she crawled over to the polished hall table and groped around until her fingers encountered the cell phone she'd left there earlier. Her hands shook so hard, she almost dropped it as she flipped open the cover. The digital display glowed green in the darkened hallway.

A heavy fist pounded again on the locked doors and she jerked in reaction. Or perhaps it was a booted foot kicking out in frustration. Whatever, it propelled her into action. She punched in the number for the emergency services and lifted the phone to her ear.

All of a sudden, with a sharp gasp, she cut the connection. Her fingers curled so tightly around the phone, it was a wonder the case didn't shatter.

Ah hell, Jane!

What if Jane *was* a part of all this? If she called the police, could she live with the idea that she'd be responsible for dumping her sister in it with the authorities?

She wasn't certain what was going on here at Dreams Unlimited, but it wasn't kosher, and she was pretty certain it wasn't legal either.

Maybe this *was* just another of Angelica's dates. Perhaps the woman had fallen asleep after her...exertions, and the client felt he was owed more for his money than he'd been given. If it was a regular client, he probably knew Jane lived above the business premises and he must have thought he could come up here and get a bit more of the same.

But what if it wasn't one of Angelica's clients? What if it were someone with a more sinister objective in mind?

To hell with it. If Jane was a party to this and had deliberately gone away, knowing Melissa would be exposed to God knows what danger, she deserved everything she got.

Melissa pushed the redial button, waited for the Emergency Services to answer, then asked for the police. *God, please don't let Jane be a part of this.*

The prayer whispered through her mind as she turned half her attention toward the elevator again. The noise had stopped. Phone held to her ear, she edged across to the doors and pressed her ear against the cold metal. She could hear a shuffling, but nothing else.

The internal doors swished shut, catching her unawares. The sound shot through her like a projectile. She jerked backward, her heart pounding in her chest. Then the whirring started and she mentally tracked the descent of the elevator to the ground floor. Her breath held, she struggled to hear any further sound.

The soft thud as the outer door of the office slammed shut came to her as an echo drifting up through the elevator shaft. She blew out a gusty sigh of relief. Reaction set in and she began to shake. Nausea churned in her gut and bile rose in her throat. She had to get to the bathroom, and quick.

"Police. Can I help you?"

She jumped when her call was answered. She opened her mouth to answer, but the bile rose up again in the back of her throat. Holding her hand to her mouth, she dry-retched. "Sorry, wrong number," she managed and cut the connection for the second time.

The wall her only support, she pushed herself to her feet. Legs trembling, she rushed through the darkened apartment to the bathroom, flicking on the overhead light as she entered. Dropping to her knees in front of the toilet, she lost the contents of her stomach, the purging violent and painful.

Her gut muscles had finally stopped contracting. She dragged herself upright and rinsed her mouth in the sink. A quick glimpse in the mirror showed a face pasty with shock, her eyes wide, the pupils dilated.

"Dear God, Jane, what the hell is going on here?" she whispered.

She knew she was being a fool. Despite Jane being her sister, she should call the authorities right now and let them deal with it. She struggled with the idea for a few minutes.

For the moment, the danger seemed to have passed. The flat was locked up tight, and tonight's little episode showed her how difficult it was for anyone to gain access through the elevator, provided she remembered to lock it.

So, no cops. At least for tonight. She'd give Jane a little more time, but only a little.

"Twenty-four hours, Jane. If you haven't contacted me within that time, I'm going to the cops," she whispered. And then Jane could clean up her own mess for once.

* * *

Melissa dragged in a deep breath and released it slowly. Staring at the elevator doors wasn't going to help matters. As she reached out and turned the key in the lock, a yawn caught her by surprise. Was it any wonder? She'd spent most of the night wide awake trying to figure out what was going on around here.

She snorted. *Let's be honest here, Melissa, you were too scared to sleep.*

Well, enough! She was not about to sit upstairs in the apartment cowering like a frightened rabbit. As early as it was, it was time to go downstairs and check out the damage, if any.

Punching the button on the key panel, she waited for the door to swish open. Then, with another deep breath, she stepped inside. The first thing she noticed was a red-handled screwdriver on the floor in the corner. Okay, so now she knew what the metallic sound had been.

She went through the useless exercise of pulling down her skirt before she stepped into the reception area. First, she needed to check out the front door. Cursing the high heels, she moved as fast as she dared to the glass-paneled entrance and eyed the digital display on the keypad.

The alarm was still set so whoever had been here last night had reset it when they'd left. Unlikely? Maybe...if it had been a normal burglar, but something told her that wasn't the case in this instance. She buried the thought in the back of her mind and tried to ignore it as she clung to the least frightening explanation.

Melissa deactivated the security system and unlocked the main door as she grappled for a solution to last night's escapade. It *had* to be Angelica and another so-called date. The alternative was just too scary. And who else would have known the code for the alarm? Next time the receptionist had damn well better keep her man under control.

Scrap that. There wasn't going to be a next time. She flicked a quick glance at her watch. It was still early. She'd get the coffee started.

The simple act of setting up the percolator helped keep her mind off last night's fiasco. She switched the machine on and then approached the viewing room. She needed to keep busy. She may as well clean up Angelica's mess while she waited for the woman to arrive.

As she flicked on the light, she made a mental note to tax the receptionist about her use of the room. It was bad enough when Angelica informed her it would be in use. It was worse when she didn't.

Her eyes opened wide as she looked about the room. It was spotless. Not a thing out of place. She shrugged. Obviously this time Angelica had cleaned up after herself. Maybe that's what she'd been doing when her date had wandered off and tried to get into the apartment. Well, bully for her, but it wasn't going to happen again. Jane had left Melissa in charge. It was time to put her foot down.

Melissa heard Angelica arrive as she closed the door on the tacky room. She waited until the receptionist had poured herself a cup of coffee and settled behind her desk. Then, trying for a measure of authority, Melissa let her have it.

"Angelica, I think until Jane, or Mitch, returns it would be a good idea if you don't use the business for your...assignments. I don't appreciate it and after all, I am in charge for the moment."

"Oh, you mean my date with Mr. Bishop on Friday night?"

She flashed a supercilious smile that made Melissa grit her teeth.

"Sorry about the mess," Angelica breezed. "Mr. Bishop was a little tipsy so I had to get him home. I'll go clean up now."

"Don't worry about it. I've already done it." She paused, struggling for the right words. "Ah, Angelica, you didn't do anything you shouldn't with Mr. Bishop, did you?"

A patronizing smirk slid across Angelica's face. "Oh, Melissa, don't be such a stuffed shirt. You do know what goes on between a man and a woman on a date, don't you?"

"I don't think you should be doing it with a client. It's totally unprofessional. Besides being ethically wrong. And I don't appreciate the fact you used the office on Saturday night, and again on Sunday night, without telling me." Melissa was wound up now. "The least you could have done was keep a better watch on your date so he didn't try to get into the apartment. It's a good thing I'd locked the elevator doors."

Angelica held up her hand. "Hang on a moment. I might have been here Friday, but that's all."

"But I heard noises down here. And someone tried to force the doors into the apartment. If it wasn't you, who was it?"

“Perhaps it was a thief doing a bit of breaking and entering.” Angelica shrugged her shoulders and spun to face her desk, but not before Melissa saw the secretive smile flash across her face.

The gesture was a clear dismissal and it made Melissa seethe. The woman acted as if she were the one in charge and it just plain pissed her off.

If it wasn’t Angelica in the building last night, then who was it? Melissa had seen no evidence of a break-in. The alarm hadn’t gone off. The area was as she’d left it, although come to think of it, she hadn’t checked Mitch’s office.

Ignoring Angelica for the moment, she slipped across to Mitch’s office and opened the door. *Well, here’s your answer, Melissa, or at least a part of it.*

Someone had been in Mitch’s office and if Angelica were telling the truth, who was responsible for this?

The cupboard containing the client tapes was wide open. The two bottom shelves were empty, the videos now sitting in an untidy clutter in front of the cupboard. Some were stacked in piles. Others stood on their ends like dominoes waiting for a final flick of a finger to start a chain reaction.

Manila folders, their contents scattered, littered the carpet around the desk, like confetti from a recent wedding. The drawer that had been locked when she’d last cleaned up was wrenched open.

Melissa drew breath to call Angelica. Suddenly, she paused, closing her mouth with a snap. If Angelica hadn’t been here since Friday night, then who? Mitch?

If so, what had he been after? The tapes she’d taken up to the apartment? Probably...

If it were Mitch, why hadn’t he just come to the door and knocked? She may not like him, but he had a perfect right to access the business premises and the apartment above. Why scare the daylights out of her?

Shutting herself inside the office, she restored the videos to the cupboard in the right order before lowering herself to her knees behind

the desk and shuffling the files into a pile. That done, she gathered them all up and dumped them on the desk.

She just picked up the last sheet of paper and was about to place it in the bottom drawer when she glanced down at the computer-generated missive. What she saw halted her in her tracks.

“Oh my gosh,” she whispered. “Now I know what those tapes upstairs were about. Damn, I am so stupid. I should have worked it out.” She sat back on her heels, ignoring the way her skirt rode up to expose the top of her thighs. Her attention was totally focused on the letter in her hand.

It was a blackmail note, threatening to expose an adulterous affair if someone called Jason Carmody didn’t hand over a specific amount of cash.

She didn’t need to live in Sydney to know Jason Carmody was a well-known cardiologist. He featured in the news on a regular basis, feted for his high profile research into heart transplants.

Melissa felt a cold sweat break out on her body as a wave of horror swept over her. Did her sister know about this? Surely not!

Regardless of whether Jane was directly involved or not, she must have had some inkling of what was going on right under her nose. No one was that stupid, even Jane. She flicked a glance at her watch. “Your time’s ticking down, Jane,” she whispered. “You better contact me soon or I’m taking the tapes and this blackmail note to the cops.”

Her hands shook as she folded the note into a small square and curled her fingers around it. Legs shaky, she pushed herself upright and left Mitch’s office, her hand fisted at her side. She should get on with some work, but right now, she needed time alone. Besides, Angelica could run this office without any help at all.

“Angelica, I have an appointment. I’m sure you can look after the fort.” She didn’t wait for a reply. Instead, she entered the elevator and made her way up to the apartment. It was time to get ready to meet Matthew and she was damned if she’d wear this poor excuse for a skirt.

Pushing the thought of the blackmail note to the back of her mind for the moment, Melissa changed into a comfortable pair of jeans and a well-

washed tee shirt. For the first time in the last few days, she felt normal. More like herself. Not very professional, but too bad. She was going for comfort, not fashion.

She rang a cab to take her into the city. It would be expensive, but to hell with it. Jane's company could shell out for the cost. Call it business expenses. Right now, she just didn't care.

After locking the door to the elevator, she left the apartment via the back door, weighted down by the small square of paper hidden in her pocket. As she stepped into the waiting vehicle, she made a deliberate effort to concentrate on the shopping trip with Matthew, and not on the ugly note that felt like a hot coal branding her flesh through the fabric of her jeans.

Chapter Nine

"You can tell Judge O'Ryan his troubles are over," Matt said as he handed the videotape to his boss. "Provided, of course, there isn't another copy."

"I take it you've viewed it?" Bob Morris said. "It's definitely O'Ryan?"

"Oh, it's him all right. And the woman is Angelica Freeman, the receptionist, although she tries to keep her face hidden from the camera. Tell the judge to keep his pants zipped in future and he won't get into this sort of trouble."

Matt dropped into the chair in front of Adam's desk and picked up the case file. "There's at least another dozen tapes where I found this one. Probably other poor saps caught in the same honey trap. It was pure luck I happened to pick up O'Ryan's."

He turned his attention to the folder in his hands, flicked open the cover and started to read. "You got the other file there?" he mumbled as he glanced over the notes on the sister in Brisbane. When Adam produced the manila folder, he slid out the photo of Jane Melissa Morgan, aka Mel Morgan, and placed it on the desk. Beside it, he positioned the photo of the sister.

"Put them together and it's easy to spot the difference," Bob said over his shoulder.

Matt could tell straight away which one was *his* Melissa. It wasn't only the difference in hairstyles or the tiny scar high on her cheekbone. Or the fact one was dressed in an evening gown and the other in shorts and tee shirt and surrounded by small children. No, it was much more subtle.

It was the expression on the face of the woman with the children. There was no weary, worldly-wise look in the rich brown eyes. Instead, there was a softness reaching out to him. A vulnerability that was easy to see.

Okay, so he was being fanciful, but he was good at reading faces. It was part of his job. No way could this woman be a party to anything as seedy as blackmail.

He glanced again at the notes in his hand. So she was a kindergarten teacher. His mouth quirked with silent amusement. It made sense, given the way she tended to treat him like a child in need of instruction.

“Melissa Jane Morgan and Jane Melissa Morgan. How insensitive can a parent be?” he asked of no one in particular. “What mother would do that to her children, even if they were twins? It’s like they have no separate identity. Must have given the girls a few problems.”

“Yeah, particularly when the younger twin uses an abbreviated version of her second name,” Bob said. “Really fucked things up beautifully for us.”

Matt looked again at the photos, his attention caught by the wide smile on Melissa’s face as she stared into the camera. He suddenly wanted to be on the receiving end of such a warm, sunny smile. He had an inexplicable urge to reach out and run his finger over the outline of her lips.

His mind snapped back to the tutorial in kissing and he realized he wanted more of the same. Shit, Adam was right. He was in way too deep, and if he wasn’t careful, he’d lose his objectivity.

“So what the hell is she doing here in Sydney, pretending to be her sister?”

Bob pulled another chair up to the desk. “She must be in on it, too.”

“No way.” Matt made a valiant effort to relax the hand clutching the papers from the case file so hard they bent in half. He shoved them back into the folder and dropped it on the desk. It wouldn’t do to let the boss know just how far he’d fallen from grace.

"No, she's covering for the sister," he said when he felt he had himself under control. "She's the type who'd try to protect anyone she cared for."

"She must at least know about it, even if she isn't directly involved." Bob pushed his chair back and stood. "You'd do well to remember that," was his parting shot before he turned and stomped off to his office.

Matt didn't answer. He didn't even look at Bob. He knew he'd give himself away if he did. He watched as Adam placed the photo of the Sydney sister into the correct file and spun in his chair to slip the case notes into the drawer behind him. While his back was turned, Matt picked up the glossy print of Melissa and slid it into his jacket pocket.

As Adam faced the desk again, Matt handed him the second file. He wasn't certain why he'd kept the photo. He just knew he couldn't part with it. He stood and shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

"I'm out of here. I have to meet Melissa at eleven. She's taking me shopping for clothes to make me look less like an undertaker."

"Just remember, this is work." Adam raised his eyebrows at Matt as if waiting for a smart comeback.

Matt was all out. "Don't worry. If she's involved, I'll find out." He just prayed he was right about Melissa. Anything else was unthinkable.

Spinning on his heels, he left the office, taking the elevator to the secure parking lot beneath the Federal Building. Then he hesitated. If he took the car, he'd have trouble finding a parking space. Why not leave it where it was and walk to Martin Place? It wasn't that far.

His mind made up, he left the building and made his way to the post office. It was right on eleven, but there was no sign of Melissa. He frowned as he searched the crowd for a woman in a short skirt. There were lots of those, just not the one he wanted.

Had she changed her mind? He couldn't believe she'd do that without contacting him. She wasn't the type to stand a man up.

It surprised him how much he was looking forward to this. And not just for the sake of the investigation. It was a lot more personal than that. In a very short space of time, she'd managed to get under his skin.

It did no good to caution himself this was work. Melissa called to that side of him he'd kept hidden since the death of his fiancée.

A hand tapped the sleeve of his dark suit jacket and he spun about. His eyes widened and his brows rose at the sight of the woman before him.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," Melissa said. "The traffic was worse than I anticipated." At the look on his face, she flicked a glance down at her jeans and tee shirt. "I know, not very business-like, but this is shopping. I'm going for comfort, not style."

Matt took her hand, bent over and dropped a kiss on the inside of her wrist. He dared to move closer and brush his lips across her cheek. "My dear, you look delightful."

And she did. Her jeans clung to her like a second skin and the blue tee shirt outlined her breasts in a way that drove his body temperature skyward. He thought of the photo tucked away in his pocket and knew he was seeing *that* woman, not a caricature of her sister. The real Melissa.

"You ready to brave the holiday crowds?" Melissa grinned as she asked the question, knowing full well how frustrating shopping could be in school vacation time.

"Lead on, my dear lady. I'm in your hands."

Melissa shook a finger at him. "Remember, Matthew, no *my dear lady*."

"See how important it is for you to remind me, my dear?"

She was tempted to pull him up on the *my dear*. Instead, she shrugged and let it go. Anyway, she rather liked it. It was sweet and it made her feel special. And he probably used it on every woman he came into contact with. She shook her head. Time to get this trip on the road.

"Okay, there are lots of arcades in this area and there's the mall on Pitt Street. I'm sure we'll find what we need in any one of the menswear stores."

“Ah...I normally get my suits made at a particular establishment down near The Rocks. They keep my measurements on hand and I phone through when I need new suits.”

“And look what they put you in,” Melissa said as she indicated his dark suit, white shirt and carefully arranged bow tie. Contrite, she clapped a hand over her mouth as she realized how rude she’d sounded.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. Your suits are fine for your funerals, but we need to soften the image. Bring you more into line with what other men are wearing. Particularly when they go on a date.”

She frowned up at him. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course I do. I bow to your greater wisdom. I’m grateful you’re willing to take the time from your busy day to help me.”

“Just pretend you’re on a date with me. It’ll be good practice for you,” Matthew at her side, she started to walk towards the main shopping area.

“Is it permitted to hold hands on a date these days?”

Melissa didn’t answer. She just held out her hand. As his larger hand enfolded hers, an electric current arced across her palm. His heat reached out to her and she moved closer so her shoulder brushed against his arm.

It was hard to concentrate. She wanted... She didn’t know what she wanted. She just knew this man affected her in a way no other man had for a long time. It was a struggle to remember the reason for this trip. To get Matthew kitted out in more fashionable clothing.

She was very conscious of their linked hands as she steered him into the first menswear store they came to. An obsequious salesman approached them.

“Good morning, sir. Madam. May I be of assistance?”

“We need some trendy clothes for my...friend here. Although not too trendy,” she warned, turning to Matthew. “You have a certain dignity to preserve. You have to remember at your age you can’t wear what the teenagers do.”

“Hey, I’m not that old,” Matthew mumbled. “It’s not like I haven’t been dressing myself for years.”

Melissa grinned. “Don’t take offense.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Even you have to admit you need some help in this area, particularly if you want to catch a modern woman.”

“If Madam would like to take a seat,” the salesman said, “I’ll see to the gentleman.” He indicated a chair before leading the way to the dressing rooms, tape measure in hand. “Now what size would sir be?”

Instead of sitting, Melissa flicked through the rack of shirts nearest her. With his olive complexion and dark hair and eyes, she felt the brighter colors would suit Matthew. Although not too bright, of course.

The salesman was on the other side of the shop selecting dress slacks and casual trousers. Matthew had disappeared behind the curtain closing the change rooms off from the rest of the shop. She chose three long-sleeved shirts and two short-sleeved casual shirts and took them over to the salesman. Then she settled down to wait.

In a very short space of time, Matthew stood before her in beige trousers and a long-sleeved shirt unbuttoned at the neck. He looked terrific, although the black shoes didn’t go, but they could deal with them later.

“What do you think?” He turned in a full circle in front of her.

“You look great.” *More than great.* “Go try the rest on and see what you think.”

Without the suit jacket, the width of his shoulders was more noticeable and the casual attire looked as sexy as...as... She couldn’t come up with a comparison that suited. Despite the funereal manner of dress and the disastrous hair oil, she’d thought he was sexy before, but how much more so now? A woman would have to be brain dead not to be happy with him.

An unaccountable shaft of jealousy speared through her chest. She didn’t want to think of Matthew with another woman. It hurt. More than it should have, given the fact he was only a client.

“All done, my dear.”

Matthew's voice cut across the disturbing thoughts cluttering up her brain. She looked up to find him dressed in a pair of dark navy trousers and a softer blue shirt.

The top three buttons of the shirt were undone. A glimpse of curly dark hair was visible above the open neck. She had a sudden desire to reach out and... She cut off the thought and curled her hands into tight fists to resist the impulse.

He held up two bags emblazoned with the shop's name. "I have enough shirts and trousers for the moment. Now I know what to look for, I can shop for more later. Where to now?"

She took one of the bags from him and linked her fingers with his. "Shoes. And a pair of jeans."

"But jeans are so stiff. Not at all comfortable. I know, I've tried them before."

"Bet you haven't tried the pre-washed ones," Melissa said on a grin. "They're so soft, you almost feel like you have nothing on."

The salacious image that popped into her mind made Melissa wish she hadn't put it like that. She tried to banish the erotic thoughts and concentrate on finding a shop that sold jeans.

"Here we are." She steered him into the store. Along one side of the store were little pigeonholes, each filled with jeans sorted by size. She walked along the row until she found what she wanted. Grabbing a couple of pairs of the soft denims, she took the shopping bag from him and indicated the changing rooms with a nod of her head. "Go try them on."

Five minutes later Matthew reappeared clad in the jeans. Melissa felt her mouth drop open. If ever a man suited jeans, this one did. The fabric molded his legs and showed off the well-muscled contours. As he turned in a slow circle and she saw how the material shaped his rear end, she almost started to salivate. The man might spend most of his days beside burial caskets, but it was obvious he found time to work out. Man, she was a sucker for a tight ass.

"What do you think?" he said. "Too tight?"

Melissa cleared her throat. "Um, no, they're perfect." She dragged in a shaky breath. "Perhaps you should change and we'll see about some shoes for you. I think that will do for today."

She had a sudden desire to get off on her own. She needed to put some distance between her and Matthew. More important, she needed time to get her emotions under control.

They completed the rest of the shopping spree in record time, finding what they needed in a little shop on Elizabeth Street, just opposite Hyde Park.

Laden down with plastic carrier bags, Matthew turned to her and grinned. "Thank you so much for your help. I couldn't have done it without you. Can I offer you lunch to make up for taking up so much of your time?"

"I should get back to the office." Melissa grimaced. She really needed to leave. She'd actually enjoyed herself in Matthew's company, more than she had with any man in a long, long time. And that was dangerous. "Angelica might need me."

"As you wish." He bowed his head. "May I ask one thing? Can I kiss you goodbye? I believe that's the time-honored finish to any date, and as you mentioned the other night, I do need to practice."

Melissa knew she shouldn't, but she wanted to, oh so badly. She had a need to experience again the rush of blood through her veins, the heady excitement his last kiss had generated. An avalanche of hormones hit her as the memory crystallized in her brain. "We can't kiss right here in the street," she managed to get out.

"I don't see why not. They have no problem with it." He pointed to a couple at the nearby taxi rank. They had their arms wrapped around each other and their lips fused together in a passionate kiss.

Not giving her time to object, Matthew guided her over to the darkened doorway of a vacant shop. He juggled the carrier bags then pulled her close until she rested against his chest. As she looked up at him, he lowered his head and captured her mouth.

She gasped at the feel of his lips on hers. Gone was the restrained pressure of his very first kiss. Now his lips shaped hers, his mouth mobile. His tongue outlined, thrust, tempted her to join him in an explosion of sensation. She'd thought it before, and she was right. The man was a quick study.

With a shaky sigh, she gave herself up to the charge of excitement zapping through her body. Her heart pounded, her blood raced through her veins. Heat gathered and swept her self-consciousness aside. Her breasts swelled, nipples tightening and pushing against the wall of his chest. She wanted this interlude to go on forever, but she knew she had to put a stop to it right now. *Before* she was drawn deeper into a web of desire she couldn't escape from.

With a soft groan, she pulled back. "I have to go," she whispered in a husky voice. She stepped away from him, crossing her arms over her chest to hide the telltale sign of her arousal. "Give me a call when you're free and we'll continue the lessons." *As if he needed them.*

She turned and ran for the taxi rank. Once safe inside the first vehicle in line, she glanced back through the rear window. Matthew still stood where she'd left him, gazing after her.

As she gave her address to the driver, she had to remind herself again that he was a client and the traitorous emotions she had experienced were not to be acted upon. She couldn't be interested in a relationship with a man she'd only just met. Any sensible woman knew men were not to be trusted and she was nothing if not sensible.

Wasn't she?

Chapter Ten

The strident ring of the telephone grated on the edges of Melissa's consciousness and dragged her from the deep cocoon of a dreamless sleep. She pushed aside the mind-numbing fog curling about her brain as she struggled for reality.

It took her a few moments to orient herself in the darkened room. She turned her head and stared at the alarm clock. Five-thirty in the morning. Who on earth would ring at this time?

I suddenly hit her. *Jane!* One arm snaked out from under the covers to grab the receiver. She opened her mouth to speak, but never had the chance.

"Where are they?" a sibilant male voice hissed.

"Who is this?"

"Where did you hide the tapes?" Impatience, heavy and intimidating, filtered down the line.

Melissa frowned. As far as she could work out, only two people knew about the tapes. So this had to be...

"Mitch, is that you? Where the hell are you?"

"I want those tapes and I want them now. Give them up or you'll be sorry. I'll hurt you like you've never been hurt before."

The voice was hoarse with venom. A sense of menace overlaid his words, making the fine hairs on Melissa's arms stand up. She'd heard enough. "Fuck you, Mitch, I am so sick of this. If you want to talk to me, have the guts to come to the office and front me face to face."

She slammed the phone down, her hand shaking. Her heart pounded so hard in her chest, for a moment she thought she'd pass out.

Blackness floated on the fringes of her mind, threatening to block out normal thought processes.

She pushed herself upright and breathed deep, dragging the air down into her lungs. The feeling of faintness passed and she reached out to snap on the bedside lamp. The fingers of light pushed back the dark of the room and the breath gusted from her mouth in a sigh of relief. Her body still trembled with shock, but at least she felt more in control.

Throwing the covers back, she sat on the side of the bed and replayed the brief conversation in her mind. Her reasoning was flawed. She hadn't recognized the voice. It may not have been Mitch at all. Any one of the men featured in naked splendor on those tapes could have made that call. But, coupled with the events of Sunday night, and the discovery of the blackmail note, logic dictated it had to be Mitch.

This whole situation was getting more and more convoluted. She absolutely had to speak to Jane. She snatched up the phone and punched in the number.

"The service you are calling is switched off or out of range."

The tinny voice on the recorded message echoed down the line, the words reverberating in Melissa's head. Damn it. No voicemail. No way to leave a message. "Jane, where the hell are you?" she whispered.

This had turned into a disaster of a holiday. Jane had worried the crap out of her. What's more, she was now frightened for her own safety.

Further sleep was out of the question. She may as well have a shower and get dressed before finding some way to fill in the hours until it was time to open the office.

For two days, she'd wandered around the apartment trying to keep herself busy. Why Jane had insisted Melissa take her place, she'd never know. Angelica was more than competent to run things. In fact, the woman acted like the business was hers. And Melissa was sure the receptionist knew more than she was letting on.

The only highlight had been a daily call from Matthew, calls she was beginning to rely on. She liked talking to him. Despite his eccentric ways, he made her laugh, although why he wanted to know so much about her

life and that of her supposed partner, she didn't know. She'd almost slipped up on quite a few occasions and let out the fact that she was a twin.

She hated lying like this, if only by omission. Jane had better get her ass home, or at least get in contact, because her time had run out.

For the last two days, she'd come up with one excuse after another as to why she'd broken she self-imposed deadline of twenty-four hours before she contacted the cops.

Part of the problem was the promise she'd made to her mother. Twenty-five years of looking out Jane was a hard habit to break. But more importantly, she knew once she reported this, in all likelihood, her time with Matthew would be over. For some reason, that hurt more than any worries over Jane. Just the same, she couldn't let this go on.

First thing tomorrow, she was visiting the police.

* * *

Matt drew his vehicle to a halt outside Dreams Unlimited. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he brushed the hair back off his forehead. It felt good not to have a head full of that greasy oil.

He locked the car door and walked down the alley to Melissa's apartment. It had taken him three days of concerted effort to get her to agree to go out to dinner with him.

This was one lady who made a career of shielding herself from any and all relationships with men. Although, having read about the ex-fiancé in her case file, he could understand why. Must have hurt to have her sister steal her boyfriend.

He'd rung her each day to chat and practice his social skills. At least that's what he'd told her. What he'd actually been doing was fishing for information about Mitch Rivers. While she pretended to be her sister, he couldn't even ask about the whereabouts of her twin.

If he were dead honest, that's not all he was doing. He could use all the excuses under the sun, but the plain fact of the matter was he liked

talking to her. Even now, excitement fizzed through his veins in anticipation of spending time with her.

In a stately, funereal manner, he climbed the back stairs and tried to ignore the rush of testosterone through his body. She made him feel things he wasn't ready to deal with. This shouldn't be happening. After all, it was just another assignment. Right?

Yeah, right.

He lifted his closed fist and rapped on the door. There was no answer, but he could faintly hear Melissa's voice. Had she called for him to come in? He tried the door, surprised to find it unlocked.

Dangerous thing to do in this day and age. He shrugged. She *was* expecting him. Maybe she'd left it unlocked so he could go right in. He took up the invitation and stepped over the threshold. Before he could open his mouth to announce his arrival, he heard her.

"Jane? Jane, where are you?"

There was a moment's silence and then she said, "Jane, I know it's you. Talk to me. I need to know what's going on here."

Matt crept down the hallway to the living room and peeked around the corner.

"And what about the tapes? I found them, Jane. *And* a blackmail letter. I'd believe this of Mitch, but not of you."

Melissa paced about the room, cell phone in hand. She ran her other hand through her cluster of curls in an agitated movement. Bright spots of color high on her cheeks attested to the state of her emotions.

"All right, if you're not involved, get your butt home here and we'll sort it out, because, I'm telling you, Jane, I'm not waiting much longer. I've had enough and I'm not about to spend another night worrying whether someone is going to try to break in or not. And to hell with Mitch. Let him look after himself."

Matt stepped backward as she turned towards the doorway. This one-sided conversation was very illuminating. He didn't want her to know just yet that he was there.

“You mean I’ve been trying to contact you for an entire week and all the time you’ve been at my place? Bloody hell, Jane. Why didn’t you ring? I’ve been worried sick.”

He watched as Melissa slashed the air with her hand in an attempt to cut off the tirade on the other end of the line. All this was information he needed, but his gut twisted at the distress on her face.

“Okay, okay, I know it’s the family home and you have every right to stay there, but I needed to know where you were. Just come back, and if Mitch is still in Sydney as you say, we’ll find him. Jane? Jane, don’t you hang up! Ja...”

She threw the phone onto the sofa, her impatience with her sister plain to see. Matt crept back to the door and knocked loud enough for her to think he’d just arrived.

The information he’d gathered he stored away to deal with later. Right now, he was going to enjoy his date with Melissa. He had a feeling things were about to change and once she knew who he was, she might not be so willing to spend time with him.

“Good evening, my dear,” he said as she appeared in the hallway. “How delightful you look.”

And she did. Her halter-neck dress was in a soft peach shade that brought out the copper highlights in her hair. The brief top left her shoulders bare and showed a hint of cleavage. The fabric molded her breasts lovingly, before skimming down her body to emphasize her small waist and the feminine flare of her hips. The skirt ended just above her knees. High heels added to her height, although she still fell well short of his own six feet.

The only thing marring the picture was the frown on her face and the worry shadowing her eyes. Matt wanted to gather her close and tell her it would be all right, that he’d look after her.

He reined in his thoughts, mentally disciplining himself. He hadn’t wanted to *look after* any woman since Allie. The thought of being in that deep scared the shit out of him.

At the same time, he realized that in a very short space of time, this woman had breached his defenses, the barriers he'd erected after Allie had died. Maybe it was time to let go of the old hurts. He'd always love Allie, but she was his past. Melissa could well be his future. *If* he played his cards right. *And* if this case didn't screw everything up. More importantly, if Melissa didn't kick his butt out on the sidewalk when she found out he wasn't exactly who he pretended to be.

He grimaced. Could be complications there. Ah hell, he'd think on that later. Right now, he wanted to concentrate on his date, because being with Melissa suddenly seemed the most important thing in his life.

Melissa couldn't help but be conscious of Matthew checking her over. She drew in a sharp breath as her nipples hardened beneath the soft fabric of her dress. A wave of heat swept up her face as his gaze focused on her chest. It wouldn't take much for him to realize where her thoughts were centered. He may be a misfit, but he was an intelligent man.

She dared a look at his face. There was a slightly glazed look in his eyes, and even as she watched, a tide of red suffused his features. Melissa willed her heartbeat to slow and ignored the charge of sexual energy ripping through her blood. Well, hell, it looked like she'd embarrassed him. Hmm, maybe he was more a misfit than she'd thought. If so, she definitely had her work cut out for her.

With her hormones under control again, she gave serious attention to her date. Her eyes opened wide at the picture he presented. She had to work hard to prevent her mouth dropping open in shock.

Stonewashed denims molded his lower body, showing off his long legs to devastating advantage. For a moment, she wished he'd turn round so she could check out the back view. She allowed her gaze to climb upward, resisting the impulse to break into a grin as she took in the rest of his attire. Lips pressed tight together, she cautioned herself not to laugh.

He'd obviously gone shopping on his own. In fact, a carrier bag from one of the big department stores dangled from his right hand. If what he was wearing was a sample of his purchases, they had a lot more lessons

to get through before he was ready to throw himself on the marriage market.

If she had to describe his shirt, she would have said loud. Bright orange, with vivid splashes of hot pink, lime green and sky blue. He'd buttoned the long sleeves tight at the wrists. The shirttails hung over the waistband of his jeans, and to finish it all off, he'd fastened the red and white polka-dot bow tie about his throat.

It was the lack of hair oil that made the greatest impact. One errant lock of dark hair fell forward over his forehead and she had a sudden compulsion to reach out and touch. She resisted, schooling her wayward thoughts before she got herself into trouble.

Oh dear, how do I handle this?

Matthew was waiting for her reaction. He stood there with an expectant look on his face and his sensual mouth curved in a sexy smile.

"So what do you think, my dear?" He took a deep breath and puffed out his chest. Hands held out to his sides, he turned in a slow circle. "I decided to go shopping on my own, just to show you how far I've progressed with our lessons. Amazing what a change of image will do for a man."

"Um, can I make a suggestion?"

Melissa struggled to find a way to give advice without offending him. "The jeans look terrific, but I don't think they go with the bow tie."

He patted the collar of his shirt. "Too much, you think?"

"Mind if I make a few changes?"

"Not at all, my dear. I'm in your hands."

I wish! Melissa moved to stand in front of him. Her hands shook as she reached up and undid the bow tie, slid it out from under the stiff collar and dropped it on the floor. Her fingers brushed the warm column of his throat as she struggled with the little button that fastened his collar. It resisted all her efforts.

"Let me," he said in a husky voice.

She shivered as his hands reached up and covered hers, working the tiny button out of its hole. She felt it again. That charge of electricity that hit her whenever he touched her.

“Better?” he murmured, his gaze fixed on her face.

“Much,” she said after she’d found her voice. She undid the next button on his shirt and spread the collar open. Her hands wanted to linger, but she wrenched them away.

“One more thing.” She raised his right hand, undid the cuff of his shirt and rolled the sleeve up to his elbow. Without urging, he offered his other arm and she repeated the action.

The task completed, she tilted her head and stared at the overall picture, only to find herself caught by his glittering gaze. She couldn’t look away. Something in his dark eyes reached out, held her immobile. Her fingers trailed down his bare forearm and entwined with his, the warmth of his skin seeping into her hand.

She couldn’t have moved if her life had depended on it. All she could do was focus on the bright shimmer of Matthew’s dark eyes and the heat generated by his touch. The sensual web held her captive until Matthew broke the spell.

“All done?” he whispered.

She stepped back and nodded, not certain she could trust her voice. It took two tries to clear her throat before she could speak. “There’s still something not right,” she said as she tried to keep her mind on the job at hand.

“Perhaps the shirt should be tucked in, but the salesman said this was all the rage.”

“Mmm, I’m not certain.” What she really wanted to do was to tell him to take the damn shirt off. It hurt her eyes to look at it.

“We can but try, my dear.” He dropped the carry bag on the floor beside him.

This time, she couldn’t help herself. Her mouth dropped open as he undid the snap of his jeans and lowered the zip to tuck in the shirt. The

flash of bare stomach made her salivate like a randy teenager. She wanted to groan in disappointment when he was fully dressed again.

“Any better?”

She continued to stare at the offending shirt. “Well, yes... I guess it’s a bit better.”

“But?”

“The thing is, if you were going out to dinner with a woman, you would be safer to wear something less...” Her voice trailed off. How could she put this without hurting his feelings? After all, the shirt was *his* choice.

“You think it’s too bright?”

“Yes, that’s it. This would be fine for a casual outing, but not a dinner date. Perhaps something a little more conservative, but not out of fashion.”

“No problem.” He reached down and opened the carrier bag. “I bought three other shirts today. Maybe one of those would be more satisfactory.” He spread the shirts out over the sofa. “Which one do you think?”

Melissa eyed the selection. The first was just as gaudy as the one he had on. She immediately rejected it. A grin threatened to break free again when she saw he’d bought another white business shirt. It would take longer than a few days to break the habits of a lifetime as a funeral director.

“How about this one? The salesman said women like the feel of silk.”

The shirt was a deep cobalt blue. It would suit his coloring perfectly. Melissa reached out and rubbed the fabric between her fingers. The man at the store was correct. “This is fine,” she said. “You can—”

Before she could tell him to change in the bedroom, he undid the buttons of the psychedelic shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. Bare-chested, he shoved it, along with the other discards, into the carry bag.

Melissa’s gaze immediately zeroed in on his naked chest. Hormones kicked into overdrive. Heat spiraled through her blood. Her breasts suddenly felt swollen, the nipples hard peaks that brushed against the

fabric of her dress and created a sensual throb deep inside. She folded her arms across her front and dragged in a shaky breath, trying to regain her equilibrium.

For some reason, she seemed to be in a constant state of arousal around this man. It rocked the nice, safe little world she'd built for herself over the last few years.

"I have a problem, my dear. Maybe you could help me."

Matthew's voice dragged her thoughts away from her body. "Um, what...what problem?"

"Such tiny buttons. Your hands are smaller than mine. Perhaps you can do them up for me?"

She gulped and moved closer. With trembling hands, she slid the first of the buttons into its buttonhole. His aftershave reached out to her, wreathing her in sensation. It triggered a whole flood of energy-charged emotions. As she struggled with the buttons, she also fought her own raunchy thoughts.

Her face was suffused with heat as she stepped back. "There. All done." She wasn't surprised at all when the words came out in a husky croak.

"Thank you, my dear." He tucked the shirt into his jeans. "What would I do without you? Now, are you ready to go?"

"Where are we going?"

"I saw a Chinese restaurant just down the road from here when I visited last time. I thought we might try there. If you like Chinese, that is?"

"I love Chinese, but I don't remember a restaurant anywhere around here." But then, she didn't live here so anything was possible. "Exactly where is it?"

"At the end of this block, close enough to walk."

"That's not a restaurant. It's a Chinese takeaway."

"But I saw the tables. Sidewalk dining is so continental and so romantic. I thought it would be perfect."

Melissa struggled not to grin. “It’s a Chinese takeaway with four plastic tables on the footpath. It is *not* a restaurant.”

“Oh, dear, I have mucked this up, haven’t I? First I arrive here inappropriately dressed and now I can’t tell when a restaurant is not a restaurant. I did so want to impress you with my new skills.” He shook his head in disgust.

“Never mind.” She patted him on the hand. “There’s a good Italian restaurant not far from here. I’ll ring and see if they have a table free.” As she moved towards the telephone, she cast a final comment over her shoulder. “In the future, if you want a date to be successful, you must book the restaurant before you pick up your lady friend.”

Minutes later, the table reserved, Melissa hung up the phone. “Okay, all done. Let me get my purse and we can go.”

She picked up her black clutch bag and the apartment keys from the coffee table. The cell phone, abandoned on the sofa, caught her eye. For a moment, thoughts of her sister flooded through her mind, but she swept them away.

Worrying wasn’t going to help. Jane would come home when she was good and ready. And besides, Melissa was looking forward to this night out with Matthew. It may not be wise, but just the same, she was going to enjoy it.

On her way to the back door, she paused, turning toward the elevator. Almost as an afterthought, she selected the correct key and locked it. After the other night, she wasn’t taking any chances.

Dropping the keys into her purse, she joined Matthew. “All ready,” she said and stepped out onto the landing. “Just slam the door to lock it.”

The warmth of Matthew’s hand seeped through the fabric of her dress as he guided her out to his car. The perfect gentleman, he opened the door, handed her in and reached to secure her seatbelt. Okay, so she could do up her own seat belt, but it was rather nice to be treated like a delicate piece of porcelain.

She hoped he wouldn't change too much. Some women might like being in charge, but Melissa wasn't one of them. Oh, she wouldn't want to be a doormat and she believed in equality as far as jobs went. No, it was being treated like a desirable woman she liked. The little things, like...having the car door opened for her, for instance. It made her feel special and Matthew did these things as a matter of course. It was part of his charm. He was the perfect gentleman.

But hopefully not too perfect, whispered a little voice inside her mind.

She had a sudden need to feel the touch of his lips on her own again. She almost burst out laughing. Sudden, nothing! She'd dreamed about Matthew and his kisses for the last few nights.

With a shake of her head, she tried to clear the erotic fog from her brain. This had to stop. He was a client. The sooner she found him a woman friend, the better. That's all she should be focused on.

So why was it the thought of Matthew with another woman filled her with such pain and longing?

"Where to, my dear?"

Matthew's voice cut through the troubling thoughts filling her mind. She gave him directions to the restaurant and waited for him to turn on the ignition. Instead, he sat staring at her. She raised her eyebrows in inquiry. Before she could say anything, he leaned across the car and surprised her with a light kiss on her parted lips.

Just a little one. A brief touch. Enough to fuel her hunger.

A smile on his face, he faced forward again and started the vehicle. His soft words floated across to her in the semi-darkness.

"Just practicing, my dear."

Chapter Eleven

Melissa settled into the leather seat and thought back over the evening. She couldn't believe how much she'd enjoyed herself. Despite his occasional lapses into funereal talk, Matthew had tried hard to make their time together perfect.

As the car pulled to a stop outside the office, she realized she didn't want the evening to end. "Would you like to come in for coffee?" The words were out before she'd even thought about them.

"I'd like that very much."

He slipped from the driver's seat and scooted around to open the passenger door, tripping over his feet as he rounded the front of the vehicle. Melissa chuckled. His eagerness was plain to see. He fumbled twice getting the door open, a grin slashing across his face.

Ever the gentleman, he assisted her from the vehicle and kept hold of her hand as they walked down the alley to the back of the apartment. Melissa wasn't about to pull her hand away. Her palm tingled from the heat of his skin. Goose bumps walked up and down her arm and a shiver traced its way down her back. But not from cold. More like a flash of intense fire sweeping through her blood.

As they reached the stairs leading up to the apartment, Melissa had to release her grip on his hand to find her keys. An arrow of disappointment lanced through her. She shook her head. Damn, she felt like a kid in the first flush of sexual attraction.

With a sigh, she ascended the staircase first, keys held at the ready to unlock the door. She reached the landing and suddenly halted, her breath escaping on a gasp. The door gaped open a good two or three

inches, visible even in the darkened alleyway. “Matthew, you didn’t shut the door!”

“I assure you, I did. It was closed when we left. I fear you’ve had a break-in.” He moved Melissa out of the way and stepped in front of her.

Matt stared at the open door, his eyes now adjusted to the darkness. With a light touch, he ran his hand down over the wood and felt where the timber had been torn away. Someone had jimmied it, probably with a crowbar.

It was only then his good sense kicked in and he realized they hadn’t engaged the deadbolt when they’d left to go to dinner. How stupid could you get? He knew better than that. He’d been a federal agent long enough to know you don’t take risks with life, or property.

He thought of the snub-nosed Smith & Wesson strapped to his ankle and rejected it. He couldn’t use it without blowing his cover. There was absolutely no reason he could offer Melissa for an undertaker to be carrying a weapon.

Motioning for Melissa to stay back, he eased the door wide open with his shoulder and stepped over the threshold. Back to the wall, he slid step by step down the hallway until he came to the living room. All was silent, as still as a morgue. He grimaced as the comparison leapt into his mind. He knew his undercover character was starting to get to him, but that was ridiculous.

He drew on his training and stepped into the living area. Once he’d ascertained it was empty, he edged around the perimeter of the room to the bedroom. A quick check of the bathroom and he backtracked to the kitchen. Whoever had entered the apartment was long gone.

“It’s all right. There’s no one here.” He nodded for Melissa to enter the apartment before heading back to the living room and flicking on the light.

“Holy shi—” He suddenly remembered his cover. “Oh dear. What a catastrophe.”

The room was a mess. Books pulled out and strewn about the room. Papers from the roll-top desk were scattered all over the carpet.

Cushions were thrown around. The room had been well and truly turned over.

Melissa said nothing. Simply turned and walked to the bedroom like a sleepwalker.

This room was no better. Almost every drawer had been emptied. Debris littered the carpet. Even the contents of the suitcase hidden in the wardrobe—no doubt Melissa's—had been dumped on the floor.

"Who on earth could have done this?" she whispered.

Not waiting for an answer, she moved into the room. Like a marionette whose strings were being pulled by a master puppeteer, she walked on stiff legs over to the side of the bed. She drew out the drawer and stared, the color leaching from her face.

"Is anything missing?" Matt said, peering over her shoulder.

He knew what the drawer *should* contain. He'd seen them himself. The numbered video tapes. Now it was empty. He placed his hand on Melissa's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Tremors rippled through her body. He wanted to hold her tight and tell her it would be all right, but he knew it wouldn't be, not until Rivers was caught.

There was no doubt in his mind this was Mitch Rivers' handiwork. Who else had anything to gain by stealing those tapes? He grimaced. Well, maybe the guys featured in all their naked glory on the videos, but he'd still lay odds it was Rivers. Anger flashed through him. What he wouldn't like to do with that slime-ball if he got hold of him. It was a struggle to drag his thoughts away from the grim scenario filling his mind when he realized Melissa was talking to him.

"I can't see anything missing," she said. "But I won't really know until I clean this mess up." She turned and walked back into the living room, Matt trailing in her wake.

"What are you going to do?" Anyone with a clear conscience would immediately ring the police. What would Melissa do?

"Um...it's probably only kids out for a laugh. Once they realized they could break the lock, they decided to trash the place. Nothing seems to have been taken. The video and TV are still here and they didn't even

take my camera.” She drew in a shaky breath and bent to pick up her cell phone. “But to hell with it. This time I’m calling the cops. I’ve had enough.”

“Why not let me call the police, my dear, and you check the rest of the apartment to see what’s missing.” *Crap, I am the police and I can’t even tell her.*

At least if he made the call, he could alert the local boys that there was a federal case going on here. He didn’t want any of them blundering into his investigation. Plus, this way he could safeguard his real identity.

He stepped out onto the back landing and pulled his phone from his belt, keeping an eye on Melissa as she made her way to the kitchen. Once he was connected to the local sergeant, he explained the situation and gave him a number he could ring to verify Matt’s story. That done, he followed Melissa into the kitchen.

She was opening the door of the pantry as he slipped inside. He watched as she pulled aside a large box of cereal. He caught a glimpse of a small stack of tapes before she pushed the box back into position. His gaze narrowed. So there were more of them and that meant Rivers would be back.

“A problem, my dear?”

“No, it’s okay.” She ran her fingers through her hair, sweeping it back from her forehead. “I know I offered you coffee, but maybe you should go.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to stay until the police get here. I don’t like to think of you on your own.”

* * *

“Now why don’t I help you clean this mess up? Then we can have that coffee you promised me in comfort.”

Melissa looked shell-shocked, her face pale and her eyes shadowed. It couldn’t have been easy for her this last hour or so. The local cops had

duly arrived and questioned her extensively. *After* he'd filled them in out of Melissa's hearing.

Thank God she'd given her correct name to the cops, although he'd made them aware of the situation with her sister beforehand. He just didn't like the idea of her lying to the authorities. Okay, so maybe she hadn't told the police the whole truth about filling in for her sister, but she hadn't deliberately lied to them either.

She'd handed over the remaining videos and the blackmail note and the police would hold them until he or Adam could go pick them up. The sergeant at least had had enough brains to work out that federal cases took precedence over anything else and would keep his hands off the investigation. Last thing Matt needed was a bunch of locals blowing his cover.

"You don't have to do that. It's not your problem."

"Nonsense, my dear. What are friends for, if not to help out in times of need? And I hope I *can* be considered your friend."

"Thanks, I do appreciate it." She chewed on her lower lip. "I'm not certain I want to be alone right now."

She led the way back into the living room. "How about we just pick up all the papers and stack them on the desk? I'll sort it out later when I work out where it all go..."

Her voice trailed off and Matt had no trouble working out what she was referring to. This was her sister's apartment, not hers. No wonder she didn't know what belonged where. "How about we start with getting the books up off the floor?"

The sigh she gave was clearly audible. "Good idea. Just get them back on the shelves. The order doesn't matter, as long as they're out of the way."

With an extra pair of hands, the room was restored to order in no time at all. Then they moved on to the bedroom. After the last item of clothing was replaced in the suitcase, Matt stowed it back in the bottom of the wardrobe and closed the door with a snap. "Right, all done. Now how about I make that coffee you promised me?"

“Thanks for your help.” She smiled and headed back to the kitchen. “And I’ll get the coffee. You’re *my* guest.”

Matt leaned against the pantry and watched as she spooned the coffee into the mugs. She tried hard to hide it, but she was still frightened. It was there in the fine tremor of her hands and the shadows dulling her normally bright eyes.

Although she’d lied to him about the whole thing, he could forgive her that. She’d thought she was protecting her sister. Maybe he’d do the same if it were a member of his own family in trouble. He just wished he could help her, make this easier for her.

It suddenly hit him. He *could* make it better for her. He could bring this sorry fiasco to an end, but it meant exposing his real identity. He didn’t even want to begin to imagine how she’d deal with that. One thing he did know, she was sure to be angry. In fact, she’d probably boot his ass right out of here.

A thought slammed into him with the fury of a force-10 gale. The breath gusted from his chest and his head snapped back hard enough to bang into the pantry door. *Holy fuck, how about that? So this is what people mean when they talk about light bulb moments.* He had a feeling he’d just had a life-changing revelation.

He didn’t want Melissa angry with him and he sure as hell didn’t want her to kick him out. He wanted to go on seeing her, and not because of any case he might be involved in. If he couldn’t see her or speak to her, something special would have gone out of his life. How the hell was he going to convince her he’d lied to her for the best of reasons?

As she handed him a mug of hot coffee, he pushed the troubled thoughts to the back of his mind to be dealt with later. Hell, it was getting damn cluttered up there in the back of his brain.

Anyway, it hadn’t happened yet. He’d worry about it when it finally became inevitable that Melissa need know who he was. Right now, he’d enjoy the time he had with her and pray he’d be able make it all right afterwards.

“You’ve had a shock, my dear. Why don’t we make ourselves comfortable? You need to relax.” He placed an arm about her shoulders and led her into the living room, heading for the sofa.

Melissa was glad of his presence and she wasn’t above stealing a bit of his warmth as he snuggled her close to his side. She still went cold at the thought of what could have happened if she’d been here when Mitch had broken in. And, damn it, she knew it was him. Had to have been. Who else but Jane’s boyfriend would want the videos bad enough to go to this bother to get them? Jane said she thought he was still in Sydney. It looked like she was right.

Fear spiked through her. Not only for herself, but also for her sister. If Mitch was prepared to go to these lengths to retrieve the tapes, he was capable of anything. Did he know the tapes in the drawer weren’t the only blackmail tapes she’d found? He must do! He’d know very well how many videos had been made.

Curled up on the sofa beside Matthew, she sipped at her coffee. She felt safe with him there, but what if Mitch came back and she was alone? A shudder ripped through her and she dragged in a shaky breath. First thing tomorrow she needed to get that door fixed.

“No, no, my dear. This won’t do at all.” He took her mug and placed it on the low table in front of the sofa. Sliding his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her close. “You must stop worrying. You’re quite safe with me.”

Melissa rested her head on his chest and allowed some of the tension to seep away. His warmth drove back the cold. His hand slid up and down the top of her arm in a continual caress. She relaxed further, a fractured, heartfelt sigh escaping.

The tremors finally stopped and she tilted her head back to look up at him. “Thank you for being here. I’m not certain I could have handled this on my own.”

“My pleasure, my sweet lady.” He dropped a light kiss on her parted lips.

He raised his head and Melissa stared into his dark eyes. She felt as if she were mesmerized, caught in a time warp where nothing existed but this one moment.

No ugly blackmail. No worries about Jane. Just the warmth of Matthew's dark gaze and the feather-soft touch of his lips. Suddenly, she was hungry for so much more than that fleeting touch. He lowered his head again and she met him halfway, her arms snaking up around his neck to hold him close.

As his mouth settled over hers, she sighed and gave herself up to the delicious sensations sweeping through her. As he ran his tongue along her bottom lip, she opened to him. He nibbled at her lower lip before thrusting his tongue into her mouth, then withdrawing, only to delve deep again.

She moaned softly in her throat as tiny pinpricks of heat blazed to life throughout her body, like lightning had entered her blood. The electric charge traveled along her veins, searing nerve endings as it passed.

A raging inferno burst into life. Her heart thundered in her chest, her pulse sounded loud in her ears, her breathing choppy. Tension coiled tight in her belly, sliding downward and making her squirm on the sofa as she tried to relieve the sudden ache between her thighs.

She was gasping by the time he broke off the kiss. "Hell, you sure learn quick," she whispered.

"A good teacher, my dear," he muttered before he captured her lips again.

Melissa made no objection when he pulled her even closer. She was too caught up in the taste of him. The rich aroma of fresh coffee, the hint of Marsala from the decadent dessert they'd eaten at the restaurant—and Matthew.

Her hand shook as she slid open the top three buttons of his shirt and trailed her fingers through the crisp dark hair on his chest. Then she flattened her palm over his warm skin and felt the perfect delineation of his muscles. A groan rumbled up from his chest and Melissa became bolder, walking one hand up his jean-clad leg.

“Ah, Melissa, you have no idea what you’re doing to me,” he whispered as he dropped butterfly kisses along her jaw.

Oh, yes, she did. She felt the muscles of his thighs flex under her hand and the bulge in his jeans was hard to miss. She knew she was taking advantage of a man who had very little experience when it came to women, but for once she wanted to throw caution to the wind. For once, she didn’t want to be the responsible sister. The *goody-two-shoes* Jane had accused her of being.

Her holiday was almost over. Soon she’d be gone and she might never see Matthew again. She may regret it later, but right now she wanted to grasp life by the throat and wring every drop of sensation out of it. And hang the consequences!

For someone who didn’t trust men, she was going against everything she believed. But she realized one thing. For some reason, Matthew had gotten to her. He made her feel. For the first time in a long while, she wanted to open up and let someone inside. No just anyone—Matthew!

Yeah, she could end up getting her emotions battered, but if she were the one to walk away, then it would be her responsibility to handle any hurt that came her way.

She was strong enough to deal with it. She had before when her fiancé had betrayed her. She could do so again. One thing she did know. She wasn’t strong enough to deny herself this interlude with Matthew.

With her lips mere inches from his, she whispered, “Make love to me.”

He closed his eyes and dragged in a harsh breath. “My dear, sweet Melissa, you don’t know what you’re asking. I cant...I don’t—”

Melissa placed her hand over his mouth, shivering as he pursed his lips and branded her fingers with a soft caress. “Shh, don’t worry so much. I know you haven’t had much to do with women. That doesn’t matter. Together, we can—”

“There are some things a man knows instinctively how to do,” he groaned. “It’s not that. You’ve had a shock tonight. You’re vulnerable. I would be taking advantage.”

"I'm the one shamelessly taking advantage." She undid another button and lowered her mouth to his chest.

"Are you sure about this?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. All she could do was react. She fused her mouth with his, tempting him into a hungry kiss that threatened to steal her breath away. He needed no further urging. He took control. His tongue thrust, coaxing a deeper response from her.

He trailed his lips down the sensitive skin of her neck. She angled her head back to give him greater access. Melissa moaned. She was so hot she thought she'd burst into flames.

Her blood felt like molten lava swishing around her body, carrying the heat downward to engorge the lips of her pussy and set up an ache that was driving her crazy. God help her, she wished he'd get on with it. Much more and she'd throw him to the floor, rip his clothes off and impale herself on the rigid cock outlined by the tight fabric of his jeans.

His hands were on the knot holding up the front of her halter neck dress. *Do it! Do it, Matthew.*

He hesitated, his fingers just brushing the fabric, and Melissa wanted to scream. Then he slid his hand down and cupped the weight of one breast. The breath gusted from her mouth in a needy sob.

Her breasts swelled, her nipples hard little points, one nudging at his palm. He curled his fingers around her breast, gently massaging. As he tweaked the nipple between thumb and forefinger, Melissa arched her back, offering herself for his delectation, hands tangled in his hair to urge him closer.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. Melissa hungered to be closer still. She dragged her legs up onto the sofa and straddled his thighs, her skirt caught up around her hips. Then she slid down until his rock-hard cock brushed at the heat of her pussy. Tension bubbled inside her, shafting downward until it coalesced into a throbbing mass of highly sensitized nerve endings. Her hips moved in reaction as she sought relief from the incredible sensations assaulting her body.

Matthew stared at her, his eyes slightly glazed. Melissa slowly lifted her hands and untied the knot at the back of her neck, letting the front of the dress fall down to expose her breasts to his avid gaze. "Touch me," she whispered.

He needed no second invitations. His hands skimmed up to cup her. Her nipples hardened even more. He took one engorged tip into his hot mouth, his tongue teasing the sensitive point. Melissa thought she'd pass out with the pleasure of it. Her back arched, she grasped handfuls of his soft hair and held him to her.

Heat shot down her body. Her clit throbbed and she felt the dampness of her pussy. She groaned in disappointment when he released her nipple, only to sigh with renewed pleasure as he lavished the same attention on its twin.

She was shaking with need by the time he released her breast. "Matthew—"

"There's something I wanted to do since I saw you in the minute excuse for a skirt when I first came here."

"What?" As he trailed the tip of one finger around her throbbing nipple, she had to fight to find her voice.

"I love your breasts, but there's something that has been calling to me. The little strip of pale skin between your garters and stockings. I need to know if it is as silky as it looks." He dropped his hand and trailed his fingers across the exposed expanse of flesh at the top of her thigh.

Heat seared her where he touched. She held her breath as his fingers slid closer to her aching pussy. A trembling started in her belly and radiated outward. He didn't go any further and Melissa wanted to sob out her frustration. Instead, she snaked one hand down and grasped his, moving it a fraction so his palm settled over her mons, her hips arching up to meet him.

"Are you sure, Melissa?"

"I've never been more sure of anything." The muscles in his thighs tightened under her ass and she could have sworn his cock grew even larger. She didn't need to ask if he wanted this, too.

Taking her at her word, his fingers dipped down, pressing the silk of her panties against her cleft. She was already wet, the crotch of her underwear showing the evidence. Hips undulating, she pressed his hand closer still, rubbing herself against the pressure of his palm.

He lifted his hips, pressing against her ass, as if seeking relief for his swollen cock. She moaned and ground herself down on him. God, she hadn't been this turned on for a long while. Leaning forward, she nibbled on his lower lip, laving the love bites with the tip of her tongue.

Her movements grew more frenzied. Matthew rubbed harder, keeping the friction up. Then he slid one finger under the edge of her panties and touched the wet lips of her vulva.

Her body bowed and she clamped her thighs about his hand. Head thrown back, she gasped for breath as fire swept through her. He parted her and thrust one finger into her hot pussy and she about came apart in his hands.

"God, you are so wet," he muttered against her mouth and inserted a second finger.

Her internal muscles clenched around his fingers. He plunged deep and then withdrew. Her climax was so close it only took a couple more thrusts of his fingers and she cried out, the convulsions of the orgasm spiraling through her. She wilted against his chest, dragging in deep, shuddering breaths.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

She lifted her head and grinned at him. "Never better. But now it's your turn. We've gotta get in lots of practice." She knew she'd just uttered the biggest fib of her life. The man didn't need to practice. One tiny lesson and he was well on the way to being an expert.

"Um, I'm not certain I have any more self-control left."

A chuckled rippled from her throat. "Even better. I do like a man who can lose himself in a woman now and then."

Undoing the remaining buttons of his shirt, she pushed it off his shoulders. She wanted to feel his warm, bare flesh against her own. He shrugged out of the shirt and pulled her close again. As the rigid peaks of

her breasts brushed his chest, she moaned, the sound an echo of the groan that issued from his throat.

The musky scent of sandalwood teased her senses as she licked at his collarbone with the tip of her tongue. His breathing was loud against the silence of the room, the sound rasping from his throat. She felt the tension in his body, a match for the thundering tumult holding her own limbs rigid. She'd already had one climax, but her body was clamoring for more.

“You ready for the final lesson, Matthew?”

Chapter Twelve

Matt allowed his head to drop back against the sofa as Melissa's hot mouth traveled across his heated flesh. With his hand still buried in her panties and his fingers in her hot cunt, he felt the lingering aftershocks that rocked her. He wanted to devour her, savor each delectable morsel. He wanted some relief for the rock-hard bulge confined by his tight jeans.

She ran her tongue over his nipple and he groaned, unable to prevent his reaction. His heart pounded, so hard it was a wonder it didn't split his chest in two. He knew he shouldn't allow this to happen, not under these circumstances, but he'd lost the will to resist.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. She'd toss him out on his ass when she found out about his lying to her anyway. Getting emotionally involved with the subject of an investigation went against every rule in the book. He hadn't planned on things going this far. He should get up and leave right now, but he wanted this one night. Perhaps they could build on it after the case was over. If not, then he'd just have to wear it.

All he knew was, right at that moment, he couldn't walk away. Shit, he wasn't certain he could walk at all, but he sure as hell was going to try.

Dragging in a deep breath, he slid his hand from her body and gathered her closer, resting his forehead on hers. "Lock your legs about my waist," he whispered.

Without a word, she complied. Matt moved closer to the edge of the sofa, Melissa wrapped around him like a second skin. Her hot little mouth continued to tickle his neck with soft kisses. He moved his hands under her to take her weight, pushed himself to his feet and carried her to the bedroom.

Once there, she lowered her legs and he released his hold on her ass. Gripping her upper arms, he waited until she found her balance. She was such a tiny thing, hardly reaching his shoulder. All his protective instincts rose to the fore. He dragged her close as a shudder sliced through his body.

Man, he was in the worst type of shit. He was in too deep. *Too deep to walk away.*

This was more than just sex. He'd taken his pleasure from other women in the past. Women who knew the score. Women who didn't want the *happy-ever-after* bit, but this was different. *Melissa* was different!

This time, it was all about emotions, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, he had a feeling it was the same for her. Something told him she wasn't the type to make love to a man unless her heart was involved.

He set her back from him and looked into her eyes. The only light in the room was from the bedside lamp. The soft luminosity bathed her breasts in a golden glow, giving her skin an ethereal quality. He didn't think it was possible, but his cock hardened even more.

With his gaze fixed on hers, he reached around behind her and eased down the zip of her dress. The sound rasped loud in the hushed silence, almost an affront to his heightened senses. As the dress slithered down her body and pooled about her feet, he groaned and closed his eyes. Then he looked his fill.

Her breasts jutted proudly, the hardened nipples a visible barometer of her desire. Her waist was so tiny he could span it with his two hands. Black lacy panties hid her pussy from view, but his fingers remembered the creamy feel of her sheath.

A black garter belt circled her hips and held up sheer black stockings. As his hungry gaze fastened on the pale strip of thigh exposed above the top of her stockings, he almost lost it right then and there. She was exquisite. Every man's dream come true. At the very least, *his* dream.

"My turn," she whispered.

She ran her hands across his broad shoulders and down to his chest. She played among the crisp curls, flicking her finger over his hardened nipples, grinning up at him as he drew in a labored breath. Christ, at this rate he'd die of asphyxiation before they got to the main course.

It was all he could do to stand still as she continued her exploration, hands gliding lower, hesitating at his belt buckle, before they traveled further. Then she flattened her palm over his rigid erection. He jumped, the breath gusting from his throat in a hungry growl. And when she cupped her hand over his balls, he angled his hips forward and pushed himself further into her palm.

"Melissa, you're killing me," he groaned.

"Well, I hope you've chosen your own casket because I haven't finished yet," she said with a grin.

Matt choked on a burst of laughter. "No, please, no funeral jokes. I thought that was something we weren't supposed to talk about."

"I'd rather not talk at all," she retorted as she unbuckled his belt and lowered the zipper of his jeans.

He bit his lip as she tugged on his trousers, hooking her fingers into the top of his underwear and sliding his remaining clothes down in one swift motion. Excitement fizzed along his veins. The breath caught in his chest as his rock-hard cock sprang free.

Despite the sexual tension that held him in its grip, Matt suddenly remembered the gun strapped to his ankle. He couldn't risk her seeing it.

"Wait," he managed to say past the lump in his throat. "Let me take off my shoes and socks. You turn down the covers."

As she moved to the other side of the bed, he flicked back the quilt and sat down. He pulled off one shoe and let it drop to the floor, using the sound to cover the rasp of the Velcro fastener of the ankle holster. He tried to convince himself he shouldn't be here in Melissa's bedroom, but it wasn't working.

By the time he'd removed the other shoe and his jeans, his conscience was buried under the untidy heap of clothes beside the bed

along with his weapon. There was no sign of any incriminating evidence to point to his profession when Melissa turned around.

She moved to stand in front of him and attempted to push him back on the bed, but he pulled her between his spread thighs. After fantasizing about these damn garter things he wanted the pleasure of removing them.

She lifted first one leg and then the other. He rolled the stockings down, dragging the moment out, lingering over the soft skin on the inside of her thighs. He chuckled at her groan of frustration.

“Matthew, I like slow and sensual, but you’re driving me crazy here. Get on with it already!”

“Your wish is my command, my dear.”

With the garter belt disposed of, he trailed his fingers over her hips, sliding her panties down. Then he leaned in to taste, pressing a hot kiss to the curve of her stomach. He moved his hands to the top of her thighs and went back for seconds, nibbling on the jut of her hipbone before licking at her belly and swirling the tip of his tongue around and into her navel.

Her stomach muscles contracted under his lips. He felt the tremor of her legs against his palms. His own hands shook as he scooted back on the bed and brought her down to lie beside him.

Words weren’t necessary. He allowed his hands to do the talking for him. She gasped as he circled her nipple with the pad of his fingers, the sound lodging deep inside him. He took the coral crest of one breast into his mouth and suckled hard. Melissa came up off the bed, a keening cry of need slicing through the tension-filled air.

While his mouth played at her breasts, his fingers continued their exploration, sweeping over the curve of her hip, dipping into the indentation of her navel, following the path his mouth had earlier. Moving closer and closer to the heat of her.

Matt couldn’t believe how responsive she was. The slightest caress of his hand gained a reaction. He brushed the coppery curls at the juncture of her thighs. Her body bowed, hips lifting off the bed.

He parted the swollen lips of her pussy and ran his finger down the length of her cleft, dragging her own creamy dampness up over her clit. She whimpered, hands reaching out to dig into his shoulders. She was hot and wet, her body readily accepting the thrust of his fingers.

Her head thrashed on the pillow and her breath escaped in little gasps. Her hips undulated, seeking a deeper penetration. The scent of her cream surrounded him, the heat of her body increasing the aphrodisiacal perfume. It was all he could do to hang on when what he wanted to do was drive his hard cock into her warmth. Forget finesse. He wanted hard and fast. Wanted to submerge himself in her fire.

"I need you now," she gasped in a hoarse voice.

"Wait." Hands shaking, he reached over the side of the bed and groped in the semi-darkness for his jeans. He fumbled for his wallet and extracted the little foil packet hidden there before dropping the jeans back over his discarded weapon. "My Aunt Anna always told me to be prepared," he said, his voice as ragged as hers.

"Good old Aunt Anna." She took the foil packet from him. "Let me do it."

He gasped and almost shot his load as she took him in her hand and rolled the condom down over his erection. "Christ, I never realized what a turn-on the issue of protection could be," he ground out through clenched teeth.

She spread her legs, the invitation one he could no longer ignore. He lifted over her and settled between his thighs, grappling with his self-control for a moment. Then he tucked his hands beneath her ass and lifted her hips, nudging at her entrance. Seems she didn't want slow and sweet either. She raised her hips higher and took him deep, her groan an echo of his.

Matt held himself still for a second or two to allow her to grow accustomed to the feel of him. As she whispered his name, he withdrew a fraction before slowly gliding home again to establish a rhythm destined to drive them both crazy.

And in that moment, he realized it did feel as if he'd come home. He couldn't let this woman go. She was too important to his future happiness. For the first time since the gunning down of his parents and the death of his fiancée, he was able to feel again, able to trust love.

But would she feel the same when she knew the truth? It was a question he couldn't answer. Not right now. His mind was too taken up with the feel of her, tight about his throbbing cock.

His arms shook as he supported his weight. He lowered his head and took one nipple into his mouth as he drove into her. Sweat slicked his body. His heart raced. His balls tightened and he knew he wasn't far off coming.

As he felt the first ripples deep within her and the clenching of her internal muscles, he increased the tempo, deepening his movements, driving the tension higher. The spasms increased and the climax overtook her and only then did he allow his own control to unravel. His release, more powerful than anything he'd ever experienced, came moments after hers.

The raging emotions washed over them. He felt as if he'd been tossed into a vortex, as if everything and everyone but Melissa had ceased to exist. He took her mouth in a hungry kiss, an anchor in a world consisting of white-hot feelings, straining muscles and thundering hearts.

His pulse finally slowed and his breathing evened out. He rolled to his side, taking her with him. A rosy flush stained her cheeks and perspiration beaded her brow. Her eyes held a slumberous, satiated glow as she gave him a cheeky smile.

"Wow! When you said there were some things a man knew instinctively how to do, you weren't kidding."

His lips twitched. "We aim to please, my dear, sweet Melissa."

Melissa reached out and traced the curve of his lips with the tip of her finger. She felt worn out, but in a nice kind of way, the afterglow making her feel all soft and squishy inside. And she felt something else, something she'd hidden from for a very long time. An overwhelming

emotion that had the power to scare her witless if she dwelled on it. The l-o-v-e word.

“Don’t worry so much. We’ll work it out,” Matthew said and smoothed away the frown on her forehead with his fingers.

She kept her gaze fixed on his. It was almost as if he knew what she was thinking, what she was feeling.

“Go to sleep, Melissa. I’m going to stay the night with you, so you have no need to worry about another break-in. You’ll be quite safe.” He tucked her face against his chest. “Sleep, my sweet,” he whispered before he dropped a light kiss on the top of her head.

Melissa took him at his word. She closed her eyes and allowed sleep to dim the edges of her consciousness. Her last thought was that Matthew seemed different. No longer unsure of himself, no longer the misfit who didn’t know how to respond to a woman. How to satisfy her.

She scrunched her face up in another frown. Moments before the world receded, one thought percolated through her sleep-drugged mind.

Matthew Campbell seemed to be an entirely different man.

* * *

Melissa woke to a sense of well-being. A feeling of languor pervaded her body as she stretched out on the rumpled sheets. It took her a moment to remember why the bed looked as if a well-orchestrated wrestling match had taken place. The delicious memories floated back and she couldn’t help the grin that spread across her face.

She rolled onto her side and reached for Matthew. He wasn’t there. The only indication she hadn’t slept alone was the indent in the snowy-white pillow on the opposite side of the bed. Not that they’d done a lot of sleeping. She could think of two separate occasions where he’d woken her in the dark of night and she had no trouble recalling how they’d filled in the hours before dawn.

It was no wonder she was alone. The bright light filling the room told her, and the red numbers on the digital display of the alarm clock just

confirmed it. Matthew probably left early because he had a funeral to conduct.

She couldn't believe she'd slept until eleven. She hadn't had a lazy morning in bed for... She couldn't remember the last time she'd done this. But then she'd never spent the night making love either. And it *was* lovemaking. It was more than just a romp in the sack designed to satisfy a biological urge. More than sex. For the first time in a long while, she felt she could trust a man. Not just any man. *Matthew Campbell.*

He made her feel things she hadn't felt before, not even with her ex-fiancé. Was it possible she'd found the one man who could be trusted not to walk away? For so long, she'd avoided any involvements. Now, because of Jane's bizarre situation, she may have found the love of a lifetime.

She frowned at the tired old cliché. Then she couldn't help herself. She grinned. Who cared if the phrase turned up in every lonely-heart magazine or romance book on the library shelves? That's what it felt like. The love of a lifetime.

Melissa glanced again at the clock. She should go down to the office. Angelica was probably wondering where she was. Then again, probably not.

After a quick shower, she dressed in the least skimpy of Jane's suits before she took the elevator down to the business premises. "Good morning, Angelica," she said as she spotted the woman near the reception desk.

Angelica raised her eyebrows, a disdainful look on her face. "It's almost lunchtime. What happened? Did your date with the funeral director go overtime?"

A tide of heat swept up over Melissa's face. "That's none of your business, Angelica."

"And you have the cheek to have a go at me for dating clients? You're no better. So tell me, what's it like to go to bed with a funeral director?"

It was an effort, but Melissa ignored the sneer on Angelica's face and the invective in her tone. No way was she going to get into an argument with Angelica. Instead, she turned her back and walked away to shut

herself in Jane's office. What she'd shared with Matthew was nothing like the casual sex Angelica engaged in with clients like old Mr. Bishop.

She pushed all thoughts of Matthew and his incredible lovemaking to the back of her mind and reached for the phone. Dialing her home in Brisbane, she waited for Jane to pick up. The number rang out. Maybe Jane had taken her advice and was on the way back to Sydney. She hoped so.

Melissa drummed her fingers on the polished surface of the desk. How was she supposed to fill in the day? She'd filed everything she could find to file. Jane's office was so tidy it looked like a room in a show home. Maybe she'd give the viewing room another clean. It would at least fill in time.

Angelica was nowhere to be seen as she passed through reception. Melissa opened the door on the scarlet and gold décor of the viewing room and understood why. The woman stood on a chair on the opposite side of the room.

The vent over the air conditioning duct had been removed and Angelica was in the process of retrieving a tape from a video camera hidden inside. Melissa tracked the line of sight of the camera lens, not surprised to see it was focused on the cushion-covered sofa bed.

No prizes for guessing how they got the blackmail tapes. "Found what you're looking for, Angelica?" She knew her voice was full of disgust, but she couldn't help herself.

The receptionist clutched the tape to her chest and spun about as best she could on her precarious perch. "Do you have to creep up on a person like that? You could have caused a serious injury."

"If you weren't doing something you shouldn't, you wouldn't have to worry. Just how many clients have you enticed in here so you could make tacky videos of them?"

"You don't know what you're talking about, so stay out of it. Some of the clients like to be taped. It turns them on to think they're going to be immortalized on film."

“Oh? Is that right? I suppose that would be classed as one of those *special* dates I’ve been getting calls about.” Melissa knew Angelica was lying through her teeth, but didn’t want to get into it.

One guess the *special* dates were tied in with the blackmailing. Obviously Mr. Jones hadn’t been sucked into the scam yet, otherwise why be so keen to get a Saturday Night Special?

Melissa had no doubt the receptionist knew more than she was letting on. She opened her mouth to tax her on it then pressed her lips into a tight line. To hell with it. Let the police deal with the likes of Angelica. She couldn’t be bothered.

She turned to leave the room, only to be brought to a halt by Angelica’s next words.

“I seem to be missing some tapes. I don’t suppose you know anything about them?”

“There’s a whole cupboard full of tapes in Mitch’s office. Are you talking about those?” Melissa maintained a wide-eyed innocence.

“No, these ones have no names on them. Just numbers. I need to find them so I can label them and file them away.”

Yeah, right. “I know nothing about them,” Melissa lied with a straight face. “You don’t need me down here. I’m going up to the apartment. Any calls for me, you can switch them through there.”

She left the office and returned to the apartment, stripping off Jane’s suit and donning shorts and an over-sized tee shirt. If she had to hang about the apartment for the rest of the day, she may as well be comfortable.

First, she arranged for someone to come in to fix the lock on the back door. Then she curled up on the sofa with a book, but it couldn’t hold her interest. Her gaze kept sliding across to the phone. She told herself she was waiting for Jane to contact her, but in her heart she knew that wasn’t it. She was waiting for Matthew.

Surely he’d ring her, particularly after the night they’d shared?

Chapter Thirteen

Matt glanced at his watch and frowned. Stretching his legs out in front of him, he slumped in the seat, his thoughts turning to Melissa and their date last night. Or rather, the aftermath. His body immediately tightened with need and he was forced to sit upright, his hands in his lap to disguise the fact his cock had jumped to attention at the thought of Melissa.

With a grimace, he slammed a mental door shut on the memories. He couldn't go down that road right now. Time enough later, after this case was sorted, to deal with the mix of emotions clouding his mind every time he thought of her.

He had a sudden impulse to prop his booted feet up on the desk in front of him then thought better of it. Bob was pretty casual about the whole boss thing, but that might be pushing it. And speaking of Bob, where the fuck was he? And Adam, for that matter? Their meeting was supposed to start ten minutes ago.

The sounds of a busy work day in the Special Investigations Unit filtered in through the open door of the office. The hubbub of voices, both male and female. The incessant ring of telephones. The scrape of chairs being moved, of files being dropped into untidy heaps on already untidy desks.

He didn't need to look to know what was going on. It had been his life for more years than he cared to count. He loved it. Or at least he had. Until this moment.

Now, for the first time, he questioned what he did for a living. The sneaking around. The pretense. Assuming personas other than his own.

The lowlifes he was forced to rub shoulders with. Could any woman accept what he did to support himself? Could Melissa?

“Good, you’re here. Let’s get on with it.”

The blunt voice dragged him from the mire of unanswered questions whizzing through his brain. He flicked a glance over his shoulder to see his boss, with Adam and Hennessey, enter the office. Pushing aside thoughts of Melissa and how she made him feel, he forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand—putting a stop to Mitch Rivers and his dirty little scam. The sooner he did that, the sooner he could sort things out with Melissa.

“So what have you got for us?” Bob settled himself in the executive chair behind the desk.

“I know Rivers is back in Sydney. That’s if he ever left. He—”

“Definite sighting?” Bob interrupted.

“No, I took Melissa out to dinner last night and happened to luck on to the tail end of a telephone conversation with her sister as I arrived to pick her up.”

“You sure it was the sister?” Adam piped up. “She might have just been setting you up, mate. Maybe she’s twigged to your cover and fed you wrong information to put you off.”

“Okay, Adam, who the hell else would she call Jane?” Matt curled his hands around the armrests of the chair, digging his fingers in until his knuckle joints protested in pain. He hated to discuss Melissa this way. It felt disloyal.

His objectivity where this case was concerned was shot all to hell. His feelings for Melissa had clouded his judgment. Both Adam and the boss already thought he was too involved. It wouldn’t do to let them know just how deeply involved he was.

“It was definitely the sister, and from the one-sided conversation I heard, she’s frightened of Rivers.” Dragging in a deep breath, he tried to moderate his tone of voice. “Melissa tried to talk her into coming home, but she hung up. One thing I did find out, the sister is at Melissa’s house in Brisbane. And there’s something else...”

The three men leaned forward in their chairs. Matt saw the anticipation written across their faces. They looked like dogs ready for the kill. To them, it was just another case. To him, it was so much more. His future happiness might well hinge on what happened from this point forward.

“Yes?” Adam prompted.

“Someone trashed Melissa’s apartment while we were at dinner.” He looked at his boss. “But I guess you already know that. Melissa rang the police and I had to come clean with the sergeant in charge. I’m assuming he rang you to verify my identity?”

Bob nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“My guess it was Rivers. The tapes in the bedside drawer were the only things missing. Of course, Melissa didn’t admit to that, at least not to me. However...”

Matt held up his hand as Adam opened his mouth to speak. “However, there are others. The first thing Melissa did was check the pantry where there were another half dozen or so tapes hidden. We’ll need to send someone over to the local police station to pick them up. It’s clear Rivers is trying to gather up all the evidence. My concern is the bastard will come back when Melissa is on her own.”

He kept his gaze fixed on the desk as he pondered the situation. He wasn’t game to look at either Bob or Adam. These guys knew him pretty well. They were sure to pick up on the emotion in his final sentence. Emotions he was unable to keep in check at the thought of Melissa being threatened.

“I think it’s time we brought all this to a head,” Bob said, “so here’s how we’ll play it. Hennessey, you take Mason with you up to Queensland and pick up the sister. I want her back here as soon as possible. Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I’ll deal with the necessary extradition papers.”

He waited until the agent left the room before turning to Adam. “I want surveillance on that receptionist, Angelica...” He waved his hand around as he struggled for her last name.

“Freeman,” Matt supplied.

“Yeah, Freeman. We know for sure she’s involved. Wouldn’t be surprised if she knows where Rivers is. I don’t want her picked up. Just keep watch on her for the moment.”

“And what about Melissa?” Matt clenched his jaw as he waited for an answer.

“You happy to keep watch on the apartment for tonight?”

Matt nodded.

“All right. If Rivers happens to show up, call for backup. Tomorrow’s Saturday so the receptionist won’t be at work. You and Adam take a team out there and turn over the business. I want any other tapes in existence and I want all the paperwork from the office. Adam, you deal with the search warrant on that.”

He nodded his head at them both. “Okay, that’s it. Get on with it. Matt, take the day off. You’ll need some rest if you’re going to be on surveillance all night.”

As Matt left, he closed the door of the office with a quiet snick when what he wanted to do was slam it, as hard as he could. Tomorrow spelled the end of the easy relationship he’d developed with Melissa. She was about to find out he’d lied to her, and he had a horrible feeling she wasn’t going to take it lightly.

He maneuvered his way around the cluttered desks and made for the entrance to the Unit. As he reached out to shove open the door, a hand descended on his arm.

“Matt, wait. Don’t lose your perspective over this woman. You’re too close—”

“Don’t say anything.” He shrugged off Adam’s hand.

“I mean it. Don’t let your dick do your thinking for you or you could find yourself in the shit.”

“Shut up, Adam. Just...just...shut the fuck up!” As he left the room, he gave in to his frustrations and allowed the door to slam shut with a resounding bang.

* * *

Matt sat in the darkened car in front of Dreams Unlimited. The mouth-watering aroma of fresh-baked pizza filled the interior of the vehicle. He hadn't eaten all day so he should have been hungry, but he wasn't. His insides were tied up in knots. All he could think of was Melissa. And what tomorrow would bring.

An end? Or a beginning? He prayed for the latter, but he had a feeling the events about to take place would signal the end of what could be the most important relationship of his life. He brought his clenched fist down on the steering wheel, the sound reverberating through the enclosed interior. *Fuck, what a mess.*

He'd tried numerous times throughout the day to ring her, but something had prevented him. It wasn't that he didn't have the opportunity. He just wasn't certain he could find the right words to say to her.

Maybe he'd simply been afraid he'd say too much and alert her to what was about to happen. Whatever it was, his courage had failed him each time his hand had reached out for the telephone.

With the pizza box balanced on one palm, he stepped from the car and closed the door. He shouldn't be doing this, but he needed to see Melissa just once more before all hell broke loose. If the boss knew, he'd tear a strip off his hide. He was supposed to watch the apartment from the outside—not the inside. But a few hours couldn't hurt. He'd keep watch from upstairs and if Rivers turned up, he'd know.

His actions rationalized to his satisfaction, he made his way down the alley to the back of the building. His footsteps rang out with a harsh metallic clang as he ascended the staircase. He rapped on the door of the apartment and waited...

* * *

Melissa was already in the hallway when the knock came. The clatter of the metal treads had alerted her someone was coming. It had to be Matthew. Who else would visit her so openly?

She'd waited all day for him to call, but the phone had remained stubbornly silent. Evening had come and still no word. She'd begun to doubt what they'd shared last night. Had she read more into it than she should have? Maybe all the emotion was on her side and she'd been nothing more than a means for Matthew to further his sexual education.

Now here he was. She pressed a hand to her chest to try to still the mad beat of her heart. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and turned the key in the deadbolt.

Suddenly she paused. A trickle of fear snaked down her spine. Her breath caught in her throat and the thud of her heart faltered, an exaggerated pause between one stroke and the next. What if it were Mitch? Her heart sped up again at the mere thought of confronting her sister's partner.

Could it be Jane?

No, she would have used her key to get in. Hang on a minute, she didn't have a key for the new lock yet. So maybe... No, she hadn't heard anyone try to unlock the door so it wasn't Jane.

The knock sounded again, breaking through the inertia holding her in place. It had to be Matthew. Mitch wasn't stupid enough to turn up so soon after he'd trashed the apartment. Just to be on the safe side, though...

"Who is it?" Her hand rested on the shiny new doorknob as she waited for a reply.

"It's me, my dear."

There was only one person who called her *my dear* in just that tone of voice. Melissa threw open the door. Matthew leaned on the doorframe, a pizza box balanced in one hand. Her mouth watered at the tantalizing aromas wafting from the box, but then the sight of Matthew dressed in tight denims and soft blue polo shirt created a hunger of a different kind.

Her lips curved upward in answer to his smile. "I hoped you would call today, but I didn't expect this." She gestured to the bright red and green pizza box.

He stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind him. "So sorry I didn't contact you. It's been a hectic day. So many funerals."

"Oh, poor Matthew. Never mind, you're here now." She took his arm and led him into the living room.

"To make up for my poor manners, I've brought you an offering." He placed the pizza box on the coffee table and flipped open the lid. "I enjoyed our meal so much last night, I returned to the restaurant in the hope I could get something to take away. They were most obliging. Pizza with the lot. I thought we might share it."

"I would love to have dinner with you. I'll just get some plates and cutlery."

"No, no, my sweet Melissa. Now it's *your* education that is lacking. Pizza should always be eaten with the fingers and straight from the box. All we need are napkins and I've even thought of those."

Melissa chuckled when he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a wad of paper napkins.

"Come, my dear, sit with me and enjoy."

"Why, thank you, kind sir," Melissa quipped as she sat down beside him. She picked up a slice of pizza and took a bite, allowing the melted cheese, black olives, anchovies and a myriad other flavors to tease her taste buds before she swallowed.

The first piece disappeared in record time. Melissa reached for another. She hadn't realized how hungry she was. She'd been too depressed to eat earlier. Now her appetite was back with a vengeance, and not just for pizza.

She watched Matthew's face as he raised the slice of pizza to his mouth, her gaze focused on his lips. The same lips that had driven her crazy the night before. That could tease a response from her when she thought she was too satiated to give any more.

“What’s the matter?” He raised his eyebrows in enquiry. “Do I have tomato sauce on my chin?” He wiped at his face with a napkin.

Melissa shook her head. She swallowed the mouthful of pizza and laid the rest of the slice back in the box.

“Come, my dear, you’ve hardly eaten anything.”

His dark gaze captured hers as he lifted a fresh piece of pizza and held it up to her mouth. She found herself unable to break eye contact.

“Indulge yourself,” he whispered.

Oh, she wanted to, so badly. But it wasn’t pizza her body cried out for. It was Matthew. His warmth. The heady scent of his aftershave. His closeness. The erotic caress of his hand. But most of all, his love.

Her eyes opened wide as she realized where her thoughts had led her. *Love*. That dreaded word she’d avoided ever since the fiasco with her ex-fiancé. Now, whenever she thought of Matthew, it slid into her brain.

She waited for the fear of rejection to strike. Nothing. Not one little shiver. Just a charge of excitement zapping through her blood. A heady sensation of gentle warmth. No, more than that. Heat, building up inside her, causing her heart to pound in her chest. And all because of Matthew.

A man who said he didn’t know how to romance women. A man who thought women wouldn’t like him because of what he did for a living. Granted, it was a bit on the unusual side and his ideas about women were antiquated, but there was so much more than that to Matthew. His quirky behavior made him special. And he made *her* feel special, too.

After years of keeping her heart hidden away, Melissa had finally learned to trust again and this man sitting here holding out a slice of pizza to her was responsible. The smile still in place, she moved forward to accept his offering.

She bit off a mouthful of the pizza, almost choking on it as he carried the slice to his own mouth and took a bite, closing his lips over the place where hers had rested. Then he ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip to scoop up a drop of sauce. “You missed a bit,” she said in a husky voice.

Leaning forward, she licked at his lips with the tip of her tongue. The touch was fleeting, but it was enough to cause a riot of sensations to explode within her.

Matthew dropped the slice of pizza into the box and reached out to her, pulling her into his arms. She wasn't about to object. His mouth met hers in a kiss designed to sear the skin right off her body. She settled on his lap and inched her hands up around his neck, dragging his head down to hers, straining to get as close as she could to the heat of him.

As his tongue glided across her lips, she opened to him. She welcomed the thrust of his tongue and enticed him into an erotic mating ritual that threatened to drive her over the edge. And the heat built, charging her blood, escalating in intensity.

She groaned and arched her body when his hand cupped her breast. Her hardened nipple brushed against his palm. As he took the throbbing peak between his thumb and forefinger, Melissa thought she would pass out, so great was the sensory overload.

Everything beyond that moment ceased to exist. No Jane. No dirty blackmail. There was only the sound of Matthew's ragged breathing. Her tension-charged moans as she responded to the tumult of emotions inside her. And when she guided his head to her breast, the deep groan dragged up from his chest.

Sensation layered upon sensation as he took her aching nipple into the warmth of his mouth. The fabric of her blouse, and her lacy bra beneath, grew damp, creating a friction that only served to drive the tension higher. Heat streaked from her breast, down her body, until it centered between her thighs and made her clit ache.

She smelt the scent of her own desire. Heard the sound of her fragmented breathing. Her body hummed with unrelieved sexual energy. It heightened her senses in a way she'd never have believed possible. Oh god, she wanted him so bad.

With a groan, Matt released her nipple, only to bury his head in the curve of her shoulder. "Ah hell, I can't do this," he muttered in a strangled voice.

Tremors racked him as he held her close. He breathed in her perfume and it only made him tremble more. His body cried out for release, but he knew he couldn't—he shouldn't—be doing this. Not now. Not tonight. Not when he knew what was to take place in the morning.

His conscience chipped away at him, making him feel like the biggest bastard that ever lived. He'd only meant to steal one little kiss. Enough to hold him until this case was over and he could come to Melissa with a clean slate. Convince her to start again, with only the truth between them. And the love. Certainly on his side, and, he had a strong feeling, on hers as well.

And what did he do? He allowed his hunger for her to take over, his control shattered at the mere touch of her lips. He was a poor excuse for an agent. He was here to protect her, not ravage her, and he hadn't even checked to see if Rivers was about. Anyone could have broken in and he'd have been none the wiser. He'd been too caught up in the sensations that ripped through his body. Thinking with his dick, as Adam would say.

He dragged in a shaky breath and put Melissa from him. He had to avert his gaze from the wounded look on her face. Legs shaking, he stood, conscious of the uncomfortable bulge clearly outlined by his tight jeans. Although he tried to clear the lump from his throat, his voice still came out in a husky rasp. "I...I have to go, my dear."

"Matthew?"

A rat! That's what he was. A fucking, low-down rat. To lead a woman on and then cut her off just when it looked like they were about to get to the nitty gritty. Men had a name for women who did that. Wonder what women called a man who did the same? Whatever it was, it couldn't make him feel any worse than he did right now.

Closing his eyes a moment, he ignored the question in her voice, and on her face. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and just as quickly removed them. It only served to pull the fabric tight and show off the state of his arousal even more.

His body taut with tension, he backed out of the room until he reached the entrance to the living room. "I'll see you tomorrow," he mumbled. He turned to walk away, but spun back at the last moment, one last thing he needed to say. "Remember, whatever happens, trust me. In a very short space of time, you have come to mean more to me than anything or anyone else in my life. I would never intentionally hurt you."

He held out his hand for a second before allowing it to fall to his side. "Trust me," he whispered. Then he let himself out of the apartment.

* * *

Melissa sat on the couch, arms wrapped around her body. The damp spot on her blouse from Matthew's mouth brushed against her arm, bringing back the sensation of his lips on her breasts. Her aching nipples throbbed in reaction. Heat streaked from her breasts down to her pussy. She squirmed, trying to relieve the pulsing between her thighs.

She slid her hand down and cupped her pussy, feeling the dampness of her cream through the fabric of her panties. Damn, she was turned on, and with Matthew gone, she'd have to deal with her own sexual satisfaction. Yes, she could bring herself to a climax with a little bit of manual stimulation, but it wasn't what her body hungered for. She needed Matthew.

Her mind grappled with his final words and the conflicting signals she'd received from him. She knew he wanted her. Hell, the bulge in his jeans told its own story. Some things a guy couldn't hide.

So what had happened? Why had Matthew acted the way he had? She didn't need to be an Einstein to know he'd been as caught up in the moment as she had. What had gone wrong?

Her lack of self-confidence where men were concerned came back to bite her on the ass.

What had *she* done wrong?

Chapter Fourteen

Melissa tossed and turned on the rumpled bed. Her arms reached out for Matthew, enfolded him and pulled him close. As his lips settled over hers, she sighed and gave herself up to the tumult of emotions sweeping through her.

Heat.

Tension.

But most of all, a need to give, and receive, the blossoming love that struggled for release inside her.

Each interlude with Matthew peeled back another layer of the hurt and bitterness she'd lived with for so long. And underneath was the burgeoning love she was beginning to feel for him. And a feeling this was meant to be, and nothing, or no one, could ever shatter her faith in him.

She gave herself up to the sensations rippling through her body. As he reached out to claim her mouth again, she gave willingly. His hands skimmed down her naked body and she moaned. Nerve endings came alive. Heat drove her to arch her hips as she tried to get closer... Reaching for the ultimate...

The thud of her pulse resounded in her head, dragging the breath from her body in jerky sobs. Surely her heart couldn't sustain this pace? The mad beating increased, surrounding her, reverberating throughout the room. It doused the fire inside, dragging her from the web of desire holding her in thrall.

Melissa opened her eyes to find herself alone in the bed, the covers in disarray, silent testament to a disturbed sleep. Bright sunlight flooded

the room. She glanced at the clock. Ten o'clock in the morning—and it had all been a dream.

The thumping sounded again and she realized what it was. A heavy fist beat at the door of the apartment. She struggled upright, tripping on the end of the twisted sheet trailing over the side of the bed. After she righted herself, she stumbled through the living room to the back door.

Still caught up in the effects of her erotic dream, she didn't even consider the fact that she wore nothing but a short satin nightie. She didn't wonder, or even ask, who was at the door. She just prayed it was Matthew.

Unlocking the door, she opened it a crack, only to have it wrenched from her grasp and flung back against the wall. Men pushed into the apartment, filling the small hallway with muscle and attitude, shoving her out of the way. And when the tide of male bodies had washed on into the apartment, there was only one person left at the entrance.

Matthew. But not the man of her dreams. Not the Matthew who had taught her to trust again, to open her heart to the vagaries of love. This Matthew seemed different. Serious. More authoritarian. Harder.

Gone was the man who had come to Dreams Unlimited for help in his quest for a life partner. Quirky, unsure of himself, *that* man had touched something deep inside of her. Despite his mode of dress and his chauvinistic behavior, there had been a gentleness about him, a genuine caring. There was no softness on the face of the man before her. It was if his whole façade had changed. Altered in some way.

"Matthew? What's going on?" Her voice was husky with the remnants of sleep.

"This is a warrant to search the apartment and business premises of Dreams Unlimited and to remove all files and tapes."

Melissa reached out and took the folded piece of paper he handed her. She didn't read it. She didn't even glance down at it. She was unable to avert her gaze from his as she tried to process his words.

"Wh..." She shook her head and tried again. "What are you talking about?"

For a moment, his facial features softened and she caught a glimpse of the man she'd come to know. Then, like a slate wiped clean, all expression vanished and the man she loved disappeared.

He stepped into the hallway, closing the door behind him and leading her into the apartment. Without her brain giving the command, she found herself in the main living area, Matthew's hand like a brand on her arm.

Her eyes opened wide at the scene before her. One man crouched in front of the sideboard. Another, at least six feet tall, broad of shoulder and dressed in a dark suit, stood before the antique roll-top desk in the corner. He pulled out the top drawer and emptied it onto the floor.

As she watched, he began to sift through the contents, carefully reading each piece of paper. His jacket swung open as he leaned forward to grasp another bundle of correspondence. Melissa caught a glimpse of something strapped under his armpit.

It took a moment for her to decipher the information her brain had taken in. Was that a shoulder holster? She'd seen enough movies to know it was. *These men were carrying guns?*

Her gaze lowered to the paper crushed in her right hand. Matthew had said something about a warrant.

A noise in the bedroom distracted her. Like a sleepwalker, she stumbled on leaden legs to the entrance of the room. The whole area was a shambles. Clothes emptied out of drawers. Papers from the bedside tables littered the rumpled sheets. The contents of her suitcase were an untidy heap in the centre of the floor. Not one corner of the room had been left untouched.

As she turned back to the living room, she shivered. The tremors caught her unaware. Centered in her stomach, they radiated out until they encompassed her whole body, like the ripples in a pond after a stone was thrown in.

Matthew came up behind her and dropped an afghan over her shoulders. Melissa jerked in reaction. Her fingers tangled in the crocheted weave and dragged it around her. An idle thought flitted

through her brain. This had been on the couch last night when she and Matthew had shared a pizza. Shared more than just a pizza. She closed her mind on the memory.

“Melissa, I’m sorry.”

The words were whispered from somewhere behind her. Melissa turned, her body taut. She had the feeling if she moved too quickly, she’d shatter. Raising her head, she fixed her gaze on his.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a federal agent and this business has been under investigation.”

Melissa pressed her hand to her chest. The beat of her heart had slowed, the sound loud in her ears. The movement of the blood in her veins felt sluggish, as if ice had invaded the life-giving fluid. She struggled to hear Matthew’s answer over the ringing in her ears.

“So you’re not a funeral director?”

“No, I’m not a funeral director. That was an undercover identity I used to get into the agency. We needed to get close to you and it was the only way we could think of. It was a means to an end.”

“A...means to an end?”

“Melissa, I—”

She cut across him. “I suppose your name isn’t even Matthew Campbell?”

“That part was true. I really am Matthew Campbell, although I prefer to use Matt. And I know you’re Melissa Jane Morgan, kindergarten teacher from Brisbane. Your sister—”

“My sister isn’t here.”

“Your sister is in custody. We brought her back from Brisbane last night.”

The roaring inside Melissa’s head increased. Darkness hovered on the fringes of her mind. She struggled to hold it at bay. “Has she been arrested?”

“No, but she *is* helping us with our enquiries. We questioned her last night when they brought her in. We know she wasn’t part of the scam, that it was Rivers.”

“Don’t you mean interrogated?”

The darkness increased, moving closer. Tendrils infiltrated her brain. Everything around her seemed to be covered in a haze, as if seen through a veil. She wavered on the spot, her legs like wobbly jelly.

He reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. “You need to sit down.”

“Don’t touch me!”

The physical contact seemed to break through the fog. She blinked her eyes, driving the feeling of faintness from her. Straightening her shoulders, she tilted her chin the man in front of her. “Don’t ever touch me again.”

Matt clenched his hands and tucked them into his trouser pockets. The look of disgust on Melissa’s face almost fractured his heart. “Will you at least sit down?”

She turned her head and stared at the mess in the living area. “Where?”

“Go into the dining room. We’ll sit down and I’ll try to explain everything.”

Before they could move, one of the men from the bedroom came up to Matt and handed him a small square of folded paper.

“It’s all clear in there,” he said.

“Okay, check the kitchen,” Matt said. “Particularly the pantry. If there are any more tapes in there, I want them. Then I want you to clean this mess up before you go down to the office.”

“But—”

“Just do it,” he barked. “I want everything put back the way it was.”

Knowing better than to touch Melissa this time, Matt held his hand out and motioned to the dining room. He vaguely noticed his hand was shaking and curled his fingers into a fist to hide the fact.

His heart was heavy as he followed Melissa. He didn't even dare pull out a chair for her. Instead, he waited until she was seated and took the place opposite.

For a moment, he just looked at her. Her face was pale, as if all the blood had drained from it. Her gaze, fixed on his, was shadowed with hurt. Her hands clenched and unclenched on the crocheted rug. She was a woman in shock—and he was responsible.

"Is my sister all right?"

"Your sister is fine. She'll be released as soon as we pick up Rivers."

"And when will that be?"

"Hopefully, some time today." He paused for a moment, the silence fraught with tension. "I take it Rivers doesn't know about you and your sister swapping places?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she raised one eyebrow and stared at him. He frowned, thinking over the situation. "We can't have two of you running around, so I'd like you to continue pretending you're Jane. It was Rivers who broke into the apartment the other night, wasn't it?"

"I think so. I'd hidden some tapes in the bedside table. They'd been taken. I assumed it was Mitch."

"We know about the tapes. I...er, I...*saw* them the night I had a shower here."

"You searched the room."

It was a statement, rather than a question. Matt held his hands out in entreaty. "You have to understand. It was my job. I had to do it."

She ignored his words. "When did you know I wasn't Jane?"

"The same night. I saw the photo of the two of you. That was the first time I realized you were a twin and the one I was dealing with was not the owner of Dreams Unlimited. How did you get caught up in this?"

"I came for a holiday, but Jane said she needed to find Mitch. They'd had a fight and Mitch had taken off. Jane begged me to take her place."

"So you knew nothing about the tapes and the blackmail attempts?"

She pushed her chair back and stood, turning her back on him. “Of course I didn’t. What type of person do you think I am?” She spun about and held up her hand. “No, don’t answer that. I already know. A silly, gullible fool. I should have known you were a fraud. No man in this day and age could possibly be as...as dumb as you were about women. You must have had a good laugh at the stupid kindergarten teacher.”

“It wasn’t like that. In the beginning it was just a job. An investigation I was involved in. But it became so much more. I started to care about—”

“I don’t want to know,” she interrupted him. “Am I allowed to use the shower? I’d like to get dressed.”

Matt stood up. “Yes, you can use the bathroom. After you’re dressed, come downstairs to the office.”

“Gee thanks.”

He watched her walk away. She wavered like a drunk, her hand on the wall for support. She stumbled, then quickly righted herself. He wanted to go to her. Wrap his arms about her and hold her tight. Assure her it would be all right and everything would turn out fine, for both her *and* her sister.

But he knew he couldn’t. She’d reject his touch. Reject *him*. And he wouldn’t blame her. If he were in her place, he’d feel devastated right now.

Would there be any way back for him and Melissa after this was all over? He had a sinking feeling he’d just blown the chance of a lifetime. The only woman who may have convinced him to have another shot at love and he’d had to deceive her.

“Damn it to hell, why did this have to happen?” he growled.

* * *

Melissa left the bathroom dressed in fresh jeans and a cherry-red tee shirt. The bright color should have made her feel cheerful, but it didn’t help. Right now, it felt as if nothing would ever be right again.

She stood in front of the mirror and ran a brush through her damp curls. Leaning forward, she searched her reflection. There should be some sign her life was in tatters. Some indication she had received a body blow she might never recover from.

Beyond the shadows in her eyes and the lack of a smile, she looked the same. Once again a man had taken her trust and trampled it in the dust, but there was nothing to show for it. At least, not on the outside.

Inside was a different matter. She was too afraid to analyze the emotions tearing at her heart. If she started, she would be totally submerged and she had a feeling it'd be a long time before she came up for air.

Turning her back to the mirror, she slipped her feet into flat sandals. Time enough later to wallow in self-pity, after she had Jane back safe and sound. And after Matthew, or rather, Matt, had exited her life for the final time.

She shivered. Strange to feel so cold on such a fine, summer day. She dragged on a jacket, although she knew it would be of little help. The cold was on the inside, and right at that moment, she doubted she'd ever feel warm again.

Spine rigid, she left the room and took the elevator down to the office. The agents hadn't wasted much time. Boxes from the storeroom were piled high in the reception area. As she watched, two of the agents came out of Mitch's office, their arms full of files they dumped into an empty carton.

On unsteady legs, she shuffled down the corridor. The office she'd used was bare, all files removed, the computer gone. Even the desk calendar had been packed away. She moved on to Mitch's office.

The agents were busy packing all the videotapes into boxes. Everything else in the office had been removed. Another few moments and it, too, would be empty.

Like an old woman, she stumbled down the hallway to the viewing room. Matt and another man were conducting a search of the area.

“If you’re looking for the video camera, it’s hidden behind that air conditioning grill up there.” She pointed in the right direction before walking away again.

Legs curled up beneath her, she sank into the corner of the couch in the reception area and waited. It didn’t take long. Through the plate glass windows at the front of the building, she saw a van drive up and park outside. The men started to load the heavy cartons into the back of the vehicle.

That didn’t take long either. In less time than she’d have thought possible, the men were gone and so was Jane’s business. All Jane had worked for over the last few years disappeared in an instant.

Melissa dragged herself to her feet and turned towards the elevator. She may as well go up to the apartment. There was no reason for her to remain down here. She didn’t even lock the front door. Why bother? There was nothing left to steal, besides the furniture, and if someone wanted a new office chair—well, right now, she didn’t give a damn.

The sound of the lock on the front door being engaged intruded on her somber thoughts. She spun about to find Matthew—or was that Matt?—standing there. Anger swept through her and found a chink in the ice encasing her heart. Her body trembled with the force of it. She wrapped her arms about herself to hide the shaking of her hands.

“What are you still doing here? Why didn’t you go with your cronies? Your job is done now.”

“It’s not finished yet. We still have to find Rivers.” He walked towards her.

“Well, you won’t find him here.” Melissa couldn’t keep the disgust from her voice. She felt a fierce sense of satisfaction when she saw him wince at her tone.

He punched the button to open the elevator and motioned Melissa inside. He waited until they’d stepped into the apartment before he spoke again.

“Rivers broke in here once to retrieve the tapes, but he didn’t get them all. The odds are he’ll come back to get the rest. Whether he wants

to destroy the evidence or continue with the blackmailing, we suspect he'll pay you another visit. I'm to stay with you until we get him."

Panic surged through Melissa's blood. She didn't want Matthew here. How could she hold it together if he were underfoot? "I'd rather you leave." Her voice was cold.

"I'm sorry, but you don't have a choice in this. We don't know how dangerous Rivers will be if he returns and finds out we've been here before him. You need protection."

"What if he's been watching the building? He'd already know you've been in and confiscated everything. There'd be no need to come up here."

"If he doesn't, we have a good idea where he'll go. We have the receptionist, Angelica Freeman, under surveillance."

"I figured she was involved. I saw her change the tape in the camera. That's how I knew where it was hidden." She started towards the bedroom. Matthew's voice dragged her to a halt.

"Melissa, we have to talk."

"No, we don't. I have nothing to say to you. I'm going to have a shower."

"You just had a shower."

"I need another one. I feel dirty. *You* make me feel dirty." She stepped into the room and closed the door on the shattered look on his face.

* * *

"Melissa? If you don't answer me, I'm coming in."

Matt pressed his ear to the door. He heard the faint sounds of movement so he knew she was awake. He'd looked in earlier and she'd been curled up under the covers, her beautiful face sad, even in sleep. Her cheeks had been damp with the tears he'd caused.

"Melissa?"

"What do you want?"

Her voice came to him through the closed door, devoid of all expression. He clenched his fist and pressed it to the door, his head drooping forward to rest on his hand. "It's nearly eight. You haven't eaten all day."

"I'm not hungry."

Matt opened the door. The room was in darkness. Melissa sat on the edge of the bed, her gaze fixed on a spot somewhere above his shoulder. "I've put some soup on to heat. I know you think you're not hungry, but you should have something. And I won't take no for an answer."

She shrugged and pushed herself up from the bed. He stepped back and waited. She moved into the living room and the light fell full on her face. His jaw clenched at what he saw there.

Devastation. Pain that ripped at his gut. Her eyes were red-rimmed, the rich sherry color dimmed, glassed over with an icy disdain. His face flushed as she leveled a flinty gaze at him. Right at that moment, he felt like the smallest slug on the earth.

She moved past him and into the dining room. Not waiting for his assistance, she pulled out a chair and sat down.

After watching her for a few moments, he shook his head in defeat. "I'll get the soup." *Damn it, it can't end this way.* He knew he'd hurt her, but somehow he had to break through the barrier she'd erected against him. Maybe after they'd eaten.

Melissa just sat there, her gaze fixed on the table. It looked lovely. Matthew had found one of Jane's lace tablecloths and used her best china and silverware. A platter of French bread sat in the center, giving off the mouth-watering smell of a freshly baked loaf. Her stomach rumbled. How could she be hungry when her life was falling apart around her?

As Matthew entered the room again, she glanced up at him, her heart heavy. He placed a white tureen beside the platter of bread. He lifted the lid and she caught the tantalizing aroma of minestrone. After he'd ladled out a decent serving of the thick vegetable soup, he placed the bowl in front of her.

She picked up her spoon and took a mouthful, savoring the rich flavor. She wondered idly where he'd got it. It certainly wasn't canned soup. She may not be a restaurant-quality cook, but even she knew you had to soak the beans for twelve hours before you could make minestrone.

Almost as if he'd picked up on her thoughts, he answered her.

"It's my Aunt Anna's recipe. I rang her to see if she had anything prepared. You don't have much in your pantry. One of my cousins delivered it, along with the fresh bread."

"So Aunt Anna is real." A bitter laugh escaped her. "I thought she was just another fabrication for your undercover identity."

"She's very real. Everything I told you about my mother's side of the family is real. I tried—"

"I don't want to know." She cut him off and busied herself with the meal, emptying her bowl and helping herself to another serving. It was very good. The heat of the soup helped to drive out some of the cold. Matthew held the platter out to her and she took a slice of the crusty bread, breathing in the warm, yeasty smell.

All this without raising her eyes to the man across from her. She wasn't certain she could look at him without the ice inside her shattering. And if that happened, the anger would take over, so best to ignore him.

After she'd eaten her fill, he gathered up the used plates. "If you'd like to go into the living room, I'll bring you a cup of coffee."

Still without a word, Melissa did as he suggested. She looked around the room, surprised it looked the same as it had before Matthew's colleagues had burst in. Not a thing out of place. Even the afghan he'd placed about her shoulders was neatly folded on the back of the sofa.

Someone had found the red and white spotted bow tie she'd dropped on the floor the night she and Matthew had gone out to dinner. Now it hung, limp and crushed, over the arm of the sofa. Unable to resist the impulse, she picked it up. Her fingers curled about the strip of fabric, crumpling it into a small ball in the palm of her hand.

Her gaze tracked across the room again. How can everything change so much and still remain the same? Then she clamped down on the thought as Matthew entered the room, two cups of coffee in his hands.

He sat down and handed her a mug. She took it and slid to the far side of the sofa. Even from here, she smelled his aftershave. The same aftershave he'd worn when he was Matthew Campbell, funeral director. His heat reached out to her, wreathing her in memories she'd rather not have to deal with right now.

She felt him watching her and flicked a quick glance at him before lowering her gaze, only to encounter heavily muscled thighs clad in soft blue denim. Vivid memories of that same body, warm and naked as he held her tight, swept through her mind. She closed her eyes. She didn't want to remember. It hurt too much.

"We have to talk."

His voice was low and husky, as if he, too, remembered. She hardened her resolve. "We have nothing to talk about."

He placed his cup on the coffee table and turned toward her. "Listen to me, I need to explain."

Melissa listened. She couldn't help herself.

"I was twelve years old when I saw my parents gunned down in a convenience store robbery. I was so devastated I vowed never to care for anyone again." He paused.

Despite herself, Melissa waited, needing to hear the rest. Maybe then she could understand why he'd put her through this.

"I pushed everyone away. That is, until I met Allie. We became the best of friends. One day we realized what we shared was more than just friendship. The love of a lifetime, I thought. We got engaged, but Allie got sick. Four years ago, I watched her die, struggling for every last breath."

He stood and paced around the room. "I swore I was never going to care again. It hurt too much when love was ripped away. Then I met you."

Dropping to his knees in front of her, he reached out to grasp her hand. Melissa tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

"I know I deceived you, but it was part of the job. I—"

"So you pretended to be someone you're not," she interrupted. "The poor misfit funeral director Matthew Campbell. Someone who needed to be shown how to act around women, how to romance them. Well, you sure fooled me. I actually thought you cared." She laughed, aware the sound carried a hint of hysteria. "You should go on the stage. You'd be good at it."

"Damn it, I *do* care. Okay, so in the beginning it was just an assignment. Then it became so much more. For the first time since Allie, I let myself feel again. We have something very special between us. I don't want to lose that."

She pulled her hand from his and scrambled off the sofa. The ice about her heart started to melt and fury swept in to take its place. She curled her hands into fists to hide their trembling.

"There is *nothing* between us." Her voice shook with rage. "Anything we had was built on lies. You talk about feelings? For the first time in a long while, I allowed myself to trust a man, and what'd you do? You took that trust and rubbed my face in it."

She paused to take a deep breath before she could go on. "You want history? Well, here's some. I have this problem. I've never trusted men. First there was my father. He couldn't stay around long enough for us to grow up. And how about the string of *uncles* in and out of our home after my father left? They couldn't be trusted to stay either."

She glared at him as a thought struck her. "If you investigated Jane, I guess there's a file on me as well. If so, I assume you know about my fiancé. I couldn't rely on his love either. So I shut myself off. I was never going to put my trust in a man again."

He approached her, his hand extended. She backed away, not certain she could stand firm if he touched her.

Her voice dropped to a whisper as she continued. "Then I met you, the strange, out-of-step funeral director. I thought you were creepy, until I got to know you and found I liked what I saw. More than that, I trusted

you enough to let you into my heart. You must have had a good laugh at my expense. Poor, gullible Melissa.”

“It wasn’t like that, my dear.” He grasped her by the shoulders.

“Don’t call me that.” She wrenched herself from his hold. “I liked it each time you called me that. A little idiosyncrasy I grew to love, but it was all a lie.”

“That wasn’t a lie. You are—”

Before he could say anything else, the cell phone attached to his belt rang. With a soft curse, he grabbed it. “Yeah?” he growled in an abrupt voice. After a few moments, he snapped the cell shut and shoved it in his pocket. “They picked up Rivers at Angelica Freeman’s apartment. He’s been there all this time. The assignment’s finished. Maybe now we can think about us. Try to find a way around all this.”

Melissa laughed. Tears filled her eyes, but she willed them not to fall. No way would she break down in front of him. She knew she was being a bitch, but it was the only way she could think to protect herself from any more hurt.

“There is no us,” she said. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“I’m the same person I was before. The fundamentals haven’t changed.”

She shook her head. “I preferred the undertaker. The Matthew Campbell I knew had a softness about him that called to something inside me. You’re not that person. You, I don’t even know, and right now, I’m not certain I ever want to know.”

On stiff legs, she walked to the door of the apartment and opened it wide. She kept her jaw clenched and her eyes wide to prevent the tears from overflowing. “There’s no reason for you to be here now. Please go.”

“But, Melissa—”

“We’ve said all we have to say. I want you to leave. In fact, I don’t ever want to see you again.”

“We’ll need you to come downtown to give a statement.”

She acknowledged his words with a polite nod of her head.

"I'll see that someone drives your sister home." He stepped out the door and moved down onto the first step. "Goodnight, my dear."

"*Goodbye, Matthew,*" Melissa said in a quiet voice before she closed and locked the door.

With her back pressed against the door, she slid down until she was sitting on the floor of the hallway. Her forehead creased in a perplexed frown, she stared at her clenched fist. Then she remembered and uncurled her aching fingers to reveal Matthew's polka-dot bow tie.

She dangled the red and white strip of fabric between two fingers, the first of the tears starting to trickle down her face.

"Oh Melissa, you've really fucked up this time."

Chapter Fifteen

“You have to fix it for me, Melissa,” Jane wailed. “I’ve lost everything.

Jane sat on the end of the couch, a satin robe pulled tight about her body, long hair hanging about her face in disarray. Her vibrant, bouncy personality was submerged beneath a wealth of pain.

“Sorry, Jane, but even if I wanted to, I can’t do anything about it this time. Mitch will just have to face the music.”

“But I love him. Can’t you find a lawyer who’ll get him off?”

One of the agents had driven Jane home in the early hours of Sunday morning. Melissa had been shocked. She couldn’t believe it was her sister. It was like she’d been beaten, the vitality drained out of her.

It was bad enough to find out your partner had implicated you in criminal activities. If he left you emotionally bankrupt as well, it was more difficult to deal with. Jane had been shattered after she’d realized Mitch had been involved with Angelica almost from the first moment the receptionist had started with Dreams Unlimited.

Melissa snorted. Sure didn’t take Jane long to bounce back. Not even twenty-four hours and she was her old whiny self again, expecting her sister to pick up after her. Well, not this time.

“How the hell can you still want the man when you know he’s been screwing around behind your back for ages?”

“But what am I going to do?” Jane’s eyes filled with tears. “Mitch *was* the business. How am I going to run Dreams Unlimited without him? I need him.”

Yeah, that sounded more like the Jane she knew. Always thinking of herself first. Melissa curled up on the opposite end of the couch, her feet

tucked under her. She gave a deep sigh, knowing there was only one thing she could say.

"You could come back to Brisbane with me. There's nothing to keep you here. You can't run the business. The police have all the files and heaven knows when you'll get them back."

Jane pushed her hair out of her face. "But what about Dreams Unlimited?"

"Why not hand everything over to your accountant and lawyer? I assume you do have a lawyer?" At Jane's nod, she continued. "Well, let them handle it. You realize you'll probably be bankrupt after all this? A lot of the contracts haven't been filled so the clients will have to be reimbursed."

"But I'll be broke. What'll I do?"

"Oh for God's sake, Jane, grow up. You'll do what the rest of us do. You'll get a job to support yourself. Because I'm warning you, if you come home, you're not living off me."

Melissa stood and walked over to the roll-top desk, pulling out a manila folder. "And I'll tell you something else for free. Things are going to change. You're the same age as I am. It's time you stood on your own two feet."

"But you promised Mom you'd look after me."

"Tough! Get used to it because this is the last time I clean up any of your screw-ups." She tossed the folder into Jane's lap. "That's a list of your clients. Matthew gave it to me when we went in to make our statements."

There was an immediate spear of pain in the region of her heart as Melissa said his name. She had a feeling it would always be like that.

Her mind skipped back to their last meeting. She'd wrapped her hurt about herself like a cloak. Not even Matthew's words of entreaty to give him a second chance had penetrated her armor. The hurt of betrayal had been too raw. She'd ignored his pleas and walked away.

Only in the dead of night had she allowed those emotions out and mourned for the loss of a love that may well have carried her through the

rest of her life. She shrugged the thoughts away. She'd done without a man in her life before. She'd do it again.

"So what do you think? Are you going to hand this list over to the lawyer and come back home? As long as we let the police know where we are for the court case, I don't see any reason why we can't leave."

"Well, the lease *is* due for renewal in three weeks so there's no problem there. I guess I could find something to do up in Brisbane." Jane paused a moment in thought before going on. "What about Matt, Melissa? Can you walk away? I saw how you both reacted when we were at the Federal building. He cares about you."

"He's nothing to me. Just one of your clients."

"I'm not certain what went on with you two," Jane said, "but it's as clear as day you both care. I know you tend to play everything close to your chest, but I can see you hurting."

Melissa dropped back onto the couch and stared at her sister. Holy crap, this was a red letter day. It was the first time she could ever remember Jane noticing that maybe someone else beside herself might have a few problems.

"If you love this man, take a chance on him," Jane said, sliding down the couch so she was sitting right beside Melissa. "Contact him."

"He lied to me. He pretended to be someone he wasn't."

"Weren't you doing the same?"

Despite Melissa's best efforts, it was impossible to ignore the question. "For the first time in a long while, I trusted a man and he made a fool of me. He betrayed me."

Jane shrugged. "He was just doing his job."

"I know, but it doesn't make it any easier to deal with."

"You always had a problem with trust, even when we were kids. You never allowed anyone close to you, not even me. I always felt like you didn't need me."

Tears filled Melissa's eyes, overflowing to slide down her face. "I'll always need you. You're my other half."

Jane gave a sniff as her own eyes filled with tears. "So what about Matt? Are you going to contact him?"

"I can't. I kicked him out and said some awful things to him. He asked me to trust him and I didn't. I just reacted to the discovery he wasn't who he said he was. This issue of distrust is *my* problem. Before I can trust anyone else, I have to learn to trust myself and my own feelings. I can't go to him like this."

Her voice broke on the last words. As sobs tore at her diaphragm, Jane gathered her close, her own tears adding to the sense of misery in the room.

After they'd both calmed down somewhat, Jane lifted her tear-drenched face and grinned at her. "Let's go home, Sis."

Chapter Sixteen

Melissa glanced at her watch. She'd better call the children for story time. She selected a couple of books and walked outside into the bright summer sun. The playground fronted onto the main road, separated from the danger of the traffic by a high, metal-rail fence.

At least twenty children, most dressed in light shorts and tee shirts to compensate for the hot weather, ran and played in the enclosed area. Lucy, her assistant, was gathering them together and seating them under a shady tree, ready for their story.

After six weeks back at work in Brisbane, Melissa had realized something. She'd changed in the time that had elapsed since her disastrous holiday. She was at peace with herself now.

Oh, it still hurt every time she thought about Matthew. More than she would have believed possible. Sadness and depression settled about her if she allowed her defenses to fall. At the same time, she struggled hard not to allow her grief to erect a barrier about herself to shut everyone out.

No, the change was more fundamental. She'd learned to open herself up to others. She had ceased to hide behind a wall of distrust. Jane—and Matthew—had taught her that.

She'd worked hard to establish new relationships with her work colleagues. She'd always loved her job, but now it was different. Allowing others to see her as she really was had added an extra dimension. She'd contacted old mates and renewed friendships, relationships she valued. She'd even gone out a couple of times with an old boyfriend, but that hadn't been much of a success. She wasn't ready.

Jane, too, had managed to get her life back on track. Melissa knew she still hurt over Mitch's betrayal. She often heard her sobs in the middle of the night. But despite that, Jane had pulled herself together and found a job, ironically, as a receptionist. It wasn't what she was used to but, she was coping, even if she did whine about it constantly.

"Come on, miss. It's story time."

One little boy's voice intruded on her self-analysis. It was Jeremy, the most vocal of the lot. A smile curved her lips as she shrugged off her mood and walked over to join the children. She sat down in the centre of the circle and gathered them close, holding the books up so they could see the covers.

"Which one would you like to hear?"

"The one about the man who pretends to be poor, but he was really a prince," Jeremy piped up.

Melissa's mouth quirked at the irony. "Is that okay with the rest of you?" At their nods, she opened the book to the first page and started to read. "Once upon a time—"

"Miss!"

"Quiet, Jeremy, or you won't hear the story."

"But, miss, there's a funny man looking at us."

Melissa felt a moment of disquiet. Kindergartens and play centers were often a magnet for all types of weird and sick minds. She dropped the book into her lap and looked around.

At first she saw no one, until a movement over by the front gate drew her attention. She focused on the person who stood there, his features striped by the shadows of the metal bars of the fence.

All of a sudden, it felt as if her heart had stopped. She pressed a hand to her chest and drew in a sharp breath, relieved when she felt the steady thud under her palm. She closed her eyes a moment then opened them again. He was still there.

Matthew.

She'd thought he might call after she'd returned to Brisbane, but there'd been nothing. No phone call, no word. For the first month, she'd jumped every time the phone rang. After that, she'd ceased to react. She'd thought he couldn't forgive her, or that she'd only been a passing fancy in a difficult case. *A means to an end.*

Now there he was. And this Matthew she recognized immediately.

Motioning for Lucy to take over the story time, Melissa pushed herself to her feet and moved towards the gate. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her face felt flushed with heat. The scope of her vision narrowed until it encompassed only Matthew. Everything else ceased to exist.

Her hand trembled so much she had trouble fitting the key into the lock of the gate. It seemed like an age before she managed to open the barrier and step through to confront him.

As her gaze swept over him, hunger rose up inside her. Hunger of the spirit, not the body. It took a moment for her to register the manner of his dress. She started to smile, but thought better of it, covering her mouth with her hands to prevent the bubble of laughter welling up inside her from escaping.

This was the Matthew she remembered from their first meeting. He'd dressed in a black suit, the jacket open to reveal his starched, snowy-white shirt. About his neck hung a perfectly tied, red and white spotted bow tie. A wilted rose was fixed to the lapel of his jacket and in his hands he carried a circle made of the same roses.

The laughter almost broke through. The floral arrangement in his hands looked like a funeral wreath. Talk about staying in character. It was the pungent oil matting his hair into clumps and dripping down the side of his face that finally did it. She couldn't contain the chuckles bubbling up. Her smile widened as they burst from her.

She caught his gaze, expecting to see a matching smile on his face, but he was all seriousness. Dare she hope this visit was what she thought it was?

"Matthew?"

Matt swallowed the lump in his throat. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words deserted him. All he could do was drink in the sight of Melissa's sweet face.

God, he'd missed her. So much so, it was like dying a little inside every time he'd thought of her. He'd wanted to come earlier, but it hadn't been possible, work commitments had intruded. So many times he'd picked up the phone to ring her, but what he wanted—no, needed—to say had to be said in person. And now he was here and he couldn't find the right words.

He'd stood there and watched her walk down to join the children. He'd seen the way she'd interacted with the kids. She loved them. She was in her element.

This was the real Melissa. A woman with so much love to give. She'd make a good parent, a loving mother with a brood of her own. And his—if she'd have him.

"Matthew, what—"

He held up his hand. "No, please...let me speak. I rehearsed what I wanted to say all the way here. It was the longest flight of my life. If I don't get the words out, I'll lose my courage."

"You? You'll never lose your courage. You're an honorable man. You'll always find a way to do the right thing."

"But I lied to you. I—"

"In the course of your work," she said. "At that point in time, you had no choice. That's all over and done with now."

"No, it can't be done with. This is too important, for both of us."

"I didn't mean—"

"Please," he begged, "let me start again."

He held the wreath of roses out to her. Melissa took it and leaned down to prop it up against the fence. Then she stood and locked her gaze on his face.

Matt ran his hands over his hair, struggling for the words he'd rehearsed. He was mildly surprised when his hands came away covered

in hair oil. Without a word, Melissa reached into the pocket of her shorts and pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to him. He took it and wiped the grease from his fingers. With the scrap of fabric wadded up in his hand, he searched his memory for the prepared speech.

"I love you, Melissa. If the last six weeks have taught me nothing else, they've taught me that much. I can't live without you. You're more important to me than breathing."

"I love you, too," Melissa said, but he didn't appear to hear her. He was too intent on having his say, his brow pulled down in a deep frown.

"I know I lied to you and I'm sorry for that. If you want me to change my job, I will. Or I can get a transfer to the Brisbane office. I've already looked into that."

"I love you, Matthew," she whispered again.

"I can be whatever you want. If you want the old-fashioned funeral director, I'll dress this way for the rest of my life, if that's what it takes. If only you'll give me a chance to make it up to you."

"I. Love. You."

"Give me a chance to regain your trust. I know you have a problem with that, but I... What did you say?"

She grinned at the shocked look on his face. "I said, *I love you*." She stepped closer. So close, she felt his heat reach out to her. Smelled his aftershave—she wrinkled her nose—and the cloying scent of the hair oil. "I love you," she repeated.

"That's what I thought you said. I wasn't certain I'd heard you correctly. I was afraid it was nothing but a dream."

"No dream." She shook her head. "You asked me to trust you and I didn't. I would have saved us both a lot of heartache had I done so. But I couldn't get past what I saw as betrayal. To me, it was just another man who'd let me down."

"I'm sorry, my dear."

Her heart thrilled at once again being called *my dear* in that husky tone of voice. “No, the problem wasn’t yours. This issue of trust is something *I* have to deal with, but I’m working on it.”

“We’ll work together to heal old wounds, my dear. I have my own share of hang-ups to deal with.” He reached out and enfolded her in his arms. For a moment, he simply rested his chin on her head. With a loud sigh, he moved her back and looked down at her. “I can’t live without you. Please, marry me and put me out of my misery.”

She chuckled. “First, I’ll have to get used to thinking of you as Matt. And I don’t care whether we live here in Brisbane or in Sydney, as long as we’re together. I love all of you, the undertaker *and* the federal agent. It doesn’t matter how you dress or act, as long as you’re there, for me *and* all the little undertakers I hope we have.” She slid her arms up around his neck and pulled his head down. As his lips settled over hers, a delicious shiver slid down her spine.

The familiar feelings hit her. She threaded her fingers through his hair and gave herself up to the charge of electricity rushing through her veins. As he slid his tongue along her bottom lip, she opened to him, welcoming his entrance with a heartfelt moan.

Heat gathered in the pit of her stomach and traveled downward. Nerve endings grew sensitized. The world threatened to slip away and it was only with a supreme effort she remembered where they were and who was watching.

Her breathing choppy, she broke off the kiss and leaned back in his arms. His dark eyes were a bright glitter, his cheeks flushed, as he fastened his gaze on hers. His love was there on his face for the entire world to see. Melissa would cherish this moment for the rest of her life. It had to be one of the most unusual proposals ever.

All of a sudden, she started to laugh, the chuckles tumbling out of her.

“What?” Matthew looked at her with a grin on his face and a perplexed frown on his forehead.

She held up her hands, the palms coated with grease. “I won’t mind seeing the funeral director on occasion, but can we do without the hair oil?”

About the Author

To learn more about Alexis Fleming, please visit www.alexisfleming.net. Send an email to Alexis at alexisfleming@hotmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Alexis! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AlexisFlemingandFriends>

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Taking a ride on the wild side is a dangerous proposition

Running With The Devil

© 2007 Lorelei James

Drug dealer? Hooker? Blackmailer? Kenna Jones was the last person to have contact with a murdered federal informant and DEA Agent Drake March goes undercover during the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally to find out just what her relationship to the dead man was. One problem—from the moment Drake encounters the gorgeous, hot-tempered chameleon—he doesn't trust her—or his immediate attraction to her.

Kenna's situation can't get worse. Posing as arm candy for rich bikers is a humiliating way to earn tuition. But the financially strapped grad student has no choice. And it appears too-sexy for his badge Agent Drake March isn't giving her a choice either. He threatens to have her arrested if she refuses to cooperate in his investigation.

But bullets fly and Kenna's life is in danger from an unknown threat. Drake's protective instincts kick in when he realizes sweet Kenna is innocent—and in far over her head.

Lust, fear and desire make for a volatile combination in the hedonistic atmosphere, leading Drake and Kenna into taking a dangerous ride on the wild side—with explosive results.

With their lives at stake, will they learn to trust each other before it's too late? Or will the devil come calling and finally get his due?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Running With The Devil*:

Drake braced himself against the wall while he toed off his boots. Wallet, leather pouch and keys landed on the bed.

Kenna dropped her duffle by the door and flopped on the bed closest to the window. She yawned and flipped back the covers. "I'm wiped."

"Aren't you changing into pajamas?" Visions of sexy nightgowns teased him; a frilly baby doll barely covering her gorgeous ass. A black silk nightie highlighting her dangerous curves. Or his personal favorite: nothing but fire flashing in her eyes and a "do-me-big-daddy" smile.

“No. I don’t wear paj—”

“Even better. That way I know you won’t be sneaking out.”

She propped herself on her elbow and scowled at him. “Here’s where you threaten to tie me to the bed.”

Drake grinned. “Only if you ask me real nice.” He yanked his T-shirt over his head and pitched it toward the chair.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

The barb didn’t hold any sting when Drake noticed her eyes were glued to his chest. Hmm. No matter what her smart mouth said, her body didn’t lie. Seemed *she* was the one having a hard time catching her breath.

He stretched, flexing the muscles in his biceps and contracting his abs. At the stunned, hungry look on her face he decided the hours spent in the gym were well worth it.

“What are you doing?” she croaked.

“Getting ready for bed.”

Drake sighed, dropping his hands to his waistband. His fingers fiddled with the top button.

Then he unbuckled his belt.

Her gaze zoomed to his fly as he oh-so-slowly lowered the zipper. Damn if his cock didn’t appreciate her rapt attention and offer an enthusiastic, hopeful salute.

She swallowed hard as he began to slide the jeans down his hips, inching them over his muscular thighs and past his knees.

“Enjoying the show?”

“God, yes,” she responded eagerly before she caught herself. A faint blush stole across her cheeks, highlighting her freckles. She abruptly turned on her side.

Drake shucked his jeans completely off and stood there, feeling like an idiot with a hard-on pressing out of the top of his black boxers. “What? No goodnight kiss?”

“You can kiss my ass,” she retorted.

“Careful, hot stuff. I might consider that an invitation.”

“Go to sleep, perv. On your own side of the room in your own bed.”

He laughed softly. “Goodnight, Kenna. Sweet dreams.”

Kenna slowed her breathing, pretending to be asleep. Drake would probably start snoring any minute. Wouldn't that blow her fantasy of him straight to hell?

Oh yeah, he was man enough to fill a hundred fantasies.

She squeezed her eyes shut, but it was no use. Her brain insisted on reliving his sexy, impromptu strip tease. Over and over again until she'd memorized every damn detail.

His body boggled her mind. Long, lean and hard, muscled in all the right places—he definitely looked long and hard where it counted. Sweat beaded on her brow thinking about touching and tasting that tanned golden skin and corded muscles. Sifting her fingers through his unruly black hair. Taking his big cock in her hands. In her body. In her mouth. She suppressed a moan, but her body launched a rush of moisture south anyway.

Hell. She'd never get to sleep now.

A deep masculine grunt. Followed by a heavy sigh. The bed squeaked and the polyester covers rustled as he rolled over.

She stared at the warped pine paneling surrounding the window, then at the brownish water spots on the ceiling. Think of something not sexy.

Rocks. She smiled to herself and began to recite the geological periods. In order. By the time she reached the Paleolithic age, she'd relaxed enough to drift off.

Her sultry voice drifted to him in the dark.

“You asleep?”

Drake went absolutely still beneath the thin sheet.

She laughed softly. “I know you're awake, Agent March. I've heard you tossing and turning.”

He sighed. No use pretending.

“Tell me something.”

“What?”

“Is it hard to sleep with an erection?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you had a pretty impressive hard-on before you crawled in bed. I imagine you’re still hard as a rock, aren’t you?”

“Kenna—”

“Can’t be comfortable with that big thing poking you in the stomach. And I doubt you want to touch yourself with me in the room.”

“Why—”

“Although you could sneak in the bathroom and jack off in the shower and I’d never know.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” The bedspread crinkled as she shifted on the mattress. “Every time you get in the shower, I’ll think that’s what you’re really doing. Slicking your hands up with soap. Sliding up and down your shaft.” She paused. “Who do you think about when you’re stroking yourself?”

He didn’t answer.

“An old girlfriend? A famous actress? Or a model? Think any of them know how to give a decent hand job?”

His heart started to pound. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want to know what you’d do if I wasn’t here.”

Jack off in the shower. Thinking of you the entire time.

“You really think I’ll answer that?” She might talk tough but he doubted she could handle his answer.

“No. But since I am here I can give you the relief you’re dying for.”

He must have misunderstood her. He was so focused on how the fringed curtains stirred whenever the air conditioner kicked on that he didn’t realize she’d moved until she’d slid beneath the sheets next to him.

“Kenna. I don’t think—”

“Ssh. Don’t think. Let me do this.”

Her bare breasts were pressed on either side of his spine and her nipples were stiffened to hard points. When had she gotten naked? She plastered herself against him and he felt the curls covering her sex grinding into his ass. He groaned. His body was so hot it felt feverish. And the coolness of her silky skin against the heat of his nearly made him come right then.

She indulged in teasing nips along his shoulder until her naughty mouth connected with the curve of his neck. Her tongue flicked the fine hairs at the base of his skull. Sweet, warm breath drifted across his skin.

Drake shivered.

“Do you want me to stop?” Her delicate fingertips drew an idle path from his hip, up the ticklish bend in his waist to trace his pectoral. Circled his nipple. Trailed back down. While driving him insane with fleeting caresses on his overheated skin, she writhed against his back. Did the thought of him exploding in her hand make her hot?

“Drake? What’s it gonna be?”

“Don’t stop.”

“Mmm,” she hummed against his shoulder blade. “I like the way you smell.” She walked her fingers over the edge of his hipbone to his groin. No tentative touches. Kenna wrapped her hand around his rigid cock and pumped from root to tip. “I like the way you feel.”

He arched his hardness into her soft hand.

“Do you want me to tease you? Make it last longer?” Those wayward fingertips delved into the hair covering his sac. She rolled his balls between her fingers and used her thumb to stroke the pulsing vein running up the length. Then she circled the base of his cock with her forefinger and thumb and squeezed. “Well?”

“No. Don’t tease.”

Her breath cascaded over the sweat gathering on his spine. “I wouldn’t dream of it.” Kenna slid her hand back up, tightly curled her fingers around his thickness and began to work him.

Pure unadulterated pleasure flooded his brain. “Ah. Jesus that feels so fucking good.”

She kissed the spot below his ear. “Imagine how good it’ll feel when it’s my wet mouth on you instead of my hand.”

“You really want to make me come fast, don’t you?”

A confident feminine laugh. Then she started a blissfully brisk rhythm that made him groan and thrust higher to meet her masterful strokes.

Twisting up to the tip. Down to the root. Over and over. No change in the pace. Her touches were oddly familiar. Kenna seemed to know exactly what he liked. How hard she could pull on his dick without making it painful. How much he craved the pad of her thumb circling the plump head with each upstroke. Each tug brought him closer to the edge. He held his breath. Clenched his ass cheeks, bumping his hips and closed his eyes, readying himself to burst in her hand.

God. It was right there. That ultimate rush of relief...

Then she started snoring.

He froze. His cock twitched at the sudden loss of friction. What the hell? How could she fall asleep at a time like this? When he was so goddamned close?

She's getting a second chance with the right man. Again. And again. And again...

Call Me Cupid

© 2007 Sydney Somers

On the day before her wedding, the last thing AJ needs is the ex she never truly got over showing up to complicate things. But when fate throws a curve ball and she wakes to relive the same day over and over, the only person who may know what's going on is the one man she can never trust her heart to.

Cooper thought he wanted closure. Seeing AJ again proves he's anything but ready to let go. With a Greek god in his corner he's got all the time in the world to convince AJ that she still loves him—if such a bold move doesn't push her straight out of his arms forever.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Call Me Cupid*:

"You're so not over her." Cooper McLain scrubbed a hand over his face, staring bleary eyed at his reflection. He looked like crap.

A night of drinking yourself into a stupor did that oddly enough. His mouth tasted like he'd downed a few shots of sawdust before he'd damn near crawled back to the hotel and crashed on the chair for the first couple hours. At some point, he'd roused enough to at least kick off his shoes before dropping into bed.

Cooper glanced at the clock. Shit. He'd slept all day. Not that he was in any hurry. He didn't even know what the hell he was doing here. The fact that his brother was visiting with his girlfriend wasn't any reason to check himself into a hotel for the night. But then, it wasn't about getting away from his brother as much as it was getting closer to AJ.

Cooper cursed under his breath and turned away from his reflection, annoyed with himself. He turned the shower on, stepping under the purposely cold water to both wake up and get a grip on himself. He planned on going to the wedding only to make himself realize it was really over and to wish AJ the best with the lucky bastard. God knows he'd given her more than enough reasons to be miserable that she

deserved this.

Then what the hell are you doing here the day before?

He'd asked himself the same question a hundred times since he checked in last night. Then a few more times between every drink he chugged back wanting to forget that he'd pushed the best thing in his life right out of his arms. And two and a half years ago to boot.

Now AJ was marrying someone else.

His gut clenched, and he almost laughed. He'd been convinced that ugly feeling was nothing more than an ulcer left from his days as a cop too caught up in his work and an inch shy of burning out. Now he recognized it for what it was.

The thought of AJ spending the rest of her life with anyone but him left him sick to his stomach.

He finished showering and dried off, really regretting that last beer. Or was it three?

"Too little, too late," he grumbled under his breath. She was moving on. It was time he did too. His cop career was over. He and AJ were over. He needed to start fresh.

Feeling slightly more alert, Cooper strode back into the bedroom. He spotted the blond-haired man stretched out on the bed, surfing through the channels on the TV.

Cooper clutched the towel he'd been about to pitch back into the bathroom around his waist. *Great.*

"To what do I owe your unexpected visit?"

Eros, Greek god of love and desire, didn't take his eyes off the small screen. He cocked his head, trying to follow the movements of the naked couple on the low-budget film. He cringed.

Cooper arched a brow. "You ordered porn?"

Eros snorted, then pushed up, turning off the television with a wave of his hand. "I came to see my favorite descendant."

"Right," Cooper drawled. "It's Valentines Day. I'm sure there are about a hundred million people that need your company more than I do right now. Go play with your bow and arrow."

"Is it just me, or am I detecting a smidge of hostility today?" Eros

frowned. “Hangover, huh?”

“Yeah, and unless you’re going to,” Cooper snapped his fingers, “will it away or however you do that shit, let’s not talk about it.” He turned around, realizing the curtains were open. Cooper stalked across the carpet, his aching eyes and head thanking him the second he yanked the drapes shut.

“Why don’t you just tell her already?”

Cooper glared at him. “We’re not going there today, you got me?” It had only taken him a few visits—after Cooper figured out he really wasn’t crazy—to realize Eros didn’t tolerate wimps or ass kissers. The god came knocking when he was bored, not because he was looking to reward descendants he never expected with a better life.

Eros grinned. “Easy there, *Zeus*, and cool it with the castrating looks, or I’ll be willing away more than your hangover.”

Cooper snorted. The one thing he’d learned about his great-great-great-into-infinity grandfather since the ageless god had poofed into Cooper’s perfectly normal world a couple years ago, was the guy wouldn’t raise a hand to hurt his “descendants” as he liked to call them. Not unless they badmouthed Psyche. Then they were toast.

“I don’t know why you just don’t—”

“No,” Cooper growled. They’d been over this. Eros was not going to screw with AJ’s head or heart on this. No way. He’d done enough of that all on his own in the past.

Eros shrugged. “Suit yourself. But you’re fucking up here, you know that right?”

“Go bug my brother.”

Eros sighed. “He’s not nearly as much fun. Although I have to say, since you got shot, you’ve been a bit of a bore.”

Cooper let the reminder roll right off him, ignoring the stiffness that seemed to grip the muscles in his leg, following Eros’s comment. “I wasn’t such a bore last night.”

“Before or after you puked your guts out in the men’s bathroom that, by the way, didn’t even look fit enough to take a piss in. And I’ll piss just about anywhere.”

“How do you know about that?”

Eros crossed his arms. “Who do you think made sure you got back here in one piece?”

Cooper frowned, combing his memory, but coming up with nothing. He remembered the drinking. Lots and lots of drinking. And then the cab? And sleeping.

“You were a mess. And that scary dude, who you claimed had a third nipple, was ready to mop the floor with you.”

Ignoring the troublesome god, who derived far too much pleasure in the chaotic state of Cooper’s life, he headed for the closet. He paused, turned back. “I was in a fight?” Considering he hadn’t woke up with anything broken or aching aside from his head, that must have meant he won.

Cooper grinned.

With a sound of disgust Eros followed him to the closet. “You couldn’t even stand up by that point. I think you even threatened the guy with a swizzle stick.”

He would have groaned *if* he actually believed a word the god was saying. His weapon of choice would never have been a swizzle stick.

Eros pushed away from the closet. “I can see when I’m not being appreciated.”

“Like that’s meant anything to you before.”

“You’re a stubborn ass, you know that.”

“I think they call it genetics.”

Despite the fact that Cooper had been a total asshole for the duration of his visit, Eros grinned. “Sure you don’t want me to help you out with AJ?”

“No.”

Eros’s lips twitched.

“Don’t interfere,” Cooper warned, not trusting the mischievous glimmer in the god’s eyes.

“Or what?” In true Eros fashion, he vanished into thin air without waiting for a response.

“Eros?” Cooper snapped. “I mean it.”

The god didn't answer.

Perfect.

His ex was getting married, and he had a bored Greek god on his hands looking to stir up trouble. If he had a lick of sense, he'd go the hell home.

What's a girl to do when a sexy builder offers to be her tutor...in the bedroom?

A Handyman's Best Tool

© 2006 Alexis Fleming

Three times dumped for not being adventurous in bed, Beth-Ann Harris is ripe for a steamy affair. Particularly when the man in question is Riley Osborne—the same guy who once told Beth-Ann she'd never turned him on. Beth-Ann decides it's time to make Riley sit up and take notice. Problem is she didn't expect to find herself falling in love, a terrifying idea for a girl who equates love with giving up control.

Riley Osborne loves women, but after his parent's sorry attempt at marriage — and his own experience with a fiancée from hell—he'd be damn stupid to stick his head in that noose again. But that doesn't mean he can't play. When he arrives to fix Beth-Ann's ceiling and she asks if he's come to plug her hole, he quickly offers his services in the bedroom as well. It's all meant to be a bit of fun but before he knows it, he's committed and is demanding she make an honest man of him.

Will Beth-Ann be able to relinquish control enough to realize it's better to have a man handy than a handyman?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Handyman's Best Tool*:

"Open your legs a bit," he whispered.

"Riley, we can't—" She couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Can you honestly say this isn't a turn-on? To do this in public where the risk of getting caught is high?" He moved his fingers the slightest amount, eliciting a gasp from her.

"Bet I can make you come in public." He flicked his fingers again and a cheeky grin broke out on his face.

Beth-Ann was grateful for his humor. It helped to lighten the tension that arced between them. She needed a moment to regroup. Her grin matched his as she shook her head. "Can't be done," she crowed. "I have too much control to allow it to go that far."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Wanna bet?"

A gurgle of laughter escaped, abruptly cut off when he slid his hand down between her thighs. Throughout their banter, she'd relaxed the muscles in her upper legs and he'd taken immediate advantage.

Her thin panties were no barrier to his scalding touch as he ran the tip of his finger along her cleft. Without her brain giving the order, she widened her legs even more, allowing him greater access.

"You're already wet," he whispered as he leaned forward to shield her from anyone who might come too near. "I can feel the dampness through your panties. Right here." He fingered the crotch of her underwear, pushing the fabric against the heat of her pussy.

Beth-Ann's hips bucked. *Wet?* What an understatement. Her panties were so wet they were darn near soaked. Without conscious volition, she slid further down on the bench seat, her head drooping forward to rest on his chest.

As she dragged in a shaky breath and opened her mouth to speak, the scent of her desire mingled with the spicy tang of his aftershave. She snapped her mouth closed again. There wasn't a thing she could say. Her libido had taken over.

"Take them off."

She frowned as she tried to process his words. "Wha—"

"Your panties. Take them off."

"Here? I can't... Someone will see me." She lifted her head and stared at him, at the wicked glitter in his chocolate-brown eyes. The hangdog look, filled with longing, caught at her heart and drove rational thought from her mind.

"How?" She rolled her eyes at the husky croak that came out. Here she was with Riley Osborne willing to pleasure her and she couldn't even put a cohesive sentence together.

He slid his hand around behind her and hooked his fingers over the elastic. "Lift your ass," he said in a low voice, his gaze never wavering from hers.

When Beth-Ann complied, he slipped her underwear down beneath her. A gasp escaped as his knuckles brushed at the cheeks of her bottom. She'd never thought of that region as being erotic, but hot damn.

"Lay back a fraction."

Well, heck, she'd come this far. May as well go the rest of the way. She still maintained her control was rigid enough to avoid the final fulfillment, but she wasn't averse to a little playing around. Manual stimulation had a lot going for it. Besides, she was interested to see how far *he'd* go.

Her heart skipped a beat as he moved his hand across the slight swell of her stomach and inserted it under the front of her panties. His fingers tangled in her pubic curls and he gave a slight tug.

"You ready?"

Oh, yeah. It was impossible to verbalize her response, but she nodded so vigorously it was sheer dumb luck she didn't knock him out.

Quick as a wink, he slid her panties down her legs until they pooled at her feet. With the added advantage of his long reach, he bent beneath the table, snagged them up and stuffed them in his pocket. Beth-Ann blinked like a moronic bimbo, astounded that he had achieved it with so little fuss. No one appeared to have taken any notice at all.

She tried to even out her breathing, but he didn't give her the chance to come down. His hand settled over her mound and slid forward to cup her between the legs. With a groan, she collapsed back against the seat and let him have his way, because right at that moment, it was what she wanted, too.

"I was right," he whispered against her mouth.

He parted her labia and ran the tip of his finger along the length of her. Beth-Ann whimpered and tilted her hips. *Don't stop, please, don't stop.*

"You are so hot and wet, so ready for me," Riley said as he delved deeper, then dragged her creamy moisture up over her clit. "You want me in there, don't you?"

"God, yes, don't tease, Riley."

With a smile, he leaned down and nibbled at the outer edge of her mouth. "Teasing is good. It builds the tension."

"Much more tension and I'm going to shatter," she managed in a shaky voice.

"Oh, I'm going to make you shatter, darlin'. That's the whole point of the exercise."

Beth-Ann made a move to shake her head in denial, but all she could do was gasp as Riley covered her mound of springy curls and pressed his fingers down. When he slid one finger inside, she moaned and spread her legs even more.

"You feel that?" he murmured against her lips. "See how wet you are. I can smell your desire. You like me doing this, don't you?"

Without any direct command from her brain, her hips moved in time with the thrust of his finger. Her muscles clenched as she tried to drag him deeper. Lord, it wasn't enough. And it was too much. Fire gathered at his touch. Her heart raced, threatening to jump right out of her chest. Her eyelids drooped as her mind turned to soggy mush and her body took over.

"No, look at me, Beth-Ann. I want to know you're thinking only of me."

She couldn't believe how hard it was to focus. Where was her much-valued control now? She struggled to gain the upper hand. After all, she was supposed to be putting *him* on the spot. Her gaze fastened on his glittering brown eyes, she leaned forward and ran the tip of her tongue around his mouth before bathing his full bottom lip with wet strokes.

He groaned and when she pulled back and looked at him, she could have sworn his eyes had glazed over. She grinned, then released a gasp as he withdrew his finger and replaced it with two. Her hips bucked in response to the tightness, the stretch of her body. A shudder raced through her as he set up a steady pace. Thrust and withdraw, only to plunge deep again.

"Go for it, darlin'. No one can see you, and even if they could, think of the spice possible discovery adds to the scenario."

Beth-Ann forgot about anyone or anything else around her. Her body took up the rhythm, her hips angled to take him deep. It still wasn't

enough. She wanted more. Control forgotten, she clamped her hand on his wrist, pushing down so the friction was where she wanted it most.

Her breath gusted out in short pants, interspersed with soft moans she couldn't have prevented if she'd tried, and she was way beyond the point of trying. All she could do was feel, and trust Riley to be there for her when she fell.

Riley couldn't believe how responsive she was. He wasn't really into public displays of sexual excess, but damned if this wasn't the greatest turn-on he'd ever experienced. Beth-Ann held tight to his wrist and ground her hips against his hand in concert with the thrust of his fingers. Her thighs clamped around his hand as if she feared he'd pull away.

No chance in hell. It was a major effort to keep control of his body as she rode his hand. His cock was rock-hard, almost to the point of pain. He needed to sink himself into her heat, bury himself to the hilt and pound away at that delectable body. Small, but dynamite.

He wanted to slither down under the table and replace his hand with his mouth. Drink of all that fiery slickness, tease her clit until she screamed out his name, and to hell with the consequences.

Beth-Ann's eyes closed as the movement of her hips became more frenzied. Her long fingernails dug into the back of his hand. Her moans increased in volume and if he kept this up, everyone would definitely know what was going on in this darkened corner of the nightclub.

"Let go, Beth-Ann, I'll catch you," he whispered...

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