

The book cover features a close-up photograph of a person's hand and arm. The person is wearing a blue denim skirt with a frayed hem. Their hand is resting on their thigh, with the index finger pointing upwards. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green grass and foliage. The text is overlaid on the image in a clean, modern font.

Loose Id

MARILYN LEE

TAKING CHANCES

Nice
GIRLS DO

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Taking Chances 1: Falling for Sharde

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Taking Chances 1: Falling for Sharde is now available from Loose Id.

TAKING CHANCES 2: NICE GIRLS DO

Marilyn Lee

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Warning

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This book contains substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage).

Taking Chances 2: Nice Girls Do

Marilyn Lee

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Chapter One

The moment Clayton Frazier spotted Sharde Donovan standing in the airport terminal, what felt like a silly grin spread across his face. Having spent most of the plane ride from Florida to Philadelphia thinking about her, he felt almost as if he'd conjured her up. Quickening his pace, he reached her in moments. "Hi, honey!"

"Hi, Clay."

He caressed her cheek. "Why didn't you tell me you were meeting me?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

The smile that warmed her smooth, brown face didn't quite reach her dark eyes. Some of his delight dissipated. "Well, you've done that. Now tell me, am I going to like the reason you chose to surprise me?"

She caught his hand and leaned up to kiss him -- on the damn cheek. "Welcome back, Clay."

Recalling the taste of her full lips as she passionately returned his kisses the last time they'd seen each other several weeks earlier, her chaste kiss did not bode well for his hopes of their becoming friends with benefits.

The carryon bag hanging off his shoulder suddenly felt as if it weighed a couple of hundred pounds. Allowing the carryon to fall to the floor, he drew her into his arms.

She pressed her hands against his shoulders, turning her head to avoid his lips. "We need to talk, Clay."

He glanced down at her left hand. A diamond solitaire winked at him from her third finger. He released her. "Oh, shit, Sharde! You're going to marry the bonehead?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I love him." She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "I know you're disappointed, but please try to be happy for me, Clay."

The woman he'd wanted for himself was telling him she was going to marry a bonehead and he was supposed to be happy about it? He pulled his hand away from her and picked up his carryon. "He doesn't deserve you."

"Clay. Please." She reached for his hand again. "I know you believe that, but I love him."

"Does he love you?"

A radiant smile spread across her face and this time it reached her eyes. She nodded, squeezing his hand. "Oh, yes, Clay. He does. Isn't it wonderful?"

Looking into her dark eyes, aglow with happiness, he knew he was looking at the one that got away. Instead of pursuing her with the goal of landing her in his bed as his significant other, he had tried to play nice and be her friend first. And look where playing nice had landed him -- he'd lost a woman he'd been a breath away from falling in love with.

He narrowed his gaze. Whoever had said nice guys finished last, had known just what the hell he was talking about. No more Mr. Nice Guy for him. The next time he met a woman he wanted he was going to pursue her until she ended up in his bed. No more of this friends first shit.

She tugged at his hand. "Clay? Can we still be friends?"

He'd spent the last five weeks horny and celibate because he wanted to be able to tell her he hadn't been with anyone while he'd been visiting his parents in Jamaica. She'd clearly not been celibate and now she wanted to be friends? How the hell was he supposed to be friends with a woman he wanted so much he'd passed up countless opportunities to bed other women because none of them were her?

"Clay? Please?"

He wanted a shower, a drink, and lots of pussy ... from her. Besides, he already had one female friend. He raked a hand through his hair and pasted a smile on his face. "Friends, huh? With or without benefits?"

She gave him a cool, reproving stare. "Clay!"

He arched a brow. "I guess that's a without, huh?"

She nodded firmly.

He sighed. "Fine, but you tell that lucky boneheaded bastard that he'd better treat you right this time or I'll plant my size twelve foot so far up his ass, he'll --"

"Clay! Jeff and I have settled our differences. We're happy and in love. Can't you be happy for us?"

"Why the hell should I be happy for him?"

"For me then?"

He touched her cheek. "I wanted you for myself."

He watched a hint of rose stain her cheeks. She nodded. "I know and if it's any consolation, I wanted you too. You'll never know how close I came to ..."

"And now you think we can be friends?"

"I know it won't be easy ... but I ... I thought if we both wanted it ..."

"And bonehead is okay with this idea of our being friends?"

She grimaced and shook her head. "Not really."

"Really?" He grinned at her. "Then I'm all for anything that makes bonehead unhappy."

"Clay! His name is Jefferson."

"Whatever." He frowned. "Damn, Sharde. Are you sure you want to marry him?"

She nodded. "I'm very sure and very happy."

Damn it, but she did look happy. He nodded and bent to kiss her cheek. "Then congratulations and best wishes."

She hugged him, pressing her lips against the corner of his mouth. "Thanks, Clay." She drew back to stare up at him. "I know you're not happy, but you're not hurt ... are you? I'd hate to think I did anything to mislead you or hurt you in any way. If I did, I'm so sorry."

He'd known from the moment he first asked her out that she was probably in love with his chief business rival, Jefferson Calder. "There's no need for sorrow or regret on your part, Sharde. You've always been honest about your feelings for old bone ... ah, Calder. I'm a little more than disappointed at the moment, but I'm a big boy. I'll get over it."

He stroked her cheek. "Now. Do you come bearing a car or are we going to need a cab ... or is he waiting to snatch you away the moment you're finished delivering the bad news?"

"I drove here alone. I was hoping I could give you a lift."

If he had a quarter of the sense God gave him, he'd say goodbye to her, walk away, and never look back. "Sure. Let me get my bags."

"Okay." She gave him a relieved smile. "I'll go get the car and meet you outside."

"Okay." He watched her until she disappeared from sight before he went to pick up his luggage. *I hope you know what the hell you're doing trying to be friends with her, Clayton.*

Twenty minutes later, as they drove away from the airport, Sharde dropped her second bombshell. "Do you have any plans for this afternoon, Clay?"

He resisted the urge to tell her he'd planned to spend the afternoon fucking her. He kept his gaze on the highway ahead. "No. I'm just going to shower, have a drink, and relax. Why?"

"No reason."

"No reason?" He glanced at her profile before turning his gaze back to the highway. "I doubt that. Why are you interested in what I'm doing this afternoon?"

"No real reason. I just thought ..."

He waited several moments before he spoke again. "Yes? You thought?"

"Well, I know you like black women ..."

That was putting it mildly. He'd always preferred black women, especially after his first night with his best friend Cami. "And?"

"And I have a friend who just happens to be black, gorgeous, and single."

His lips tightened. "What's the matter, Sharde? Feeling so guilty for kicking my ass to the curb you now feel sorry and want to fix me up with your friend?"

She made a small, distressed sound. "Oh, Clay! I'm sorry. I --"

He shook his head and turned to look at her. "No! You have no reason to be sorry. I'm the one who should be sorry for being a jackass. You never lied to or deceived me."

She cast a quick look at him. "I am sorry, Clay."

"Don't be. You have a right to be happy without thinking it's at my expense. I'm just so damned grouchy because I'm horny as hell. I need some pussy." He arched a brow. "I don't suppose you're feeling sorry enough to give me some, are you?"

"Clayton! No!"

Watching the hint of color rush to her cheek, he laughed and patted her thigh. "Don't have a stroke. I was just teasing ... and testing your resolve."

"It's very solid."

"Lucky bonehead."

"Clay --"

"Yes. I know. His name is Jefferson."

She nodded, her shoulders relaxing. "So about this friend of mine. She's divorced and not interested in anything serious right now."

"And?"

"And she wouldn't be averse to a strictly sexual relationship."

"Really? Well I'll keep her in mind."

"Don't you want to meet her? She'll be going away on a business trip soon, but I can probably get you two together this afternoon."

Her persistence surprised him. She really must feel guilty. "And this black, gorgeous friend of yours dates white men?"

"Well ... not exactly, but I'm sure Darbi would go out with you if you asked her."

"At the moment, I want sex, not a date. And I have no interest or inclination to waste time and energy pursuing a woman who doesn't date white men."

"I admit you might have to do a little chasing, but she'd be worth the effort."

"Hmmm."

"I wish you'd reconsider, Clay."

"Why?"

"I know the two of you could be good together. She's very nice."

"Really? Well, as I said, I'm not that interested in dating a nice girl who doesn't. I'm more interested in a not so nice girl who does."

"There are some nice girls who do, Clay and Darbi has a lot of ..."

"What? Problems? Lovers? What?"

She shook her head. "I can't say more without revealing her confidence, but I know the two of you would be great together."

"And this Darbi is ..."

"Darbi Raymond."

"She works for bonehead?"

"Clay!"

He smiled. "Calder. That better?"

"Yes and she's very nice."

"Listen, I appreciate your concern, but I really am capable of landing my own lovers."

"I know, but I just hate the thought of you being sexually frustrated."

"You hate it? Imagine how I feel."

Her lips twitched and she laughed. After a moment, he joined in.

"So can I introduce you two?"

"No."

She sighed. "If you change your mind, Clay, I --"

"Let it drop, Sharde."

"Fine."

Still smiling, he settled back in his seat and closed his eyes. Once he'd had some pussy he'd be more inclined to view her reconciliation with Calder in a less tragic light. Maybe then the two of them could be friends. But first things first. He needed to see Cami. As selfish as it was, he hoped she was between lovers at the moment.

Forty-five minutes later, after sweeping Sharde into his arms and pressing a long, last, greedy kiss against her sweet lips, he said good-bye to her, and walked into his Center City condo. Noting the message indicator on the answering machine in the front hall blinking, he sighed. He had four messages.

He decided the messages could wait, but a shower couldn't. In the master bedroom of his three-bedroom condo, he kicked off his shoes. The phone rang. Ignoring it, he sat down to remove his socks. Rising he removed the rest of his clothes as listened to his answering machine greeting.

Hi. I'm not home. Leave a message.

He was at the door of the adjoining bathroom when he heard his mother's frantic voice.

"Clayton? Clayton, if you're home, please pick up. Clayton, please! This is important."

Frowning, he quickly crossed the bedroom to pick up the cordless phone on his night table. "Mom? What's wrong?"

"Oh, thank God, I got you, Clayton."

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"It's Amber. You have to talk to her, Clayton."

Amber. He'd noticed a marked and unpleasant change in her during his visit to Jamaica. He sighed and sat on the side of his bed. "Who does she owe money to now?"

"I wish it was just a case of her owing money. This time she's gotten herself in a big mess. You'd better sit down, Clayton."

Shit. Just what he needed -- bailing Amber out of another damned mess. "What's going on, Mom?"

"She wasn't happy when I insisted she had to go to the States. She'll be staying with you until we can figure out how to handle this."

"Handle what? And why can't she stay with Damien?"

"She needs her big brother now more than ever, Clayton."

He frowned, annoyed by the censure he heard in her voice. "Damien's her big brother too."

"Yes, but he doesn't have a spare bedroom."

Lucky bastard. No spare bedroom meant not having to take Amber in when she got herself into yet another mess that his mother couldn't deal with and Xavier refused to admit was a problem.

"Besides, he has no patience. He seems to forget the messes he had to be bailed out of. Don't get me started on your brother's selfish streak, Clayton."

He raked a hand through his hair, recalling the good old days when he'd been an only child. Amber would be starting Harvard in September. She'd want to spend at least a month shopping for new clothes so he'd only have her in his hair for two months or so.

"When is she arriving, Mom, and what's wrong?"

* * * * *

After calming his mother down, he called Cami. "Hi, honey. It's Clay."

A woman with a warm, island voice answered. "Clayton! How lovely to hear from you. How are you?"

"So-so. You?"

"Fairly well. How is the family ... your parents ... Amber ... Damien?"

"Amber is Amber, but everyone else is fine. Your family?"

"Great."

"Good. Are you free this afternoon?"

"I'm always free to spend a few hours with you, Clay. Come whenever you like."

"Can I bring you anything?"

Cami hesitated. "Is Damien seeing anyone?"

"I don't think so. Why do you ask?"

"No special reason. I was just wondering. I haven't seen him in a while."

"He's had his hands full keeping Fra-Tech on track while I've been in Jamaica."

"Of course."

"So, do you need me to bring anything?"

"Just bring that big, hard dick of yours. I'll supply lots of condoms, the lube, the warm, wet, willing pussy, and the tight ass."

He felt a surge of lust, tempered by affection. He loved that Cami never played games or pretended not to enjoy sex. On his sixteenth birthday, the eighteen-year old Cami had given him his first taste of brown sugar. After a hot, two-year love affair, they'd decided they were not in love and became friends. During the last fifteen years, they'd developed a closer friendship with occasional benefits.

He fondled his cock. "You're making me hot."

She laughed. "Don't play with yourself, Clay. Save your lust for me."

He laughed and released his cock. "I'll see you soon."

"I'll be waiting, Clay."

His thoughts on Cami, he called Damien and warned him of Amber's impending visit. "As you know, I'll be heading out for the West Coast Job Fair, so it will be your job to look after her while I'm gone."

Damien swore. "Why the hell can't she get her act together, Clay?"

He arched a brow. "If memory serves, you didn't begin to get yours together until you were twenty-three or four and then you only got it together after I threatened to kick your ass if I had to bail you out of one more mess."

"That's ancient history, Clay."

"I wouldn't call six or seven years ancient, Damien. Anyhow, I just called to give you a heads up. She's your responsibility until I return from the West Coast."

"Come on, Clay. You just got back from a five-week vacation. Why don't you take her to L.A. with you?"

"No way! She's yours until I return."

"Shit!"

He smiled. "Yeah, well, you know what they say about shit -- it happens."

"Thanks. You're a big help."

"I try."

"And you succeed. What are your plans for the day?"

"I'm going to shower and then I'm going to see Cami."

"Cami? What about what's her name? Sharde?"

He frowned. "Long story made short, she's engaged. I need some pussy so I'm going to see Cami."

"Yeah? I haven't seen her for a while. Maybe I'll come with you."

Three years earlier, he'd learned Damien and Cami had become friends with benefits as well. His initial annoyance had vanished when Cami had invited them both over for a night of lust. First he and Damien had taken turns on the bed with her, until, while Clay was balls deep in her pussy, she'd invited Damien to fuck her ass. Things had gotten wild after that.

Although he and Damien had never dated the same woman, somehow sharing a sexual relationship with Cami, a woman they both cared about, seemed natural.

He shook his head. "The hell you will. I am not in the sharing mood."

"Want all that sweet, dark loveliness for yourself, huh?"

Sweet, dark loveliness? That did describe Cami. "Yes!"

"Look, like you and Cami, I'm between lovers. Why don't I give you and Cami an hour or so together and then we do a threesome?"

Clay hesitated, and then struggled. "Make it two hours alone and then, if it's okay with her, it's okay with me."

"I'll call her."

"You do that, but see that you don't get there first, Damien," he warned. "I need lots of pussy and if I arrive and find you fucking her, I will kick your half-white ass all the way back to Jamaica."

"Who the hell are you calling half-white? I'm black, Clay. Got it?"

He shook his head. Most of the time, Damien's skin was paler than his. His younger brother's insistence on embracing his black heritage exclusively, despite his pale skin, straight, dark hair, and green eyes, had always annoyed the hell out of their father. "Tell that to Dad."

"I have, but you white people are so damned touchy and Dad's no exception."

Clay laughed and hung up.

Three hours later, he lay between the long, dark legs of a pretty, passionate woman, who moaned with desire and raked her long nails down his back as she came around his thrusting cock.

After she lay quiet under him, keeping his cock in her pussy, he rolled them over. He lay on his back with her on top, still impaled on him. "All right?" he asked softly, stroking his hands over her ass.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. She brushed her lips against his. "Do you know your dick feels better every time we fuck?"

He smiled and slapped her ass. "Ditto for your pussy."

"Hmmm." She rubbed her big, warm breasts against his chest. "You're just saying that because it's true."

He laughed and licked her lips. Lord, he loved a sexually confident woman.

She lifted her upper body and glanced over her shoulder. "So? Are you going to stand there all afternoon playing with that big, delicious dick of yours, handsome, or are you going to come join the party?"

Damien, naked and aroused, pushed himself away from the closed bedroom door, and crossed the room to the bed. He picked up the lube lying on the nightstand and got on the bed.

Grinding herself on Clay's cock, she reached back to part her ass cheeks. "Lube me up, gorgeous, bring your tight ass and your big, sugar dick over here, and shove it deep up my ass."

Moments later, with Damien kneeling between their legs, Cami moaned against Clay's lips as Damien thrust his entire cock into her ass with one hard movement.

Damien reached between their bodies and cupped his hands over Cami's breasts. He lifted her slowly until Clay's cock slipped out of her pussy and she knelt on the bed, grinding her ass against Damien's groin. She leaned back against him, linking her arms over his shoulders and around his neck. "Oh, yes, Damien, your cock feels so good ... as if it was made just for my ass."

"It was." Damien slipped a hand down her body to stroke her pussy, closed his eyes, and groaned softly as he gently fucked her. "Oh, damn, Cami, I've been dreaming about you and this big, black ass of yours for weeks."

"Why didn't you call me, gorgeous? You know this ass is yours anytime you want it ... anytime at all."

"That's all the time."

Sighing in resignation, Clay rolled onto his side. He rose and discarded the condom he clearly would have no further need of. Leaving them alone, he walked into the adjoining bathroom.

When he returned to the bedroom after a fifteen-minute shower, Damien lay on his back on the bed. Cami sprawled between his legs. Clay could see the clear outline of Damien's cock against one of her cheeks.

As he dressed, he watched her suck Damien's cock with a heat and hunger that made him hard again. When Damien clamped his hands over the back of her head and came, she kept her lips over him, swallowing his cum.

Damien groaned and lay against the bed.

Cami released his cock and rose onto her knees. She turned to look at Clay, her dark brown eyes glowing, and a satisfied smile on her lips. "Are you leaving?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She walked across the room and looked up at him. "Why?"

"This feels like three's a crowd."

She glanced at Damien before looking up at him again. "I hope you don't mind."

He shook his head slowly. "No."

"Good." She smiled and kissed the corner of his mouth. "Drive safely," she told him and climbed back on the bed to lie between Damien's legs.

Damien was still aroused and Clay watched in dismay as she lifted her hips, pressed Damien's bare cock against her slit, and sank down on it, driving it up into her pussy.

"Oh, my God, you have the sweetest dick in existence, you gorgeous boy."

Instead of protesting, Damien wrapped his arms around her waist and rolled her onto her back. "That's what I'm thinking about your pussy, baby. This has got to be the sweetest, tightest, juiciest cunt ever."

"And it's all yours, handsome."

"That's what I want to hear." He kissed her as he began fucking her hard and fast, thrusting his cock in her with all the hunger of a man discovering the joys of fucking for the first time.

Disturbed that they were having unprotected sex, Clay turned and left them alone. The sounds of their combined moans and groans filled his ears as he let himself out of her apartment.

Chapter Two

"You look tired. Didn't you get a chance to rest after your flight yesterday, Clayton?"

Clay sat back in his seat, flexing his shoulder muscles. He studied the woman seated in one of the two black leather chairs in front of his desk. With her smooth, clear, dark chocolate skin and dark, warm eyes, at fifty-nine, Betty Johns was one of the most important people in his world. Having been with Fra-Tech, the electronics company he chaired, and a family friend for nearly twenty-five years, she was far more than an executive assistant.

She had been the one constant in his life during the turbulent years before his parents openly began dating other people. During that time, she had been his father's secretary.

When he had been sent to school in England, she had moved there to be near him and became like a second mother to him. He told her things he'd never even shared with Cami. Although Cami would never break a confidence, when he felt battered and bruised, seeking Betty out felt natural. While his mother was loving and always willing to listen, she was overly emotional and too prone to panic and cry when either he or Amber had a problem. Betty, on the other hand, while also being loving, rarely allowed her emotions to control her.

He could tell her anything, but since she had never approved of his and Damien's shared relationship with Cami, he decided not to mention having seen Cami the day before. He shrugged. "I'll be all right. I just need a few days to get acclimated to being home again.

"It feels like we've just spent months implementing upgrades Damien and I are confident will expedite our expansion to the West Coast." He sighed. "You know the only company standing in the way is Calder Technologies."

"We outbid them last year to win that multimillion-dollar government contract and we can do it again."

"We were lucky to --"

She shook her head, running a hand over her short, natural hair. "Luck had nothing to do with it, Clay. You and everyone in this company worked long, hard hours for that contract. We earned that contract."

He nodded. "You're right, but the Calder Tech people are formidable competitors."

"Yes they are, but we beat them once, we'll do our best to do it again."

He wasn't so sure he shared Betty's confidence. He shrugged. "Maybe so, but if we're going to make a run at that and continue with our expansion plans, I think we both need a break. Now that Damien's on board, we can leave everything in his hands for a bit."

Betty was a workaholic and he was pleased when she nodded. "I think you're right. I think I'll head to the Islands for a week or so. What about you? How did your vacation go?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "You know how things are. The two weeks I spent with Dad and Velva were fine. The last three weeks with Mom, Xavier, and Amber were anything but. I'm feeling a little stressed." He smiled suddenly. "It's time I played a little."

"You're going to need to head west soon," she warned.

He nodded. "I know. You'll oversee all the arrangements?"

"Yes. What about you?"

He grinned. "I'm going to find some luscious lovely to occupy me."

"This Sharde ... did she hurt you?"

"I wanted her more than I've wanted anyone else in a very long time, but I'm a big boy. I know when it's time to move on and I'll be doing that with my heart still in one piece."

She sighed. "I'm glad to hear that. Do you have anything lined up?"

He shook his head. "No. I'll just play it by ear."

"You know, Clay, if you settled down with one woman --"

He held up a hand. "When I meet someone I want to settle down with, I will."

"Will you? Clay, most men are married with growing kids in their early to mid thirties."

"I'm not most men and I have no desire to marry, but I will settle down and have kids one of these days."

She sighed. "Okay. End of lecture."

He rose, stretching and rolling his shoulders. He walked around his desk, put his hands on her shoulders, and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Have a great time in Jamaica. And if you need anything ..."

She looked up at him. "I know, Clay. I'll call."

"And I'll drop everything and come."

She smiled and patted his hand on her shoulder. "I know that too. You have a good time."

He straightened. Now that he had decided how to spend the next few days before his West Coast trip, he felt more relaxed. "Oh, I plan to."

* * * * *

"We went to a lot of trouble and expense and, trust me, girl, you are going to enjoy this whether you like it or not. Period. So get used to the idea."

Darbi Raymond sighed and looked at the women seated in the two chairs opposite her desk. The dark, smooth face of each one bore a determined look. When Jadan and Willow were on a mission, they were nearly impossible, but she was just as resolute.

"Look, you both know I appreciate your concern, but I'm leaving for L.A. tonight and I don't have time for ..." She glanced at the fancy red envelope on her desk.

Jadan rolled her eyes. "Look, it's time you had some fun, Darbi." She glanced at the envelope and smiled. "And trust me, you'll have more than a little fun with him."

Darbi arched a brow. "Have you and he ...?"

Jadan shook her head. "I've never had the pleasure of having Sarro dance for me alone, but trust me, he is hot with a capital H, girl." She looked at Willow, who placed a hand against her chest and pretended to swoon.

Darbi smiled, glanced at her watch, and rose. "I hate to rush you, but I really have to get going if I'm going to make my plane tonight."

As Jadan and Willow rose, Darbi picked up the red envelope and offered it to first Jadan and then to Willow. Both of her friends smiled and left her office silently, closing the door behind them.

Darbi hesitated and then opened the envelope. The card inside read,

"The bearer is entitled to a private, romantic evening with exotic dancer Sarro."

For a moment, Darbi stared at the card, allowing her thoughts free rein. She hadn't been on a date in over three years. It might be nice to spend a few hours with a sexy, exotic dancer. She moistened her lips. Maybe he'd even give her a lap dance. And just maybe --

She gave an angry shake of her head. She did not have time to surrender to lust. Once she had completed the West Coast trip successfully, there might be time to get horny and laid. Even then, after a broken marriage and two bad relationships, she'd decided to embrace a second virginity until she met a man who was ready to make a firm commitment to her. If she could manage that, she was confident the incessant need she felt to be loved would be suppressed. Love hurt, but passion, fueled by commitment, would be something she could be content, if not happy with.

Later that afternoon, while trying to work on the flight to L.A., Darbi found her thoughts wandering to the envelope she'd left on her desk. Left on her desk. She closed her eyes briefly. Left on her desk for anyone who had occasion to have to go into her office to find and read.

Oh, well. Abandoning thoughts of fine-tuning her presentation, she turned off her laptop. Putting it in the overhead luggage rack, she sat back in her seat, closed her eyes, allowing her thoughts to turn back to the red envelope.

She sighed. Jadan was probably right. She had been too long without sensual contact with a man. Her sexual toys notwithstanding, she did miss the feel and weight of a lover's body lying on and against hers. There was nothing quite like lying in bed on her stomach with her hands curled into fists as a big, hard, ebony cock plowed in and out of her pussy or her ass ... after she'd sucked it to get it nice and hard.

Cock. Lord, she wanted some cock. She moistened her lips and wished she were alone with her favorite toy pressed against her clit as she fantasized about a real fuck with a real live man ... a man who would eat her pussy and suck her breasts and get her so hot she was nearly ready to come with the first stroke of his cock.

Her pussy ached and her cheeks burned as she fantasized what Sarro would look like. Since Jadan and Willow knew she liked her men tall, dark, and well hung, he would look like Boris Kodjoe, have a Denzel Washington smile, the swagger and self-confidence of Wesley Snipes, and a big, hard, pussy-stretching and pleasing dick like her ex, Martin.

Although having Martin dump her for another woman had hurt, what she missed most about him was his big, hard, wicked cock. Recalling the pleasure he had dispensed with that bad boy sent a rush of heat down her spine. With her entire body aching for fulfillment, she knew she'd been a fool not to accept Jadan and Willow's gift of a few hours with this Sarro.

How was she supposed to stay celibate when just the thought of sex made her so hot? She rose and made her way to the restroom. Inside, she leaned against the door, taking slow, deep breaths. *Get a grip, girl. There's nothing you can do about sex now, but when you get home, you are getting laid.* She nodded. After she'd been laid, she'd decide if this second virginity thing was worth another try.

She returned to her seat and forced herself to work until they arrived at LAX. In the cab on the way to her hotel, she called Sharde and asked her to move the envelope off her desk.

"What shall I do with it?"

She hesitated. "Toss it."

"Are you sure, Darbi? If you don't mind my saying so, you could stand to ... unwind a little."

She cast her gaze ceiling ward. "Okay. Keep it and I'll decide what to do with it when I return."

"Okay. Have a good trip."

"Thanks." She slipped her cell phone in her shoulder bag and sank back against her seat. She closed her eyes and allowed her thoughts to dwell on sex until she arrived at the hotel.

It seemed to take an eternity to check in and get into her room. Finally, after tipping the bell cap, Darbi closed and locked her hotel room door. Her thoughts still on sex, she stripped down to her thong and bra. Usually when she traveled, fearful of having her sex toys discovered by airport security, she'd been using her electric shaver to relieve her sexual tension. This trip, she'd removed the batteries, and brought along some of her favorite toys in her carry on luggage.

She took the oversized cosmetic bag from her luggage, spread several items on the bed, replaced the batteries in both devices, fiddled with the stereo system until she located a smooth jazz station, and then lay on the cool sheets with her legs parted.

She lubed the medium sized, ebony vibrator, turned it on low, and pressed it against her thong over her clit. After several moments, when she felt a nice buzz, she turned the vibrator to medium, removed the thong, and sighed in anticipation as she slowly moved the head along the length of her slit. She rotated her hips and eased her breasts out of her bra. She touched the head against her clit. A tingle danced down her spine.

Moaning softly, she eased several inches between her wet folds and into her aching pussy. Not satisfied, she slid the entire shaft inside. Reaching down to the base, she turned it to high and rolled onto her stomach.

With the vibrator buried in her pussy, she rubbed her hands over her nipples until they hardened. Then, thrusting her hips down onto the vibrating cock, she began to fuck her pussy onto the shaft. She felt a different type of tension building in her as she attempted to thrust herself to an orgasm.

Although the vibrator created a pleasant tingle in her pussy, the orgasm she longed for eluded her. She needed additional stimulation. She rolled onto her back and sat up, using her internal muscles to keep the vibrator buried in her cunt. Picking up a tube of anal ease lying on the bed, she coated the remaining vibrator. Turning onto her side, she pressed the tip against her anus.

As the tip penetrated her, she turned the vibrator to medium. Then, she slid onto her back. She pushed her hips down, slowly forcing the entire slender, ebony vibrator up into her body.

Oh, yeah. With her pussy and ass filled, she sighed. Now that felt very nice. She rolled back onto her stomach. Closing her eyes, she slowly fucked herself on the vibrator in her pussy. Reaching back, she grasped the handle of the anal vibrator and moved it in and out of her ass.

The pleasant buzz continued in her body, but a climax still eluded her. After several, long, frustrating minutes, she moaned. "Oh, damn!" Her toys, usually so reliable, just weren't getting the job done. "I need a real dick."

"Funny you should mention that. I was just lying in the tub there thinking my hand was okay, but I needed some pussy. You need cock. Will this one do?" a deep, masculine voice asked.

Darbi gasped and bolted into a sitting position, heat rushing up into her cheeks. She must have left the door unlocked. She glanced towards the door, expecting to see the bell cap. Quickly noting the closed door, she frowned. The voice must have come from the stereo.

“Over here.”

Her head snapped around, her gaze moving wildly around the room. She turned her attention towards the door she assumed led into the bathroom and gasped again.

A man stood in the doorway. He looked as if he were well over six feet tall, was well built, and breathtakingly handsome. He had piercing, I-can-fuck-you- hard-and-often-green eyes, short, dark hair silvering at the temples, and a tan so deep his skin looked almost honey bronze.

He had wide shoulders. A light sprinkling of dark hair covered his chest, thinned over his washboard abs, before growing thick and vibrant at his groin. Her attention was drawn to the cock protruding in front of his taut body. Fully erect, it was huge, boasting both a length and width to rival Martin's monster cock. Like Martin's, the head of this cock was helmeted and looked eager to conquer every pussy in sight.

She met the deep, green gaze of the stranger and, inexplicably, her fear vanished. The vibrators still pulsing in her ass and pussy were forgotten as her gaze was drawn back to the handsome hunk's groin. Oh, damn. “Whoever said white men had small dicks lied,” she whispered in a shameless voice. “God, you're long and thick.”

A smile curved the man's face. “But whoever said once you go black, you never go back didn't.”

She sucked in a breath, deciding it was time she stopped thinking with her pussy. She removed the vibrator from her pussy, turned it off, and then rolled onto her side to remove the one from her ass. Turning that off as well, she slid off the bed. She snatched her dress off the floor near the bed, and backed towards the entrance door. “Who are you and what are you doing in my room?”

“There's no need to be alarmed. Nothing is going to happen between us that you don't want.”

“Great. Now what are you doing naked in my room?”

Allowing his gaze to move over her body, he slowly rolled a condom over his cock. He arched a brow. “Your room? There has apparently been a mix up because this is my room.” He had a deep, warm, sexy voice that sent shivers of lust down her spine. “I checked in half an hour ago and was lying in the tub with blue balls when I realized someone was in here. Imagine my surprise when I looked into the room and saw you lying on the bed in all your dark, luscious glory.”

About to step into her dress, she paused and looked at him. Dark, luscious glory? He sounded as if he had a thing for black women. "Your room? This must be some mistake. My keycard opened this door."

"As did mine."

She frowned. "I travel a lot, but I've never had such a mix up."

"Neither have I, which must mean someone up there saw two lonely people in need and did something about it."

She considered him in silence. Jadan and Willow had expressed an unusual interest in her travel plans. They had both seemed so pleased with themselves as they saw her off at the airport. Had they had something to do with this room mix up?

"So now that I'm here and you're here ... what do you want to do about it?"

With her gaze on his shaft, Darbi knew exactly what she wanted to do about the mix up. She wanted to be lying on the bed on her back with him sprawled between her legs, slowly feeding the big, bad boy hanging between his legs into her wet, aching pussy. She hesitated and then spoke quickly before she could lose her courage. "Does this answer your question?" She allowed her dress to drop onto the carpet at her feet. She unhooked her bra and tossed that down as well. Her thong followed.

"I think so, but are you sure?"

"Oh, yes." Her cheeks burning at her shameless behavior, she stood naked and aroused before him. "I've never been surer of anything."

His dark, green gaze moved slowly over a face she knew most men found attractive. Her nipples tightened when he looked at her breasts. Although no longer as firm as they used to be, they were large with wide areoles and nipples that extended nearly an inch in length when she was aroused, as she now was.

His gaze brushed quickly over her belly before lingering on the dark triangle of hair between her legs. With her pussy flooded with moisture and his erect cock covered with a condom, there was little doubt that they were going to fuck.

So he might as well see all of her. She turned away from him, glancing over her shoulder as his green eyes raked over her rear. Along with her breasts, she was most proud of her ass, which was big, round, without reaching buffalo size. She'd never encountered a lover who didn't love to hold, spank, and fuck her ass.

Turning to face him again, she allowed her gaze to linger on his big, thick dick. The uniform tan, including his dick, clearly indicated that he sunbathed in the nude. His cock was so tanned it might almost belong to the ebony hunk about whom she'd been fantasizing.

"Well?"

"Damn." He raised his gaze to hers. "You have a beautiful body, but your face isn't pretty."

She flushed. "I ... I ..." She bent to snatch up her dress to hold against her breasts and pussy.

He moved across the room to stand in front of her. He took the dress from her hands and tossed it on the floor. Cupping her face between his palms, he stared down into her eyes. "It's gorgeous."

Relieved, she smiled up at him, pleased that he thought her more than pretty.

He rubbed his thumb over her lips. "You put the beautiful in big, beautiful woman."

"That's sweet."

"So is my cock."

"That's what I'm counting on."

"Oh, I love a sexually liberated woman." He moved his hands from her face. The feel of his hands cupping and massaging her breasts nearly made her come. She inched her lower body forward until she felt that monster cock pressing against her belly. When sufficiently aroused, she had very few sexual inhibitions.

With her pussy aching, she reached down and closed her fingers over his hard, warm flesh. She cupped her other hand under his balls. They were big and heavy. "I want you to come in me."

"Come in you? What do you mean, come in you?"

She gently squeezed his balls and smiled when he groaned. Gazing up into his eyes, she removed the condom.

He stiffened and his eyes narrowed, but he remained silent.

Rubbing her breasts against his chest, she slowly slid the head of his dick along the length of her slit. He shuddered and she moaned at the contact. "That's nice, but I want more."

He stared down at her, his green gaze dark with desire.

"I want to feel you inside me with nothing between us."

He shook his head. "That's a charming invitation, but I'll have to pass on it."

"It's been nearly seven years since I had unprotected sex with my ex. How long has it been for you?"

"About fourteen years, but --"

"Then when you come, I want it to be inside me." She massaged his balls and eased the big head of his dick between her wet slit. "I want you to shoot every drop of cum deep in my pussy to put out the fire there."

He cupped her breasts in his hands. He eased his hips forward then stopped with several inches of cock lodged in the opening of her pussy. He slid his big hands over her back to cup her ass. "You're beautiful and so damn sexy, just looking at your large, lovely, dark

body makes me want to come, but trust me when I tell you I don't need a bare cock to fully satisfy you and make you melt with lust for me.”

“But I want --”

He pressed a finger against her lips. “I promise you won't mind the condom. Even wearing one, I'll make you come again and again.”

She nodded, trembling with anticipation. She'd never felt hornier. His voice was so sexy and his dick so big, she suspected it wouldn't take more than a few deep thrusts to make her start gushing like a geyser. “You're right. Of course we have to use a condom. I just lost my head for a moment. It's been so long ... of course we'll use a condom.”

He smiled and stroked his fingers through her folds. “You're already so wet.”

“Yes. So ... just fuck me already, won't you?”

He inserted several fingers inside her. “Damn, I love a woman who isn't afraid to admit she wants to be fucked.”

She placed her hand over his and pushed his fingers deep into her. “I want to be fucked over and over ... in my pussy ... up my ass ... in my mouth. I want to feel your cock everywhere.”

“There's nothing sexier than a beautiful, naked, black woman with a wet pussy and a candid lust for my cock.” He flicked his tongue against her nipples. “I'll be right back.”

She licked her lips and nodded.

He walked across the room and disappeared into the bathroom.

Chapter Three

When he appeared in the bathroom doorway a few minutes later, another condom covered his cock.

He'd been gone long enough for Darbi to begin to have second thoughts. She'd put her toys away and stood by the bed with her dress pressed against her body, wondering what the hell had gotten into her. For the love of God, she'd offered to allow him to fuck her without a condom! Offered? She'd begged for it. Thank God he'd had more sense and restraint than she had.

Now she just needed to find a tactful way to tell him she'd changed her mind. She closed her eyes briefly. *God, please don't let him go ballistic on me.*

He stood in the doorway. Their gazes met and locked. After several moments, he crossed the room to her. He took the dress from her and tossed it onto the floor. He tipped up her chin. "Having second thoughts?"

She sucked in a breath and then sank her teeth in her bottom lip.

He brushed his hand against hers in a gesture she found strangely reassuring. "If you are, it's okay."

Her quick acceptance of his word surprised her. "It is? Are you sure?"

"I'm not going to lie and say I'm not aching to sleep with you, but I'm a man, not a boy. I can control myself if you've changed your mind." He smiled. "Mind you, my balls will probably be permanently blue, but I'll abide by your decision." He caressed her cheek. "Have you?"

Relieved that he wouldn't freak out on her, she took a deep breath, and then spoke in a rush, "No."

He searched her gaze. "You're sure? I want you so much I can almost taste my need, but I want you to be very sure. You don't need to feel pressured because I'm here in front of you -- hard as a rock and horny as hell."

She laughed and any lingering doubts vanished. "I'm very sure. I want you too -- now."

"Then let's make love."

She blinked at him. Make love? It had been years since anyone -- Martin -- had made love to her. Her two lovers since her divorce had fucked her, but never made love to her. She doubted the man with her was interested in anything more than a quick fuck, but she was touched he cared about her feelings enough to pretend.

"Yes. Let's."

Cupping her face between his palms, he bent his head. She closed her eyes and felt his mouth brushing lightly against hers. That first touch of his lips sent a coil of heat into her belly. She placed her palms against his chest and leaned into him, parting her lips.

Releasing her face, he cupped one hand behind her head. Slipping his other arm around her waist, he peppered her lips with a series of long, warm kisses that had her arching her back and pressing her breasts against his chest within minutes.

As he deepened his kisses, the coil in her belly tightened. With desire spreading through her, she linked her arms around his neck and sucked eagerly at the tongue he flicked between her lips.

He continued to kiss her as he stroked his hands down her back. When she felt his big palms caressing her butt, she moaned. Eager for him to penetrate her and put out the sensual fire burning inside her, she moved her hips against his. She did it with a slow deliberation so that she could savor the feel of the thick length pulsing between their bodies.

He sucked in his breath and dragged his mouth from her lips. She opened her eyes and stared up at him. His green eyes blazed with desire. He took her hand in his. "Let's get in bed."

Her knees shook as she pushed the covers back and climbed onto the bed. He got in beside her and urged her from her side onto her back. Lying on his side, facing her, he caressed her breasts, rubbing his thumb over her nipples.

She shuddered. "Hmmm."

He stroked his big, warm hands down over her stomach.

She caught her breath, waiting for the moment when he touched her pussy.

He paused with his hand lying over the top of her pubic hair. She turned her head and looked at him, her lips parted in a wordless plea for him to continue and touch her most intimate body part.

He leaned over her and pressed a slow, warm kiss against her mouth. "Part those long, beautiful legs of yours for me, sweetheart. I want to lie between them while I make love to you."

He whispered the words against her lips in a deep, husky voice that made the muscles in her stomach clench and sent a flood of desire through her. "Yes. Oh, yes." Her heart racing, she eagerly spread her legs.

He stroked his hand down her pubic hair to her slit. Still on his side, he pressed his lips behind her ear, as he explored her with his fingers.

Unable to contain herself, she moaned and closed her legs, imprisoning his fingers inside her body.

He laughed softly and nipped at her ear lobe. "You're wet and ready."

"Yes!"

"So am I. Part your legs again, sweetheart."

She did.

He removed his fingers and kneeled between her thighs, staring down at her.

As if they had a mind of their own, her hips jerked upward. "Please."

"Touch me," he whispered. "Show me how much you want me."

She reached out a trembling hand to touch his muscular thigh.

"A little to the middle," he teased. Taking her hand in his, he pressed it against his cock.

Sucking in a breath, she closed her fingers around him. Lifting her butt, she pressed him against her slit. "Now ... please."

"Now," he echoed and eased his hips forward.

A flutter of intense pleasure flooded her as the head of his cock slipped between her folds and lodged just inside her. "Ooh."

Settling between her legs, he drove his hips down, easing his full length into her.

She shivered and closed her eyes as ripples of pleasure danced along her nerve endings. It had been so long since she'd been with a man with a cock whose length and width were so satisfying. "Yes ... oh, God, yes. I want all of you inside me ... every hard, thick inch."

When they were groin to groin, he rested his weight on her. He lay motionless in her for several moments. "You feel good, sweetheart. So good."

She opened her eyes and found him staring down at her. Smiling, she slipped her arms around him and held him close. "Please."

He bent his head. As he kissed her, he thrust gently in and out of her.

She moaned against his lips and rocked her hips against his, awash in delight. The three plus years since she'd been penetrated by anything other than her own fingers and her toys made his tender possession of her all the sweeter.

He kept his strokes long, measured, and deep. While his cock assuaged the ache in her pussy, he caressed her and rained sweet, insistent kisses against her parted lips, her neck, shoulders, and breasts.

Under the delicious assault, the coil of heat in her belly spun apart and spread down her body, invading her cunt, setting it on fire. She moaned and arched her back, thrusting her hips up against his. She tightened her muscles around his hard, thick flesh, her body tensing as her climax built.

He trailed his mouth from hers and fastened his lips over one of her breasts. He caressed and massaged the other mound as he shortened and increased the pace of his strokes.

The combination of the intensified thrusts and the attention to her breasts pushed her over the edge. Raking her nails down his back, she gasped, shoved her hips up to meet his downward thrusts, and blew apart.

He rolled them over so she lay sprawled on top of him, and held himself still inside her as she came. With his lips against her ear, he caressed her and whispered soft, sweet, nonsensical words to her.

When the first wonderful wave had receded, he rolled her onto her back, and thrust, deep, and hard into her.

She gasped. "Ooh."

He withdrew and then thrust deep again -- and again, until he was pounding in her.

A new coil of heat ignited in her. Eager to feel his coming, she closed her legs over the back of his, clutched his ass, and rocked her hips in time with the wild, luscious rhythm of his.

When the tension in his body and the fierceness of his movements signaled his pending climax, she sucked his tongue into her mouth, parted his taut cheeks, and pressed a finger against his tight ass.

"Oh, God!" He groaned, clutched her tight, shoved himself balls deep inside her, buried his lips against her neck, and shuddered through his orgasm.

"Come," she urged him, her voice hoarse. "Come for me." She held him, pressing kisses against his head and gently tightening herself around him as he did.

Long after he'd stop shuddering and groaning, he eased out of her, discarded his condom, and leaned over to press a gentle kiss against her lips. "Are you all right?"

All right? She wasn't sure if wonderful would be a strong enough word to describe her present level of contentment. "Yes. Oh, yes." Resisting the urge to rub her hand against her wet pussy, she turned onto her side.

He moved behind her, sliding his hands over her body. He kissed her neck and shoulders.

Little flutters of desire tightened her pussy.

"I want you again," he whispered, cupping a hand over her breasts.

"So have me again," she invited.

He nipped at her ear. "I'll be back."

He got out of bed and went into the bathroom.

Resisting the temptation to follow him, she pulled the cover over body and lay on her side, her heart racing, eager for his return.

Several minutes later, he joined her on the bed. Tossing the cover aside, he slid his body against her back.

She felt his cock against her body and sighed with anticipation when he slipped an arm around her. His probing fingers slipped between her legs. "You're wet again."

"That's because I want you." She wiggled her butt against his groin.

"Are you wet enough to take me now?"

"Yes!"

He rubbed his thumb against her clit.

She shuddered.

He withdrew his legs from her and stroked his hand over her thigh. Pressing his lip against her ear, he spoke in a soft, sexy voice. "Lift your leg for me, sweetheart."

She lifted her top leg.

Sliding a hand over her thigh to hold it up, he moved closer. Apparently he wasn't interested in making love to her because he thrust nuts deep in her with one sweet, confident movement.

"Oooh!" She closed her eyes and shuddered. "Oooh."

He fucked her hard, fast, and deep, making her ass jiggle and her pussy explode within minutes.

As she moaned through her climax, he rolled her onto her stomach, rested his weight on his arms, and slid in and out of her with a lustful intensity that nearly brought her to another climax before he lay his full weight on her, gripped her hips to keep them still, and fucked her until he shuddered and groaned, emptying himself in her.

He rolled them onto their sides, discarded the condom, and kissed her neck.

With him lying behind her, spoon fashion, she felt drowsy and totally satisfied. She smiled and murmured softly as he kissed her ear and caressed her breasts. "You're not going to sleep on me, are you?"

"I'm considering it. Why do you ask?"

He pressed closer, allowing her to feel his semi-erect cock against her bottom. He licked her neck, below her ear. "What we just shared was incredible, but you have another opening I'd love to explore."

She shivered, a tingle of desire shooting down her spine. The thought of this big, handsome hunk fucking her ass made her wet, but it was time she started thinking with her head again. "I'd like that," she told him.

He slid his hand around her body to caress her pussy. "But?"

She sighed. "But it's already late and I have a very important job fair starting tomorrow. I need to be alert for that so ... I really need to get some sleep."

"A job fair? What kind?"

She hesitated, then decided it was silly to worry about revealing her plans to a man she'd already slept with without knowing his name. "I'm here for the L.A. Job Fair."

His hand stilled between her legs. "Oh? Where's it being held?"

She mentioned the location.

He stiffened.

She frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He pressed a kiss against her ear. "I'd better let you sleep." He rolled away from her and rose.

Her desire to sleep vanished. She sat up, pulling a sheet up to cover her breasts as he turned on the lamp on his side of the bed. "Where are you going?"

"I'd better go straighten out the room mix up."

She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 1:15 a.m. "It's so late. Why don't you wait until tomorrow?"

"It is tomorrow." He smiled and headed towards the bathroom.

She hesitated several moments before kicking the cover aside. She got out of bed and followed him into the bathroom.

Standing in his briefs, he turned to face her. His gaze swept quickly over her nude body before he looked in her eyes. "Do you need to use the bathroom?"

She shook her head and closed the distance between them. She linked her arms around his neck, pressing her breasts against his chest. "Can't you wait until tomorrow? I'd like to fall asleep with your body pressed against mine."

He stared down at her. "My name is Clay."

"Clay?"

"Yes. Clay." He caressed her cheek. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

She couldn't decide if there was a hint of a southern drawl or a hint British accent in his speech. Either way, she decided she liked the way he sounded calling her sweetheart. She smiled. "My name's Darbi."

"And you're here for the L.A. Job Fair?"

"Yes. Have you heard about it?"

He sighed. "Yes."

She tilted her head and studied his face, noting the weary look in his beautiful green eyes. "What's the matter? Is your ex named Darbi?"

He shook his head. "I don't have an ex. At least I don't have an ex-wife, if that's what you mean."

"It is."

"I've never been married nor engaged."

That surprised her. He must be at least thirty-five. "You've never been engaged?"

"No."

"Then why that reaction to my name?"

He shrugged. "Darbi isn't a very common name."

"I guess not." She smiled. "At least you don't trip over black women named Darbi every few feet."

A brief smile curved his lips upward. "A ... friend of mine has a friend named Darbi."

"And? Do I remind you of her?"

"I've never met her." He stroked her cheek. "At least I hadn't met her."

"I'm not following you."

He slipped his arms around her waist and hugged her close. "It's not important."

"No? Then you'll come back to bed?"

He stared down at her. "I probably shouldn't."

She pressed a finger against his lips. "But you will?"

He sighed and nodded. "Yes."

"Good." She smiled and stepped away from him. "Take off your briefs and let's go back to bed."

He arched a brow. "Take off my briefs? Why?"

"Because I want to sleep in the nude with you." She grinned at him. "Shameless, ain't I?"

He shook his head. "Sweet and addictive is more like it."

"You're sweet. How is it you've never been engaged?"

He grinned and moved close to rub his groin against hers. "Just lucky, I guess."

She feigned annoyance. "Take off your briefs and come back to bed."

"I don't sleep in the nude. I only take off my briefs if I'm going to make love." He stroked her breasts. He bent his head and sucked gently at each nipple before lifting his head to leer down at her. "Are we going to make love again after all?"

"No, but I am determined to have my way. Take them off and come back to bed." She kissed the corner of his mouth and left the bathroom. She slipped into bed and pulled the cover over her body.

He returned to the room moments later -- gloriously naked. A condom covered his erect cock. He paused in the doorway, looking at her, his brow arched. "Like you, I'm determined to have my way, Darbi."

She liked the way he said her name in that deep, sexy voice of his with that alluring accent. "Are you English?"

"No. I was actually born in Jamaica, but I'm American. My parents are both from South Carolina. I spent very little time there. I was educated in England. Why do you ask?"

"I detect a hint of a British accent warring with just a touch of a southern drawl."

"Hmm. Do you want to talk about my accent?"

"I don't want to talk at all." Smiling, she kicked the cover away. "Come to bed."

He slipped into bed beside her. Urging her onto her back, he slid his body on top of hers. He stared down into her eyes. "You are so sweet and so sexy."

She smiled. "Do you have a sweet tooth?"

He shook his head. "I didn't -- until tonight with you."

She stroked her hands over his back, down to his taut buns. "Then eat up, Clay."

"I intend to, sweetheart."

"I like the way you call me sweetheart."

He smiled. "You're going to like this, too." His warm lips covered hers.

She closed her eyes and slipped her arms around him. She definitely liked the intense way he kissed her -- as if he were branding the taste of her lips or his. Or was he attempting to place his brand on her with his kisses?

They spent several moments kissing and caressing each other. Her desire heightened, she reached between their bodies. Closing her fingers around him, she brought his warm flesh to rest against her slit. "I want you again," she whispered.

"You can have me." He thrust forward, sliding into her with a slow heat that made her toes curl.

"Oooh ... yes. Oh, yes, you feel so good." Locking her legs around him, she lost herself in the absolute delight of making love with him again. She hadn't felt as if she were actually making love and being made love to since she'd realized Martin no longer loved her. Every sexual experience after that had been entirely physical and had not touched her emotions.

What she and Clay were doing -- sharing -- felt as if it were special. Even under the passion he made no attempt to hide, she felt as if her pleasure was of paramount concern to him. Within minutes of his sliding into her, she shuddered and came. He sweetened the experience for her by stilling his movements in her to hold and whisper softly to her. He rolled onto his back with her sprawled on his chest, still impaled on him.

She kissed his chest. "Oh, God, Clay, that was so good."

He stroked his hands over her back and kissed the top of her head. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, sweetheart. Now go to sleep."

"You haven't come yet," she protested.

He eased out of her and moved to lie behind her, spoon fashion. "I'm fine. Go to sleep."

She reached behind her to stroke his thigh. "Are you always so unselfish?"

"No, I'm not."

She smiled. "Should I be flattered?"

He slipped an arm around her waist and pressed his lips against her ear. "I'm probably going to like you a lot more than I should. Should that make you feel flattered? Judge for yourself."

She suspected she was going to have the same problem. "Does that mean we're seeing each other again?"

He stroked his fingers against her slit. "Damn I'd love that, but that would probably not be a good idea."

Disappointment settled over her like a weight. She sighed. "Maybe not, but I don't want this to be a one-night stand."

"Do you generally date white men?"

"I ... well ... why do you ask that when we've ... made love twice?"

"Do you?"

"Well ... not usually, but --"

"Then why start now?"

She swallowed slowly. This conversation wasn't going as she'd hoped. "I don't want this to be the only night we spend together."

"Are you always so open about your feelings?"

"Only when I'm sufficiently aroused. And believe me, you have me very aroused."

He nibbled at her ear. "The feeling is mutual."

She moistened her lips. "It's a little late to ask this, but are you seeing anyone?"

"No."

She grimaced. "I guess it's obvious I'm not either or I wouldn't need my toys." She turned her head. "How long are you here? Can we see each other again? I'd much prefer spending some time with you than with my toys."

"I'm flattered." He kissed her ear and caressed her breasts. "Now go to sleep."

So he wasn't prepared to commit to more than a one-night stand. Fine. She'd tackle the subject again in the morning. "If you want me to go to sleep, you have to stop caressing me. You're making me so hot. If you keep this up, I'm going to be between your legs fucking you like white on rice."

“Like white on rice? How does one fuck like white on rice?”

“If you keep touching my breasts, you're' going to find out.”

He laughed and stilled his hand on her breasts.

“Clay?”

“Yes, honey?”

Sweetheart and now honey. Why did mundane endearments sound so sexy and potent on his lips? “This has been the most incredible night of my life,” she told him. “I’ve never felt quite this ... content after sex.” Realizing what she’d just admitted, she bit her lip. *Okay, girl, the sex was great, but don’t go losing your mind just because he knows how to use his big dick.*

He sighed. “It’s been pretty special for me too, Darbi.”

She turned in his arms and closed her fingers around his cock. “I want to do this with you again and again.” She moved his shaft along her slit. “I’m tired now, but I feel so greedy for more sex with you. I’d love to lie on my stomach with you on top of me.” She shuddered with anticipation.

“I ... I want that too, but it’s late and we both have an early day. Let’s go to sleep.”

Although drowsy and sated, it still took a while to sleep once she settled her body against his.

* * * * *

“You want me to do what? Clay, are you out of your mind? Do you know what time it is?”

Seated in the hotel lobby, Clay listened to Damien’s annoyed voice in silence for several moments before he spoke again. “It’s 2:20 here, that would make it 5:20 there.”

“A.m., Clay. a.m. What the hell are you doing up so late?”

He stared down at the crumpled piece of hotel stationary in his hand, sighed, and shook his head. “Never mind that. I need you to get up, get dressed, and be here as soon as you can.”

“Why? You were so gung-ho to attend the job fair yourself.”

“Look, Damien, I’m so damned tired I can barely keep my eyes open. I’ve left a message for Beth to tell her you’re running very late, but you will be taking my place at the fair. Now I’m going to catch a few hours sleep and then I’ll be on the next plane home --”

“Clay --”

“I need you to do this for me, Damien without asking questions. I don’t want to talk. I just need this favor from you. Will you do it?”

Damien swore softly. “Yes.”

"Thanks."

"What's wrong, Clay?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired."

"You don't sound fine, Clay. It's not like you to --"

"There's going to be someone at the fair I'd rather not meet today. Okay? Satisfied?"

"A woman?"

"It damn sure isn't a man."

"It's not Calder's woman again? Don't tell me you--"

"No, Damien, it's not her! That's over."

"Then you must be losing your touch."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"First you let Calder steal your woman and now you're telling me you've met a woman you can't handle?"

"First, Calder already had Sharde when we met her. And second, I'm not in the mood for this shit, Damien!"

"Okay. Fine, but she must be someone special. What's her name? Do I know her?"

"I didn't say I couldn't handle her." Along with the almost breathless sexual hunger he'd felt for her, had come an unexpected and unwanted tenderness. He frowned. And a surprising desire to get to know her. Surrendering to that urge would lead him down a path it was best not to travel with a woman who didn't generally date white men. "I'd just rather not meet her again ... at least not yet."

"So you're running away from her with your tail between your legs?"

"Damien! I am not in the mood! Can we leave it at that?"

"Damn. You sound rattled."

He took a deep, calming breath. He felt rattled. Getting out of that bed and leaving Darbi had taken every ounce of his resolve. And every moment since he'd let himself out of the room, he'd been battling a pressing need to return.

"I'm fine."

"Hmmm. Okay. What about Amber?"

He frowned. "She's eighteen. She can be left alone for a few hours."

"Fine, but if she gets into more trouble while we're both in transit, I'm not taking the heat from your mother."

He smiled. Behind her back, Damien called Clay and Amber's mother, their *mother*. To her face, he called her Mom, just as Amber called their father Dad. "You tell Amber if she can't behave for a few hours, I'll lock her narrow behind up until she's twenty-one."

"Like that's going to work. That sister of yours is a royal pain."

"As were you. She'll be fine for a few hours."

"Fine. Tell Beth I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thanks."

"Thanks hell, you're going to owe me big time for this, Clay."

"Tell me about it. Now get your ass in gear."

He shut off his cell phone and sat back in the chair. He smoothed the crumpled piece of paper in his hand and read the message he'd written to Darbi, but decided against leaving.

Dear Darbi

When you learn my identity, you'll realize, that no matter how much we might both want it, a relationship between us would not only be impractical but also unlikely to succeed. However, I did want you to know I will cherish the memory of the night we spent together.

I hope you'll forgive me for not delivering this message in person.

Take care of yourself and be happy.

Clayton Frazier, CEO, Fra-Tech.

Why the hell should she forgive him for not having the balls to have faced her in person and told her who he was and why he'd left? He crumpled the paper in his hand. Instead of tossing it into the trash, he pushed it in the pocket of the jacket he wore.

He rubbed his temples. After he'd had a few hours sleep, he'd decide how to handle Darbi. Handle her? What was there to handle? They'd shared a few hours in bed when they shouldn't have. It wouldn't happen again. End of story.

He recalled the feel of her breasts against his chest ... the taste of her lips ... the aroma of her aroused pussy ... the incredible delight of thrusting into her ... again and again ... the exquisite climax he'd experienced with her ... the desire to know what made her happy ... the urge to ensure she was satisfied before he even thought of his own needs. End of story?

Yes, damn it, Clayton. End of story. You are not getting involved with her. Not only does she work for Calder, but she doesn't date white men. There are too many other black women who do date white men to waste your time chasing one you'd have to convince dating you is okay before you can even woo her.

* * * * *

Darbi woke alone the next morning. Sliding out of bed, she searched the nightstands and dresser for a note or message from Clay. Although she noticed the notepad that had been by her bed the night before was now on the top of the desk by the window, she could find no message. If he hadn't planned to leave her a message, why had he moved the notepad? She sighed, her shoulders sagging. Would it have killed him to leave some indication that he'd enjoyed their night together?

Get a grip, girl. Of course he didn't leave any message. It was a one-night stand. The night is over. He's moved on and it's time for you to do the same. She went into the bathroom and showered. As the water cascaded over her body, she closed her eyes and allowed her thoughts to drift to the delights of the night before.

Clay hadn't been her first handsome, skillful lover. Martin had been both. But Martin had never done what Clay had done, satisfied her without coming himself. She sighed. There was something irresistible about a man who didn't always put his dick first. Too bad she and Clay weren't likely to meet again. For him she'd been willing to make an exception and date a white man ... at least until her ebony knight rode into her life.

Giving herself a mental shake, she left the shower, and quickly dressed. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 7:20 a.m. She had less than an hour to have coffee and catch the hotel shuttle to the job fair.

* * * * *

She arrived at the fair with five minutes to spare. By the time she made her way to the hall hosting Calder's booth, it was nearly 8:15. She moved quickly down the aisles of the big hall, noting the names of the various recruiting companies.

Near the center, she spotted the Calder Technologies sign and smiled. They'd landed a good location. A pretty, blue-eyed blonde sat at one of their tables. Darbi approached and extended her hand. "You must be Melissa. I'm Darbi Raymond."

The blonde smiled and shook her head. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. Raymond."

"Please call me Darbi." She put her briefcase down and sat behind the desk located to one side of the table where Calder Tech employee applications and information pamphlets were arranged.

She glanced across the aisle. Her gaze narrowed. Frazier Technologies was located just opposite. A beautiful, model-thin woman with skin the color of dark toast staffed it.

"Ironic, huh?"

She glanced at Melissa and nodded. "I understand Frazier himself is here. Have you seen him?"

Melissa shook her head. "Not yet, but I've been keeping my eye out for him."

Darbi arched a brow. "Oh?"

Melissa grinned. "I know our own head honcho, Jefferson Calder, is handsome, but I hear Frazier is absolutely drop-dead gorgeous."

Darbi recalled Sharde's description of Frazier. If he were half as delicious as the man she'd spent the night with, he must be breathtaking. She smiled. "I suppose we'll soon see."

The hall's doors were opened and Darbi and Melissa were soon occupied with answering question and accepting resumes. The morning passed quickly. She and Melissa took turns taking breaks and a forty-five minute lunch each. During the day, another woman joined the woman manning Fra-Tech's booth, but there was no sign of Clayton Frazier.

As the fair was about to end for the day at three p.m., Darbi glanced up and found herself looking into the piercing green eyes of a man seated behind the desk in the Fra-Tech booth.

Her heart raced and she went wet, recalling how dark his eyes had looked the night before as he gazed down into her eyes while cupping her ass in his palms and slowly sliding his cock into her.

He gave her a brief smile and looked away.

Only then did she realize he was not the man she had spent the night with. Like her lover of the night before, he had green eyes and was drop-dead gorgeous. But there was no silver at the temples of his short, dark hair, and he did not have the deep tan of the man she'd spent the night with. But his resemblance to her lover of the previous night was too striking to be coincidental.

She knew from Sharde that Clayton Frazier was close to forty and he was drop-dead gorgeous. Her one-night stand had been stunningly handsome. Not only had he told her his name was Clay, but he'd had a visible reaction when she'd told him her name.

As the implications sank in, she closed her eyes briefly. He'd known then who she was. It was just her luck to have slept with her company's biggest rival. *Way to go, Darbi. When you screw up, you do it big time.*

"Darbi? Are you all right?"

"What?" She blinked and looked at Melissa. "I'm sorry. I'm a little tired and my thoughts wandered." She glanced at her watch. "It's about time to wrap things up here, Melissa. Why don't you head out? I'll hang around in case any stragglers come along."

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Melissa gathered a folder full of resumes and sat them on the desk. "Great. Then I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded. "Thanks so much for your hard work today."

Melissa smiled. "Thanks for not pulling rank and allowing me to pick my lunch time."

She smiled. "My pleasure."

She watched Melissa gather her briefcase and leave before turning her attention to the stack of resumes. After a quick nap, she'd have dinner, and spend the evening looking through them. Then maybe she'd work out such things as what to do about having slept with Clayton Frazier and decide if she should call Sharde and tell her.

She closed her eyes briefly. Or worse yet, would she need to tell Jefferson? Oh, lord, what a mess.

"Hi."

She looked up into the green gaze of the man who could only be Clayton Frazier's younger brother. She smiled and rose, extending her hand. "Hello."

"Damien Frazier from Fra-Tech."

"Darbi Raymond, Calder Technologies." She moistened her lips. "Are you and Mr. Frazier related?"

"We're brothers."

"Oh."

"Do you know Clay?"

"Know him?" She had carnal knowledge of him, but she didn't know him. "I don't believe we've ever been introduced."

He gave her a brief, intense stare before smiling. "Ahhh. I thought perhaps you two might have met last night."

Oh, hell! Had he told his brother about sleeping with her? "Is he here?"

"Not anymore. Did you want to see him?"

"Yes." She noted the lack of surprise in his green gaze at her admission. "Where is he?"

"Back in Philly by now."

So after she'd confessed her shameless desire to sleep with him as often as possible, he'd hightailed it back to Philly. So much for liking her more than he should. The big, cowardly ox had known all along who she was and that he'd had no intentions of sharing any more than a one night stand with her.

Damien glanced around the hall. "Everything seems to be wrapping up here. How did the day go for you?"

"Fine. How were things for you?"

He shrugged. "I arrived late so I haven't been here long, but I'll be here for the next two days."

"Well, I'm sure there are enough prospective employees to keep us both occupied."

"No doubt. Tell me, Darbi, do you fraternize with the enemy?"

Recalling just how closely she'd fraternized with his brother the previous night, she was hard pressed not to blush. "Not as a general rule, no."

When he smiled, he was a breathtaking as his brother. "But, as you've probably heard rules were made to be broken."

She smiled. "I have heard that."

"Good. Can I buy you a drink?"

She considered him in silence. Sleeping with Clayton had been unintentional. Should she compound that mistake by being overly friendly with his equally handsome brother?

"There's no need to look at me like that. I promise I won't attempt to ferret out any company secrets from you. I'm just looking for pleasant, non-business related conversation over a drink."

She smiled again, deciding she liked this Damien Frazier. "Let me gather my things and return to my hotel to freshen up and --"

"In that case, why don't we make it dinner?"

If she had dinner with him, she would surely have an opportunity to learn something about Clayton Frazier. She nodded. "Okay."

"How does six o'clock sound? That'll give me time to shower and change and discover a good place to eat before I pick you up."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Great."

Chapter Four

As Clay sat in a crowded, dimly lit club, watching Amber dancing with a man half his age, his thoughts drifted to Darbi Raymond. Instead of sitting in this noisy, smoke-filled place, he'd like to be somewhere quiet, holding her in his arms as they slow danced.

His cell phone rang. He pulled it from his waist holster. "Hello?"

"Clay? I can barely hear you. Where are you?"

"I'm in a club with your sister having my hearing impaired."

Damien laughed. "Better you than me. Listen, I've met her."

He frowned. "You've met who?"

"The woman you ran away from."

He tensed. "What? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come on, Clay. You know who and what I'm talking about. She's gorgeous and her name is Darbi Raymond."

When had Damien gone from being an annoying younger brother to a man who knew him like a best friend? "What makes you think we know each other?"

"I know you do."

"How?"

"She asked about you."

"And that proves what?"

"It was the way she asked."

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "What did she say?"

"She said she wanted to see you."

Seeing her again was not in his game plan, nevertheless ... "She said this when?"

"I introduced myself at the job fair and we're about to have dinner."

He stiffened. "You're having dinner with her? You move fast."

"I move fast? I'm only planning to have dinner with her, Clay. I'm thinking you did a lot more than that."

He swore softly. "What's the point of this conversation, Damien?"

"I just wanted to know if there was anything I needed to know about her before I see her again."

"If there's something you want to know about her, ask her."

"I will, but I need to know if things start to get interesting between us tonight, is that going to be a problem for you?"

"Why should that be a problem for me?"

"Didn't you sleep with her?"

"Where the hell did you get that idea?"

"You know how people who have met either one of us immediately know we're related when they meet the other one of us?"

Despite the nine-year age difference between them, before he started to gray, people had often mistaken him and Damien for twins. "Yes."

"Well, when she looked across the hall and saw me, I know she probably thought I was you. And the look on her face when she did, said it all. She had the look in her eyes of a woman gazing at a man who knows her in the biblical sense. You two have a one-night stand or is there something more between you?"

"What?"

"I know you did more than hold her hand. You want to tell me how much more so I know what I'm dealing with?"

"Fuck off, Damien!" He broke the connection and turned off his ringer. He sat back in his seat, resisting the urge to order a drink. He was there to see that Amber had a good time without getting into trouble, not to drink.

He sat staring into the distance without actually being aware of his surroundings until Amber returned to the table some time later. She leaned down and linked her arms around his neck. "What's wrong, Clay?"

"Nothing's wrong."

She kissed his cheek before slipping into the seat opposite his. "While I was dancing, Damien called on my cell phone. He said you weren't answering your cell and asked me to tell you he wouldn't touch her."

Clay swallowed a lump of relief. He was going to need to handle his Darbi problem soon.

Amber tilted her head. "Who isn't he going to touch and why should you care? Are you two still sharing women?"

He narrowed his gaze. "What makes you think we share women?"

She tossed her head, sending her long, blond hair flying around her pretty, golden brown face. "I know about Cami."

Damn. Could this night get any worse? Instead of denying there was anything to know, he spoke in a low, cool voice. "Let me make myself perfectly clear, Amber. I have no intentions of discussing who I may or may not sleep with, with you."

She shrugged. "You don't have to. I know you and Damien are both sleeping with her."

How the hell had she learned of the unique relationship he and Damien shared with Cami? "Did you hear what I just said? My love life is none of your business."

Her dark green eyes spat angry sparks. "But you can ask me who I've been sleeping with and expect me to answer truthfully?"

"Damn right. I'm your big brother ... the one who might have to kick a few asses if I catch some knucklehead mistreating you."

The annoyance vanished from her gaze and she smiled. "I hate when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Say something to make me want to throw my arms around your neck and kiss you! I hate when you give me your I'm-your-big-brother-and-you-know-I-love-you speech."

"Why?"

She sighed. "Because I always know you mean it."

He nodded and reached across the table to capture her hand in his. "I do mean it."

She nodded. "I know."

"Good." He released her hand. "So tell me about this Paul who has Mom so worried."

She sighed and tugged at her hand. "This isn't the time or place. I want to have fun ... not talk about some ... knucklehead who is dealing."

"Dealing? Drugs?"

She lowered her gaze to the table.

Damn. Just what he needed -- to have to worry about keeping a drug dealer away from her.

She raised her gaze to his. "I didn't know what he was into when we started dating."

He nodded. One of her most endearing qualities was her innate honesty. "And when you found out?"

"I freaked. He tried to tell me it wasn't a big deal, because it was just some occasional weed, but ..." She shook her head. "Drugs are drugs."

"Is he likely to be dangerous?"

“Dangerous? Paul? No! He's very gentle, Clay.”

“A gentle drug dealer? How likely is that, Amber?”

“Don't make him sound like some big time drug lord. It really was just a little weed. He's not dangerous, Clay.”

He sure as hell hoped not. “Did he know you were coming to the States?”

She shook her head after a noticeable pause. “No.”

So he did know. “Does he know it's over? Is he likely to come looking for you?”

She shrugged. “He ... has a thing for me, Clay so I don't know. I know this is a pain for you and Damien, but ...” She trailed off, her lips trembling.

He smiled and recaptured her hand. “It's okay, honey. We'll deal with whatever we have to.”

She squeezed his hand. “I ... don't want him hurt, Clay ... I love him.”

Great. This night kept getting better every second. He swallowed the urge to tell her it was easy to imagine one's self in love at eighteen. With her eyes glistening with tears, he suspected she wasn't in the mood for a lecture on the difference between infatuation and love.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “We'll work things out, honey. Okay?”

She nodded and wiped at her face.

“Can we leave now?”

“No.” She tugged at his hand. “Dance with me?”

He glanced onto the dance floor with people half his age danced with carefree abandonment. “I don't think so.”

“Oh, come on, Clay. I want to show you off.”

“Show me off? Everyone in here is likely to think I'm a dirty old man trying to sleep with a sweet young thing.”

She shook her head. “All the girls will be jealous because I'm with a hot old white guy who actually has enough soul to be able to dance like a black man.” She flashed a smile at him. “So come on. Let's dance.”

He arched a brow. “After you call me a hot old white guy, how can I refuse?”

She laughed and bolted to her feet.

Casting his eyes towards the ceiling, he rose and followed her onto the dance floor.

* * * * *

Darbi took off her robe and slipped into her hotel bed. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. 12:05 a.m. She hadn't planned to spend so much time with Damien Frazier. He

was charming and somehow, the hours had slipped by as they laughed and talked about everything but their competing businesses. And Clayton.

She hadn't even had much time to think about the older Frazier brother until lying in the same bed where he'd made such sweet love to her the night before. Although tired, her thoughts of Clayton didn't bode well for a restful night's sleep. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against her pillow.

With a determined effort, she dismissed thoughts of him and the passion they had shared and slowly drifted to sleep. She woke several times during the night with thoughts of Clay taunting her.

She glanced at the clock and groaned when the number flashed at her. 2:15. Damn him. Why had he run away from her after making love to her and making forgetting him such a difficult undertaking? She doubted she'd be sleeping well until she saw him again.

She woke the next morning, tired, irritable, and determined to seek Clay out and force him to tell her to her face he didn't want to see her again.

Damien called as she dressed. She smiled at the sound of his voice. "Hello."

"Morning. How about we meet for breakfast before the fair starts?"

She sat on the side of her bed. "Sure. I'll meet you in Ally's Café in half an hour."

"See you then."

She put the phone down and rose. Walking over to the dresser, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. What was she doing and why? Sleeping with one brother and then hanging out with the other? Clay had bedded her and then made his lack of interest in her clear. Did she take the hint? No. She was plotting his downfall instead. And going out with his brother.

Damien had showed no genuine interest in her and yet seemed to enjoy her company. Although she enjoyed him, she didn't need the added complication of trying to cultivate a friendship with Damien any more than she'd needed a sexual relationship with Clayton. Nevertheless, she knew if Clayton hadn't left, she'd have slept with him again -- even after learning who he was. And she was about to see Damien again.

She shook her head and turned away from her reflection. "When you get back to Philly, you'd better get it together, girl. Instead of seeking him out, you're going to pretend he doesn't exist and stay as far away from him as possible."

* * * * *

A week later, Clay sat in his office, thinking of Darbi and staring out the window when his secretary buzzed him. He turned and pushed his intercom. "Yes, Jill?"

"There's a Miss Raymond from Calder Technologies here to see you."

He tensed. "Raymond?"

"Ms. Darbi Raymond."

"She's here? Now?"

"Yes. I explained to her that you're very busy and might not be able to find the time to --"

"Ask her to come in." He straightened his tie, and rose as a tap sounded on his office door. "Come in." He moved around his desk and stopped in the middle of his office.

The door opened and Darbi, wearing a dark blue slacks suit, walked into his office. Her thick, long, dark hair lay around her shoulders in a soft cloud. A light, soft fragrance filled the air.

The sight of her rekindled memories of making love to her. He swallowed and struggled to keep his cock from stirring. He smiled and extended a hand. "Hello, Darbi."

"Clayton."

"This is a surprise."

She closed the door and leaned back against it, ignoring his hand. "I'm sure it is."

Noting her unsmiling face and narrowed gaze, he shook his head. "It's a pleasant surprise."

"Is it?"

Clearly she was feeling combative. Great. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and kiss her until they were both breathless and she appeared to want a fight. Women.

He gestured to the leather sofa along one wall. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea? Juice?"

She moved away from the door to sit on the sofa. She crossed one leg over the other and gave him a cool stare. "No, but you can tell me why you didn't give me the courtesy of telling me you were leaving."

He hesitated before sinking onto the other end of the sofa. "I should have been honest with you, but our sleeping together was a bad idea."

"Why? Neither of us are married or committed to other people."

"No, but you work for the competition."

"So did Sharde, but that didn't stop your trying to get her into bed."

Her reference to Sharde annoyed him. He was sick to death of everyone tossing Sharde's name at him as if she'd been the love of his life. He rose and moved across the room to sit behind his desk. "For your information, I never slept with her."

"It wasn't from a lack of trying."

He tightened his lips. "If we had slept together, it would have been just as much a mistake as you and I were."

She flashed a cool smile. "So I was a mistake?"

He raked a hand through his hair, but remained silent.

“Sharde was wrong about you. She said you were --”

Sharde again? That did it. He leaned forward, catching and holding her hostile gaze. “At the risk of appearing rude, I frankly don't care what she might have said about me.”

“Why? Is talking about her too painful?”

The frequency with which Darbi had occupied his thoughts for the past week was a clear indicator that he had not been in love with Sharde. “I have no desire to continue this conversation. Can I get the door for you?” He stood up and strolled across his office. With his hand on the doorknob, he turned to face her.

“Aren't you the charming gentleman?”

He clenched his left hand into a fist.

She rose, a hint of red staining her cheeks. “Thanks for your hospitality.”

He stepped back from the door at her approach.

When she reached for the doorknob, he placed a palm against the panel. “Why did you come here?”

She shrugged, not quite meeting his gaze. “Does it matter?”

Maybe it shouldn't, but it did. “Did Calder send you?”

She sucked in a breath and stared at him, an angry look in her eyes. “Did you send your brother to fraternize with me after you ran out on me?”

The thought of her and Damien together angered him. “I didn't run out on you!”

“What would you call what you did? Why did you leave like that? The least you could have done was leave me a message.”

He swallowed hard. “I did write one.”

Her dark eyes lit up. “You did? What did it say? Where did you leave it? I never found it.”

“I wrote it, but I didn't actually leave it.”

“What? Why not?”

He shook his head. “Never mind that.”

“Never mind? You expect me to believe you wrote a message and then did what? Took it with you?”

He supposed it did sound implausible. “What difference does that make now? Tell me what happened between you and Damien. Did he ... did you allow him to ...”

“What did or didn't happen between us is none of your business.” She pulled the door open.

He pushed it closed and leaned against it. “Did you sleep with him?”

“You think I sleep with every man I meet?”

"I don't know. Do you?"

Her eyes blazed at him and for a moment, he half expected her to slap him. "How would that be any of your concern?"

"Why the hell did you come here if Calder didn't send you?"

She lifted her chin and stared into his eyes. "He didn't send me! I came because -- because ..."

"Because what?"

"Because I was foolish enough to want to see you again."

He ignored the warm feeling her admission generated in him. "Why?"

She shrugged. "My batteries ran out and I thought maybe ..."

"When did they run out? Did you sleep with Damien?"

"If I said yes?"

He stepped away from the door and jerked it open. "Thanks for stopping by."

She pressed her lips together, cast a quick look towards the ceiling, sighed, and then pushed the door closed. "I didn't sleep with him."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, because I have no need or reason to lie to you."

"Unless you thought it was necessary to get what you want."

She laughed and shook her head. "You think you're so ... hot I'd lie to get to see you again?"

"Would you?"

She moistened her lips. "I do want to sleep with you again, but I'm not lying. What makes you think I'd even be interested in sleeping with your brother?"

"Because he's a younger version of me. If you found me attractive, why wouldn't you find him even more so?"

"Is that what this is about?" She placed a hand on his chest. "Granted, he's gorgeous -- like you. And that's the problem, Clay. He looks like you ... he sounds almost like you ... but he's not you."

He swallowed and stared at her in silence. Why did he want to pursue a relationship with her when common sense urged otherwise?

"Am I wasting my time as well as embarrassing myself here, Clay?"

He lifted her left hand from his chest and brushed his lips against her fingertips. "There's no reason to be embarrassed."

"Isn't there? Are you that used to women tracking you down and coming onto you?"

He shrugged. "It's happened once or twice."

"I'll bet it has." She sighed. "This is getting more embarrassing by the second." She tugged at the hand he still held. "I'd better go before I really say or do something to --"

He retained her hand. "Before you do, I think you should know that I'm flattered that you did come."

"But it was a waste of time. Wasn't it? I should have taken the hint when you ran out on me in the middle of the night."

He opened her hand and pressed his cheek against her palm. "For the last time, I did not run out on you in the middle of the night."

She stroked his cheek. "Yes, you did. When you left, you knew perfectly well that I was expecting to see you in the morning."

He sighed. "Okay, I admit I knew that."

She withdrew her hand from his face. "Then why didn't you tell me you wouldn't be there?"

"I didn't decide to leave until after you fell asleep."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Are you serious? Had I awakened you, it wouldn't have been to tell you I wouldn't be there when you woke up again. It would have been to fuck you until you couldn't walk."

So. No more games or pretending he'd wanted to make love to her. "If that's the case, why did you decide to leave?"

"You are a beautiful, sexy woman."

"But?"

"But I'm not looking for a relationship at the moment. If I were, I'm sure I'd be very interested in one with you."

She sighed. "She hurt you, didn't she?"

"Who?"

"Sharde."

"For the love of God, Darbi, not her again!"

"Isn't she part of the reason you left? You really wanted her, didn't you? Did you just want her or were you -- are you in love with her?"

"Whatever I might have felt for her has no bearing on this conversation or why I left L.A."

She reached for his hand and linked her fingers through his. "So what we shared didn't mean anything to you?"

"What we shared? We spent a few hours together when we shouldn't have."

She withdrew her hand from his. "Is that all it felt like to you? You said it was incredible."

He hesitated. "Look, Darbi, I didn't say anything to you that I didn't mean. Nevertheless, it's not as if we had ..." He allowed his voice to trail off, unable to try to trivialize something that had touched him so deeply he was still carrying around the letter he'd written to her.

"Fine. You've made your point. I won't keep you any longer." She pulled open the door and walked out.

He closed the door behind her and leaned against it, closing his eyes. *Idiot! A sweet, sexy, beautiful woman tracks you down and you behave like a moron. You want to have sex with her. She wants to have sex with you. What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you creating problems? Why are you allowing her to think that night meant nothing to you when it did?*

He took several deep breaths before yanking the door to his office open. "Darbi ..."

She glanced briefly over her shoulder but kept moving across the outer office.

He followed her out of the office and into the hallway. At the bank of elevators, she turned to face him, a wary look in her eyes. "I don't think we have anything else to say to each other."

He slipped his hands into his pant pockets. "I'm sorry. I behaved like a jerk just now."

She shrugged. "You behaved like a man who's not interested."

"You can't really believe that."

"You haven't given me any reason not to."

"I am interested."

"Sure you are."

"I am. And I did write a letter."

"Yeah. I know. You wrote it, but didn't leave it. Tell me another one, Clay."

"It's the damned truth, Darbi!" He pulled out his wallet, removed the folded, crumpled hotel stationery, and gave it to her.

He watched several expressions -- surprise, pleasure, and annoyance chase each other around on her face as she read his note. When she looked up at him, he spoke before she could. "It's been difficult to dismiss thoughts of you since we met."

"Why didn't you leave this, Clay?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I intended to, but at the last minute, I didn't."

"If our night together was something you wanted to cherish, why make me track you down and why humiliate me in your office?"

"I'm sorry if you felt humiliated. That certainly wasn't my intention, but I'm just not interested in anything other than a strictly sexual relationship at the moment."

She shrugged and pushed the elevator call button. "What makes you think I want anything more than that from you?"

He considered her in silence for several moments. Why would she be willing to settle for a strictly physical relationship? "You're not interested in anything more permanent?"

"Yes, but I'll be ... blunt. I'm tired of toys. I want the real thing. I'd like to have it with you -- until I meet someone I can fall in love with."

He narrowed his gaze. "And of course you couldn't fall in love with me?"

She folded his letter and to his surprise, slipped into her shoulder bag. "You're one of the sexiest ... you are the sexiest man I've ever met, let alone slept with, but when I'm ready to get serious, it will be with a man whose tan is permanent."

What the hell was her problem? She intended to keep the letter he'd written her and she couldn't spread her legs fast enough for him, but he wasn't good enough for a serious relationship? "So you just want to use me for my body until then?"

Although annoyed by her attitude, he liked that she didn't blush or look away from him as she nodded. "There's no need to make me sound so ... self-serving. I thought we could use each other."

He shook his head. "I don't know if I like the idea of being your real life sex toy."

"It's not as bad as you're making it sound. I wasn't in that hotel room by myself. You were there too. You know how ... good it was between us. It was more than good, Clay."

He nodded. "That doesn't mean I'm prepared to be used."

"You're making too big a deal out of this. You said you weren't interested in anything but sex with me. Yet when I tell you that's all I want, you get bent out of shape? What do you want me to do? Pretend it was love at first thrust?"

"It happens."

"Maybe so, but not in our case." The elevator door slid open. She stepped in. "I'll give you some time to think about it and then I'll call you to see if you're interested."

The elevator doors closed and he returned to his office and sank down into his chair. Determined not to spend any more time thinking about her, he turned on his computer and concentrated on work.

Two hours later, his intercom buzzed. He reached over to answer it. "Yes, Jill?"

"Ms. Raymond is on line one."

"Thank you." He picked up the receiver and pushed line one. "Darbi?"

"You've had enough time. Are we going to be lovers or do I need to look elsewhere?"

He sat back against his chair. "This is your idea of giving me time to think about it?"

"I want to sleep with you. How much clearer can I make it without totally embarrassing myself?"

"I've already told you there's no need to be embarrassed. I find a sexually unrepressed woman highly interesting."

"That's easy for you to say. You're not the one doing the chasing and tracking down."

As he sat with his eyes closed, with a picture of her beautiful face imprinting on his eyelids, he realized that had she not tracked him down, he would have pursued her. "Our seeing each other would not be a good idea."

"I see. In that case, I won't take up anymore of your --"

"Hey! Wait a minute. It's not a good idea, but I am interested ... more than interested."

She released a quick breath. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How much more than interested?"

"A lot more."

"Good. So let's just lay down a few ground rules and --"

He laughed and shook his head. "Do you always take over like this?"

"No. Of course not. I've never run a man down and I've sure never begged one to be my temporary lover. So let me say what I need to before I lose my nerve."

"You don't need to be nervous or embarrassed with me, Darbi. I'm finding your sexual candor exhilarating. Go on. Have your say and then we'll talk about dating."

"Dating? We're not actually going to be dating, are we? We're both adults and I can't see any reason why we shouldn't just admit we want a sexual relationship with no strings or complications attached. I don't have to pretend I don't want to sleep with you and you don't have to pretend I mean anything to you."

"Damn, you're blunt, aren't you?"

"You'd rather pretend?"

"No, but I'd rather you didn't sound as if you expect me to treat you like a piece of ass."

"Isn't that what you plan to do?"

"No, it's not. Just because I'm not interested in trying to fall in love with you doesn't mean I'm going to treat you like my personal whore either."

He heard her catch her breath. "Good, because I'm no one's whore."

"Now we have that out of the way, can I buy you dinner tonight?"

"You don't have to --"

"Look, Darbi, just because I said I only wanted a sexual relationship doesn't mean the only time you're going to see me is when I want sex."

"No?"

She sounded surprised, but pleased.

He smiled. "No. I'm looking forward to slow dancing with you and then having sex with you."

She laughed. "I'd like that."

"So would I. So then we'll have dinner, slow dance, talk, and then have sex."

"Yes."

"We'll have lots of sex."

"Yes, please. Lots of it."

Chapter Five

Darbi hung up the phone, closed her eyes, and pumped both fists in the air. “Yes!” She opened her eyes. And now that she'd run him down and they were going to be lovers, it was time to tell Sharde. She sighed, hoping Sharde was completely over him.

She left her office and slowly walked down the hall separating her office from Sharde's. She'd briefly occupied the office when Sharde had left Calder Technologies for several months. When Sharde and Jefferson had reconciled, Darbi had gladly returned to her former job, which included the traveling she enjoyed.

She tapped on the door.

“Come in.”

She took a deep breath and entered.

Sharde looked up from her monitor and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey. Got a few minutes?”

“Sure.” She gestured towards the two chairs in front of her desk. “Take a load off.”

“Thanks.” Darbi sank into one of the chairs. “We need to talk.”

“Sure. What about?”

“Clayton.”

Sharde sat back against her chair. “Clay? What about him? I take it you met him at the job fair?”

“I ... I did more than meet him, Sharde.”

“You ... oh. Really? Do you mind if I ask when?”

“About a week ago. The night before the job fair. There was a mix up in the rooms and somehow we both ended up in the same room.”

Sharde nodded. "And?"

"Well ... he was in the bathroom, sleeping in the tub when I arrived. I didn't know he was there and I was feeling a little ... tense and sorry I hadn't maybe had Sarro do a lap dance for me. I had my toys with me so I ... I was lying on the bed with my battery-operated boyfriend when he came out of the bathroom, naked and aroused and ... one thing led to another and ... we ended up in bed."

Sharde glanced down at her desk before meeting her gaze again. "I am so tempted to ask you how he is in bed, but I won't."

"He made my toes curl."

"Really? He sounds as if he's almost in Jeff's league."

Darbi arched a brow. She doubted Jefferson or any other man could touch Clay in bed. "He's ... he has nothing to be ashamed of."

"So he's a good lover. Why are you looking so worried?"

"He's our biggest rival."

Sharde dismissed her concern with a wave of her hand. "So?"

"So do you think I need to tell Jefferson?"

"No. Why would you need to tell him?"

"Because I just got off the phone with Clayton and it's not going to be a one-time thing."

"You two are dating?"

She nodded. "Does it bother you?"

Sharde's gaze widened. "No! Why should it? That's what I wanted ... the two of you to get together." She smiled. "I told him you two would be great together. I knew you'd knock his socks off and I knew once you met him, you'd want to date him even if he's not black."

She shook her head. "Before you get too happy for us, I think you should know that we're not really dating."

"What do you mean?"

"He's great in bed, but I still plan to marry a brother."

Sharde blinked. "Oh, you do?"

"Yes. We've ... he and I have decided to be adult about our mutual attraction. We're going to be friends with benefits."

"For how long?"

"Until either one of us finds someone we want to get serious with."

"You think that's going to work?"

"Yes. We've discussed it and neither one of us wants a serious relationship with each other. We've agreed to have a purely sexual relationship that doesn't lead to or require a commitment."

"But I thought you were going to do the second virginity thing until you met a man you wanted to marry?"

Darbi grimaced. "That waiting until an engagement before having sex again thingy flew out the window when he stepped out of the bathroom so ... gloriously aroused. Sharde, the man is ... hot ... he's packing a whopper and he wields it with lethal-like skill."

"And you think you're going to be able to keep from falling hard for him while sleeping with him?"

"Yes."

"Come on, Darbi. Get real, girl. I was head over heels in love with Jeff when I met Clay and I nearly lost my heart to him. I came so close to tumbling into bed with him. And we never got past the kissing and caressing stage. I can't see your not falling for him once you start sleeping with him."

"I have it all straight in my head. I know what I want. What I need to know is if I should tell Jeff we're seeing each other."

She shook her head. "It's none of his business. He knows all he needs to know: that you're loyal to the company and won't divulge any company secrets. Not that Clay would ask or expect that of you. But I'll mention it to Jeff in passing so it won't come as such a shock."

"Okay." She exhaled deeply and rose. "I'd better get back to work."

"Darbi, be careful. Okay?"

She turned at the door. "Careful? You think he'll hurt me?"

"Not intentionally, no, but if you start wanting more and he's still satisfied with sex only ... trust me, it's going to start hurting real bad real fast."

"I don't want a commitment from him. I just want ... sex until my ebony knight comes along."

"What if you've already met him, but he's white instead of black? Would you really turn down love with Clay just because he's not black?"

"Love?" She shook her head. "What he makes me feel begins with an L all right, but it's lust, not love. Don't worry about me, Sharde. I'll be fine."

"Darbi ... don't you think the room mix up is like a sign?"

"From who about what?"

"Come on, girl. What are the chances of your both being assigned the same room and ending up in bed? Don't you think the mix up is like a sign you two belong together?"

She shrugged. "Maybe for the short haul, sure. Long term? I don't think so."

"Fine, but don't expect me not to say I told you so when you find yourself head over heels in love with him."

She grinned. "I'm head over heels with him all right, but it's lust, girl. Not love. I want him so much I tracked him down and told him I wanted him to be my lover."

Sharde's eyes widened. "You tracked him down and said all that and you still think this is just lust? Girl, get real! You're in lust and love with him."

"Lust, Sharde, big time. Not love."

Sharde shook her head, holding her hands up, palms out. "Fine. Call it what you want, but I know what I call it and it ain't lust. What do you want to do about your present from the girls?"

"My present? What present?"

Sharde lifted the blotter on her desk and held up a red envelope. "Sarro. Remember him?"

"Oh."

Sharde waved the envelope at her. "Can I interest you in a lap dance given by a sexy hunk?"

Darbi crossed the room, took the envelope, tore it into pieces, and dropped them into the wastebasket near Sharde's desk. "Nope."

Sharde nodded, a satisfied look on her face. "I thought not."

Darbi shrugged. "Never mind him. How are the wedding plans coming along?"

Sharde's smile lit up her face. "Do you have time to help me choose a wedding dress?"

"Is the sky blue? Of course I have time."

Sharde's smile turned into a grin. She opened her desk drawer and slapped a thick book on her desktop. "Then pull up a seat and let me show you the five I have my eye on."

* * * * *

"Clay? Got a moment?"

With his hand on his car door, Clay looked up from his car to see Damien crossing the company parking lot. He opened his car door, tossed his briefcase in the passenger seat, and leaned against his car. "Actually, I've been wanting to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Cami."

Damien tensed. "What about her? Look, if you're still angry because I got a little carried away with her --"

"How long have you two been having sex without a condom?"

He watched the muscles in Damien's jaw clench. "You used one with her, didn't you?"

"Always, with her and everyone else."

"Then what's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem, but if you're having unprotected sex, you do or will."

Damien shook his head. "I don't need a lecture from you, Clay. I'm a big boy and I know how to protect myself."

"Then why the hell aren't you doing it?"

"I do. You think I have unprotected sex with every woman I sleep with?"

"Do you?"

"No! Cami is ... special."

"Special. How special?"

He shook his head. "Look, I wanted to talk to you about Darbi Raymond."

"What about her?" He raked a hand through his hair. "Look, Damien, if you're about to tell me you had unprotected sex with her as well, I swear, I'm going to knock you the fuck out right here and right now!"

Damien arched a brow. "So, despite what you said, it's like that, huh?"

"Like what?"

"You mean that, don't you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're about to lose your heart ... if you haven't already done it."

"You think wrong."

"Sure I do." He slapped Clay's cheek. "I never laid a finger on your Darbi. Hell, to tell you the truth, as gorgeous as she is, I wasn't even tempted."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I told you, I knew when our eyes met you'd slept with her. I saw it in her gaze. When we had dinner, she kept staring at me, and I knew she was seeing you, not me. I think you need to make a move before someone else does."

"When I want your advice on how to handle my love life, I'll let you know." He smiled and clamped a palm around the back of Damien's neck. "You worry about Cami and let me worry about Darbi."

Damien narrowed his gaze. "Why should I worry about Cami? Do you know something I don't?"

"No."

"Then what are you talking about, Clay?"

"The way you two were going at each other when I left ... that was some heavy shit, Damien."

He shrugged. "She's ... I like her."

"Apparently she likes you too."

"Does that bother you?"

"Why should it? I'm not in love with her."

"Good. Since you clearly have other interests now, can I expect you to stay away from her?"

He frowned. "You're sounding a little possessive there, Damien."

"No, I'm not, but now that you're seeing Darbi Raymond and --"

"Don't jump to conclusions. Just because you're ready to toss away your little black book doesn't mean mine's going in the trash too."

"So you're going to go on seeing Cami?"

"Would my seeing her be a problem for you?"

Damien averted his gaze. "Why should it?"

He got into his car and lowered his driver's side window. "Then, if you'll excuse me, I have a date."

Damien gave him a cool look. "Give Darbi a couple of deep, hard thrusts for me, will you?"

Damien's assumption that he would be sleeping with Darbi again annoyed the hell out of him. "Fuck off and get the hell out of my way, boy."

"Who the hell you calling boy, whitey?"

He laughed and started his car. "Give Cami a hug for me."

"I will. You'd better get going so you can be home in time to tuck Amber in bed at a decent hour."

His smile vanished. "About her, can you run shotgun for me tonight?"

"Nope. I have a date of my own. Your sister. Your problem."

"Thanks, Damien, you're a real pal."

"Ain't it the truth?" He laughed and walked back into the building.

* * * * *

Standing in her apartment wearing a new elegant black dress with a scoop neck and back, Darbi noted the appreciative gleam in Clayton's beautiful green eyes. The dress had been worth every penny of the ridiculous price she'd paid.

"Damn, you're beyond beautiful."

She smiled. "Thank you." She hesitated before lifting her face.

He brushed his lips against her cheek.

She turned her head until their lips met. Linking her arms around his neck, she pressed a long, moist kiss against his mouth. His lips parted and she slipped her tongue inside, rubbing her breasts against his chest.

He lifted his head and stepped back.

She allowed her arms to fall away from him. "What's wrong?"

"We're supposed to do the dinner and dancing thing before we have dessert."

She nodded and linked her fingers with his. "So we are."

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it. "Let's go have dinner."

They had dinner at an upscale restaurant. He arched a brow when she ordered a salad. She smiled. "I don't want to eat too much and get sleepy. I want to be wide awake for dessert."

He laughed. "You candor is amazing."

"Believe it or not, I'm not usually so straightforward."

"Then I'm flattered." He sipped his seltzer water. "You're not married or engaged. Have you ever been?"

She sighed. "This is the part I hate."

"Why?"

"I'm divorced."

His glance went to her left hand. "How long?"

"Nearly six years."

"What happened?"

"I met Martin when I was twenty-one. We were married four months later. I graduated from college early so I was working full time while he was still in school. We had a lot of plans and goals and to help expedite them, I took a second job to help pay his way through grad school.

"I thought we were on our way when he graduated and landed this great job at an engineering firm with this huge salary. I quit my second job and prepared to be happy and prosperous. A year after graduation Martin got a big promotion. That's when things started to go south for us."

"In what way?"

She sighed. "Along with the promotion came this beautiful secretary. I guess I can't blame him for falling in love with her. She was the most stunning woman I've ever met. She was tall and slender with this lush, smooth sable skin. Her dark skin and green eyes made for an incredible look and she was the most beautiful creature."

"You're beautiful."

She shook her head. "Not compared to her. I --"

"You're beautiful compared to any woman."

She smiled. "You mean that."

"Of course I do. So he fell for her?"

"Yes. Six months later, I found myself divorced."

"I take it you were still in love with him and didn't want the divorce?"

"I didn't want the divorce and yes, I was still in love with him then. So the divorce really hurt."

He reached across the table to squeeze her hand. "And now?"

"It took a while, but I got over him."

"But you still believe in marriage?"

"Of course. One of these days in the not too distant future, I'd like to have at least two kids. For that I need a husband."

"Is that the only reason you want a husband? What about love?"

"What about it? I tried it once and got my heart broken and tossed back at me. The next time I get married it will be for necessity, not love."

"And you expect to find a man who'll settle for a loveless marriage?"

"Why not? Just because we won't be in love doesn't mean we won't share passion and affection for each other. Actually, I think we might have a better chance of having a lasting marriage without love."

"You do?"

"Yes. What about you? You said you'd never been married or engaged and you're how old?"

"Thirty-nine. No, I haven't been married or engaged, but I do believe in love. I want to fall in love."

"Have you ever been in love?"

He shrugged. "I've imagined myself in love a couple of times. In college there was this co-ed who looked like Whoopie Goldberg. She had this amazing smile and every time she smiled at me, I got aroused. Within weeks of meeting her, I was convinced we were meant to spend the rest of our lives together."

"What happened?"

He grimaced. "Nothing happened."

"Nothing? You mean she didn't share your interest?"

"Oh, she shared it all right. In polite company she used to call me TDH, for tall, dark, and handsome."

"And what did she call you in not so polite company?"

"Well-hung."

That appellation certainly applied. "So you were lovers?"

"No, we weren't."

"Then how did she know you were well-hung?"

"Our relationship never went past the kissing stage, but she did have a pair of wandering hands."

Recalling how often she herself had touched, caressed, or held his cock during their few hours together, her cheeks burned. "If you were both interested, why weren't you lovers?"

He gave her a cool look. "I was too white for her. Like you, she was determined to save herself for a man with the right skin color."

She shook her head. "I hope you don't think I'm prejudiced because I'm not."

"I think you're a bit of a hypocrite."

"What?"

"I'm good enough to fuck, but not good enough to marry."

She sucked in a breath and tugged at her hand. "That's not fair."

He tightened his grip and retained her hand. "Of course it is."

"No, it's not! It's not as if we're in love, but I refuse to marry you because you're not black. Besides, how can that be a fair statement when even if I wanted to marry you, you wouldn't be interested?"

His nostrils flared and he released her hand. "Okay, maybe you have a point there."

"Was Whoopie your only love?"

"No. A few years after college, I met this woman who was a dead ringer for Angela Bassett. Unfortunately, she was already spoken for."

"Do you always fall for black women?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Do you only date black women?"

"Yes."

"Exclusively?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He arched a brow. "Because I prefer them. Why else would I date them?"

"I don't know."

"I've always known what I wanted and I've always wanted to date black women. I'm from a long line of southern men who have always been predominately attracted to black women."

"Your mother is ...?"

"Mom is a gorgeous, natural blonde with green eyes, which is probably why she couldn't hold my father's attention or affection for very long. He prefers black women too."

"So you're like your father in that respect."

"Somewhat, but unlike him, I have no intentions of marrying a white woman to please anyone."

"No. You have no intentions of marrying a woman of any color, do you?"

"I don't think marriage is necessary to be happy."

"What happens when you fall in love with a black woman who won't settle for anything less than marriage?"

"I'll worry about that when and if it happens."

"You don't think you'll fall in love?"

"I'd like to, but I haven't yet."

"What do you have against marriage?"

He shrugged. "I haven't had a very good example. My parents are still married to each other, but they are both in long term relationships with other people. I have a brother and sister as a result of those extramarital relationships. You've met Damien."

"He's your half-brother?"

"Half-brother?" He shook his head. "We have a different mother, but he is my brother. Period. There's no half in our family. We're all one big, happy family. Hell, my parents live within miles of each other in Jamaica and the four of them have been known to go on vacation together."

She blinked. "Your mother and her ... partner and your father and his partner vacation together?"

He laughed. "Yes, no need to look so shocked. They're all friendly with each other, but it's not as if their swap partners or anything."

"Oh. Well, that must make for ... interesting vacations."

"Oh, it does."

"Well ... you and Damien look so much alike when I first saw him, I thought he was you."

"He's nine years younger than I am. Our sister is even younger. She and I have the same mother. My parents are very happy with their respective lovers, but feel no pressing need to get married. My father's been in love with Damien's mom for over thirty-one years. As far as I know, he's never strayed during that time."

"And Damien's mom is content to have spent so much time with a man who's still married to another woman?"

"The last time I saw her, Velva looked very happy. My mother is happy in her relationship which has lasted over twenty years."

"It sounds like your parents and their lovers have an ... ideal relationship."

"They think so."

She flashed him a brief smile she hoped hid her opinion of his parents' relationships. How could a woman in love be content in a long-term relationship with a man who didn't care enough to marry her?

"Never mind my parents." He reached for her hand.

She slipped it into his.

"I'd rather talk about us."

"Is there much to talk about? We have very different thoughts about love and marriage."

He shrugged. "Maybe, but they don't have to be mutually exclusive. You believe you can marry without love and be content. I believe you can be happy without marriage." He smiled. "We might need to file that information away for future use."

Why bother?

"So. Darbi. Tell me about your parents and your siblings."

"My parents were happily married for thirty years before my father died five years ago. I don't have any siblings."

"Aren't you the lucky one?"

She shook her head. "I wish I did."

"How is your mom doing without your father?"

"It's been a difficult time for her, but she's finally coming to terms with the fact that he's gone. She's living in Orlando now, sharing a house with my aunt."

"And what does she expect of you?"

"She doesn't put any pressure on me, but I know she'd like to see me happily married with a kid or two. She took the break up with Martin almost as hard as I did."

"Why?"

"Martin represented everything most black mothers want for their daughters. He was a handsome, successful, educated straight black man going places. She was devastated when he decided I wasn't going with him."

"I guess your mother wouldn't be happy to hear you're dating me."

"She's not prejudiced, Clay."

He arched a brow.

"No, Clay, really. She's not. Don't you think it's normal for parents to want their kids to marry within their own particular culture?"

"Don't say culture when we both know you mean race, Darbi."

"Clay --"

"No, Darbi, you mean race."

"Okay. Race, but that's normal."

He shrugged. "My own family notwithstanding, I get your point. My material and paternal grandparents both wanted that for my mom and dad."

"Good. I wouldn't want you to think badly of my mother."

He smiled. "How could I think badly of the woman who gave you life?"

She smiled. "You're very sweet."

"You make that sound like a compliment."

"It is."

"Then I'm flattered. Maybe I'll get to meet your mother one of these days."

As things stood between them, she couldn't see any occasion for introducing Clay to her mother. "Maybe."

"You don't sound very optimistic."

"Well, it's just that if I introduced you two she'd think we were serious."

"Aren't we?"

"Yes, but only on a temporary basis. My mom is not the type of mom I could expect to be happy if I told her I'd moved in with a man. She'd want to know why I was willing to live with a man who wasn't willing to marry me."

"Wouldn't your feelings count with her? What if you were happy with that arrangement?"

"I wouldn't be happy with such an arrangement, Clay. I know it's extremely old-fashioned of me, but I'm not the living together kind of woman."

"I see."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "I'll be sure not to ask you to move in with me."

That wasn't quite the response for which she'd been hoping. She gave him a cool look. She knew where he stood.

He shook his head. "Don't look at me like that, Darbi. We've both been honest about our feelings and what we want and expect out from our relationship."

"I know I pursued you, but should we continue with this?"

"What? This conversation?"

"No. This ... relationship. We both want things that are so different --"

He reached across the table and closed his hand over hers. "Not seeing you now is out of the question, Darbi. So let's not even go there." He glanced towards the dance floor. "Will you dance with me?"

"Yes."

Moving around the dance floor with his big, warm hands sliding along her shoulders, she closed her eyes. The combination of the soft lights, the romantic music, and his cologne lulled her into a world where she could pretend she danced with a man who loved her and wanted her to have his babies ... a man who loved her enough to want to commit to her forever ... a man willing to prove that commitment by asking her to marry him.

“Forever's a long time.”

Darbi blinked and lifted her head from Clayton's shoulder. She looked up at him. “What?”

“I said forever's a long time.”

Oh, lord. Had she spoken aloud? “For what?”

“I asked how much longer you wanted to dance and you said forever and I said that's a long time.”

“Oh.” She laughed, relieved. “I'm sorry. I was in another world.”

“Nice place?”

She stroked her hands over his chest. “Yes.”

“Nice people?”

She nodded.

He caressed her cheek. “Yeah? Was I there with you?”

Had he been the man holding her? Had he been the man who wanted to marry her and father her children? Or had her lover been the ebony knight whose arrival she still awaited? “I don't know, but you're here with me now.”

He pressed his thumb against her lips. “Yes, I am.”

She leaned into him, staring up into his eyes. “And I'm glad you are.”

“So am I.” His slow, warm smile sent a tingle of anticipation through her.

“Take me home, Clay and take me to bed.”

Chapter Six

Darbi was surprised at how easily the conversation between them flowed on the thirty-minute drive to her apartment. They talked about politics and sports, discovering their mutual love for football and basketball. "I have season tickets for the Eagles and Sixers. I'd love to have you accompany me to home games for both."

She smiled, pleased that he expected to still be in her life several months down the road when the football and basketball seasons started. "It's a date."

"Good." He parked his car in her extra parking space and got out to open the passenger door for her.

She resisted the urge to slip her hand in his or to lean against him. The knowledge that she'd soon be leaning against his nude, aroused body made her hot.

Inside her apartment, she led him into the living room. She moved across the room to the small bar along the wall by the patio doors. "Can I offer you a drink?"

"No thanks."

She turned to face him. "Dance with me?"

He nodded and crossed the room to her. She picked up a remote control, started a soft jazz CD, and lowered the lights before turning into his arms with a soft, satisfied sigh.

He pressed his hands against her bare back and drew her close.

She linked her arms around his neck and looked up at him. "You're probably used to my shameless behavior by now so I'll come right out and say I want to go to bed now."

"I'm always willing and ready to take you to bed." He released her.

She took his hand and led him from the living room through the dark apartment to her bedroom. The door was open and the moonlight shining through the parted curtains at the balcony doors provided the only illumination in the room.

He unzipped her dress and while raining soft, biting kisses along her neck and shoulders, he pushed the dress off her shoulders to her waist. He lifted his head from her neck and reached around her body to unhook her bra. He tossed the black silk and lace bra aside and pressed a moist kiss against each of her breasts, making her nipples harden.

"You have such lovely breasts, sweetheart."

She stroked her fingers through his hair. "And you have such sweet lips."

He sucked briefly at each nipple before he slid his hands down her body and pushed the dress over her hips. When it fell to her feet, she kicked it aside, followed by her heels.

They removed her pantyhose together, leaving her standing before him in her black thong. She gripped the waistband.

"No. Leave them on."

She wasn't sure what he had in mind, but she nodded. "Okay." She smiled at him, cupping her hand over his groin. "Your turn. Shall I undress you?"

"No. You'll take too long." As he spoke, he began to quickly remove his clothes. In moments, he was naked and semi-erect.

She smiled, as she allowed her gaze to feast on him. Not only was he fit and tanned, but there wasn't an ounce of excess weight on his big body. She stroked her hands over his chest. "You are such a hunk. I feel so lucky you're attracted to me."

"Lucky? If anyone's lucky, it's me. You're beyond beautiful."

"Maybe so, but nowhere near as physically perfect as you are."

He arched a brow. "Are you serious?" He cupped her breasts in his hands. "I'd lock you up and force feed you if you attempted to lose a single ounce."

"Oh, Clay, you know how to make me feel so sexy."

"You are sexy, honey, so that's not a difficult task."

She linked her arms around his neck and pressed a long, warm kiss against his mouth. He slipped his arms around her body, resting his palms against her ass.

They stood near the bed, kissing and caressing, sensuously rubbing their groins together. Her passions rising and her pussy aching, she broke away from him. Eager to feel him sliding inside her, she wrapped her fingers around his cock and gently pumped him.

Slipping her other hand under his cock, she cupped her palm around his balls. When she ran a thumb over the thick head of his shaft and felt several drops of pre-cum, she dropped to her knees, and pressed her face against his groin.

She liked the feel of his pubic hair pressing against her cheek. She turned her head and licked his balls, while gently pumping him. Urged on by his husky groans, she slid her tongue along the underside of his cock before popping the head between her lips. She swirled her tongue around the big head, loving the feel of him inside her mouth.

“Oh, damn, that enough! I need to be inside you.” He reached down and pulled her to her feet. He led her to the bed and urged her onto her back.

She watched with breathless anticipation as he rolled a condom onto his cock. He looked around the room briefly before turning to face her. “Lube?”

Lube? Was he finally going to fuck her ass? Her heart raced and her pussy flooded. “In the bottom drawer of the night table,” she whispered.

Armed with the lube, he smiled at her. “Ready to be loved?”

“Oh, yes.” She rolled onto her stomach, parted her legs, and cupped her hands over her bottom. “I like to lie on my stomach with you on top of me.”

He knelt on the bed between her legs and kissed the backs of her thighs.

She shivered. “That feels nice.”

“It’s about to get nicer, sweetheart.”

He rose onto his knees again and lifted her right foot. “You have pretty feet,” he told her.

She smiled and closed her eyes as he held her foot and kissed each of her toes. Delicious eddies of pleasure fluttered through her as he turned her on her back and kissed his way up from her foot, past her knee to her cunt. He paused briefly to lick and gently suck at her clit before kissing his way down the opposite leg.

After treating her other toes to a sensuous suck, his hands descended on her hips. He turned her back onto her stomach. His warm, insistent lips moved over her ass in a series of circles that caused the muscles in her stomach to ripple.

“Lift your hips for me, honey.”

Keeping her eyes closed, she obeyed. He pushed what felt like two pillows under her hips. She allowed him to arrange them as he liked before she settled against the pillows.

She kept her eyes closed, wanting to be surprised by whatever he did to her next. She moaned softly when he rose and gently parted her cheeks and slipped a lubed finger into her bottom.

Nipping and licking at her ass cheeks, he gently fingered her.

“Oooh. Oh, Clay.”

He slid his lips downward until she felt his lips against her pussy. He slid another finger into her bottom and sucked at her pussy.

A shock of delight sizzled through her. “Oooh, Clay. Clay!”

Still finger fucking her ass, he ate her pussy with an insistent, passionate intensity that had her arching her back and moaning in a mindless haze as her world blew apart, and she came against his probing lips and tongue.

He held her hips and pressed soft kisses against her pussy as she moaned her way through her climax. While the last waves of pleasure fled down her spine, he rose, pressed his cock against her upturned cunt, cupped his hands over her breasts, and thrust forward.

She shuddered and licked her lips as he slid nuts deep into her pussy with one slow, delicious movement. He settled his body against hers, kissed her neck, and thrust quickly in and out of her with a heated intensity that made her toes curl.

Lord, he knew how to fuck a pussy. Curling her hands into the sheet at her sides, she moaned with lust and desire as he fucked her from behind hard and fast. The combination of his weight on her body and the delectable movement of his pistoning cock quickly sent her into another erotic haze.

Pushing her ass back against his groin, she shuddered and came. He groaned, tightened his hands on her breasts, and thrusting deep, he climaxed. He held her tight with his face pressed against her neck while he shuddered and groaned through his climax.

He lay on her for several minutes after he stopped coming. She tolerated his weight on her for as long as she could bear it before she reached back to stroke his thigh. "Clay?"

He lifted his head from her neck. "Am I getting too heavy, honey?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." He kissed her neck, withdrew his cock, and rolled off her.

She kicked the pillows aside and settled against the bed. "Don't be. I love having you on top of me."

He kissed her cheek. "Go to sleep."

She rolled onto her side. He moved behind her. He pulled the cover up over them and tossed an arm over her waist, allowing the tips of his fingers to touch her pussy.

"Oh, Clay, I love having sex with you."

"Making love," he corrected.

So they were back to making love? Smiling, she settled her ass against his groin, and fell asleep.

Drowsy and happy, she opened her eyes when Clay slipped out of bed sometime later. She rolled lazily from her back onto her side, then sat up in surprise. He was reaching for his clothes. "Clay?"

He pulled on his briefs before looking at her. "Did I wake you? I'm sorry." He sat on the edge of one of the chairs on either side of the patio doors and put on his socks.

"Why are you dressing?"

"I have to leave."

She glanced at her bedside clock. "Why? It's only eleven thirty-five." She smiled. "Do you turn into a pumpkin if you're not home by twelve?"

He laughed. "No, but I need to go home."

"I could come with you."

He rose and put on his pants. "I'd like that, but I have a houseguest."

"A houseguest?" She bit her lip. "Male or female?"

He crossed the room to sit on the side of her bed. "Female." He caressed her cheek. "My sister is staying with me. I can't tell her not to sleep around if I stay here with you all night or take you home with me."

She sighed in relief. "Oh. Your sister."

"Yes, Darbi, my sister."

"That's a relief."

He frowned. "Let's set the record straight, Darbi, I never sleep with more than one woman at a time." He slipped his hand down to caress her breasts. "As long as you and I are lovers you can be sure I won't be sharing a bed with anyone else. Can I get the same promise from you?"

She nodded. "Yes. Of course. Please don't let my ... uninhibited behavior with you make you think I'm easy or --"

He pressed his fingers against her lips. "I don't think you're easy so I don't need an explanation. I just want to know that this relationship is an exclusive one -- just you and me."

"I'm a one-man woman and I want you to be the one man I'm woman to." She linked her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Just you and me, Clay."

He embraced her and buried his lips against her breasts. "Just you and me, Darbi." Holding her hips, he sucked her nipples until moisture filled her pussy before he lifted his head and kissed her lips. "Don't get up. I'll lock up after myself."

As he rose, she caught his hand. "How can you leave me after making me wet and needy again?" She pressed the hand she held between her legs. "Look what you've done to me."

He stroked into her pussy. "Nice and wet ... for me?"

"Just for you." She parted her legs and smiled up at him. "Help me dry this out before you go."

"Oh, honey, don't tempt me. If I get back in bed, I won't be getting out again for several hours and I really have to go." He kissed her cheek. "Go to sleep and dream about me until we see each other again." He withdrew his hand and kissed her lips. He reached for his wallet and placed a card on her nightstand.

"What's that?"

"It has my home phone numbers on it."

She smiled up at him.

"Good night, honey."

"Good night." She slid back down in bed and pulled the cover up over her nude body. She lay with her eyes open until she heard her entrance door open and close. Only then did she close her eyes. The knowledge that he had not said he'd call her kept her awake long after he left.

* * * * *

Thoughts of Darbi kept Clay alert and aroused as he drove home. He let himself into his condo just after twelve a.m. and surprised a fully dressed Amber coming down the hall to the front door.

"Clay!" She dropped the keys she held and then snatched them up.

He leaned against the wall and watched her shove the extra keys to his SUV into the pocket of the tight jeans she wore. "And just where are you going, Amber?"

"Going? What makes you think I'm going anywhere, Clay?"

"You're fully dressed and you have the keys to my SUV, which I have not given you permission to drive, by the way."

She frowned and tossed her head. "Well, what do you expect me to do while both you and Damien are out fucking? Sit home playing with myself?"

He straightened and closed the distance between them. "This is the last time I'll tell you to watch your mouth and mind your own business, Amber. Now take your narrow behind back down that hall and into your room. In the morning, we'll talk and set up some ground rules."

"Rules?" She lifted her chin. "I'm eighteen, Clay. I don't need your permission to go out whenever I want to."

"When you're at Harvard living off campus, you can do as you like. While you're living with me, you'll follow my rules."

"What if I decide not to go to Harvard?"

"Not go? Are you nuts? Do you know how hard it is to get into Harvard?"

She shrugged. "It wasn't so hard."

"It's hard enough for applicants who don't ace their SAT's."

She shrugged again.

Her careless attitude annoyed him. He extended his hand. "Give me my keys and go to bed, Amber."

She stamped her foot. "Clay, I just told you --"

"My keys, Amber."

Her eyes shooting sparks at him, she pulled the keys from her pocket and slapped them into his palm. Then she whirled around and started down the hallway.

"Amber."

"Leave me alone, Clay!"

"Amber!"

She stopped and turned to face him, her green eyes shining with tears.

He walked over to her and put his arms around her. After several moments of resistance, she wrapped her arms around him and buried her face against his chest.

"I'm not a child, Clay!"

He kissed her hair. "I know, honey and I'm sorry." He drew back and cupped her face between his palms. "You're going to have to give me a little time to get used to the fact that you're all grown up now, honey. I still have this picture of this skinny pre-teen with the gorgeous eyes and beautiful smile in my head. I need a little time to get use to the change. Bear with me?"

Her lips quivered, but she nodded.

He smiled and kissed her cheek. "That's my sweetheart."

She smiled.

"Now, you want to tell me who you were meeting?"

She flashed him a startled look. "Who was I meeting? No one!" She turned and ran down the hall.

He swore softly. She was definitely hiding something. God, he hoped she hadn't been planning to meet that damned drug-dealing boyfriend of hers. Whoever she'd been meeting would keep for another time. At the moment he was too tired to push the issue.

He reset the condo alarm and went to his bedroom. Undressing quickly, he slipped into bed and was asleep within minutes.

* * * * *

The phone woke Darbi the next morning. Rolling onto her side, she sat up and picked up the receiver lying on her nightstand. "Hello," she said sleepily, settling against her headboard with her eyes closed.

"Hey girl. You planning to sleep the day away?"

She groaned at the sound of Jadan's voice and looked at her the clock-radio on her nightstand. 10:12. "Thank God it's Saturday and I can sleep late."

"No, you can't. Willow's out of town, but she wanted me to get together with you to discuss a gift for Sharde and Jeff. So get your big butt out of bed because I'm five minutes away and I'm hungry."

"Can't you come later?"

"Feeling hard of hearing today? I said I'm five minutes away and hungry. Get your big rump in gear."

"Pain in the ass," she muttered, rubbing her eyes.

Jadan laughed. "Yes, well, I love you too. Be there in five. Bye!"

Darbi put the phone down and turned to bury her face in the pillow Clay had used the night before. It still bore a faint scent of his cologne. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and lay tingling as she savored the memory of their lovemaking the previous night.

The man was addictive. In addition to being a skillful, considerate lover, who always saw to her pleasure before taking his own, she loved the way he held her afterwards -- ensuring she fell asleep feeling satisfied and cherished.

The buzz of her intercom several minutes later sent her bolting into a sitting position before slipping out of bed. She hurried to her drawer to get an Eagles nightshirt, which she pulled over her naked body. She then made her way to the living room and pressed her intercom. "Yes?"

"Open up, girl. It's me and I'm hungry."

She released the entrance door. Several moments later, her apartment doorbell rang. "Yes?"

"Avon calling."

She laughed and opened the door. Jadan, dressed in a beautiful, form fitting silk pantsuit, swept inside. "I need to shower. So go into the living room." She smiled. "Better yet, go make yourself useful in the kitchen."

"Hmmm."

She started down the hall and Jadan followed her into the bedroom and sank down into a chair by the patio doors.

She frowned. "Dani --"

"Don't Dani me, girl. I'm a guest. Guests don't cook. They eat. I'm going to park my butt right here until you shower and get me something to eat."

She cast her gaze ceiling ward and went into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, washed her face, and took a quick shower. When she emerged from the bathroom, she was surprised to find Jadan standing by her bed.

She took off her towel and put on her bra and panties. "What's up?"

"Damn girl. You're sure doing your part to make sure some lucky man doesn't get blue balls, aren't you?"

She paused in the act of stepping into a pair of sweat bottoms to turn and stare at Jadan. She cast a quick glance at the unmade bed and grimaced. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Never mind the bed." Jadan stared down into the wastebasket by her bed. "Have you looked in here?"

"No. Why?" She stepped into her bottoms, pulled on the top, and walked across the room. Her cheeks burned as she stared down into the wastebasket where Clay had tossed his condoms. She snatched up the wastebasket and rushed into the bathroom to empty it.

"So who's the lucky guy scratching your itch these days?" Jadan asked when she returned to the bedroom.

She put the wastebasket down and pulled the sheets off the bed. "His name is Clay."

"Clay? Clay what?"

With the sheet and pillowcases held against her body she turned to face Jadan. "Clayton Frazier."

"Clayton Fra..." Jadan's eyes widened. "You're sleeping with Sharde's ex?"

"No!"

"No? Wasn't that his name? He the CEO of Fra-Tech?"

"Yes, he's the CEO, but he's not her ex."

"Since when?"

"Dani!" She sank onto the side of the bed. "Since never. They were never lovers. They were just friends."

"Oh." Jadan smacked a palm against her forehead. "Of course. I'm losing it." She sat on the side of the bed and slipped an arm around Darbi's shoulder. "Don't mind my goofy slip, girl. I know they weren't lovers."

Darbi sighed. "Do you think she minds?"

"Who? Sharde?"

Darbi nodded.

"Haven't you told her?"

"Yes."

"And she was thrilled for you. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"There you go! That girl is so in love with her big, handsome hunk, she's not going to waste any time worrying about your big, handsome hunk."

"He's not exactly mine."

"He's not? Then how did he come to discard two very used condoms in your bedroom?"

"I mean he doesn't believe in marriage so this is just a temporary thing."

"He doesn't, huh? How long have you two been ... an item?"

"We're not exactly an item. Last night was our first date."

Jadan coughed. "Wow! He got two heaps of loving on your first date? Damn, he must be hot stuff. Nice size dick?"

She blushed. "Dani!"

"Okay. How do you know he doesn't believe in marriage after just one date?"

"We talked about marriage, love, and commitment."

"On a first date? Neither one of you are wasting any time, are you?"

She grimaced. "I guess that was a bit strange, but it felt natural. Last night was our first date, but we've seen each other a two times before last night."

"Judging by the contents on those rubbers, you two had a really good time last night."

She stood up and stared down at Jadan. "Dani!"

Jadan smiled. "Okay. So you don't want to talk about sex. That's okay for you now that you're getting some again. I'm not getting any so it's a favorite subject of mine. So you, Sharde and Willow, lucky dogs, are just going to have to put up with my non-stop sex conversation until I land myself another man. Hopefully someone tall, blue-eyed, reasonably well-hung, and handsome."

Jadan made no excuses for her preference for dating white men.

She studied Jadan's face. "So it's really over between you and Tom?"

She nodded firmly. "It is so over."

"And you're all right with that?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not having a sexual relationship with any man who can't keep his damn dick out of strange pussies as soon as I turn my back."

Darbi sighed. "Fidelity doesn't seem to mean as much to men as it does to women. Now that it's over, you're going to continue sharing the apartment?"

Jadan nodded. "He refuses to leave and I'm sure not leaving. It took us a year on a waiting list to get that apartment and then we had to sign a two-year lease. So since we have two bedrooms, we've decided to be adults and share the apartment until the lease is up."

Darbi shook her head. "I know you and he waited a long time to get that apartment, but how is sharing an apartment with an ex-lover going to work?"

Jadan shrugged. "We'll be okay. We've both agreed that we won't bring any lovers there. As long as neither of us do, we can get through the next year and a half."

"Then what happens?"

"One of us is getting the hell out and it ain't gonna be me." She tilted her head. "Speaking of tall, dark, and white, how come you're dating a white guy?"

"We're not dating."

"Oh? You mean you're going to fuck him, but not date him?"

"No! Okay ... so we're dating ... temporarily."

“Ah huh. Good in bed?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

“Hmmm. Reasonably hung?”

“Dani --”

“Oh, come on, Darbi. Toss a sexually frustrated pal a bone, won't you?”

“He ... he's very well hung and since you're being so damned nosy, he knows how to use his ... weapon with devastating effect.”

Jadan pretended to swoon and fanned herself. “Enough, girl! You're making me green with unbridled lust.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “But never mind teasing me with talk of sex with a big, handsome, well-hung white guy who knows how to fuck. Oh, lord, just the thought of spending time with such a wonder.”

Darbi frowned. “Wasn't Tom a good lover?”

Jadan shrugged. “He was adequate when it came to dick size and skill.” She leered. “If he had a big dick he knew how to use, I might have had more of a problem kicking him out of my bed than I did. If I don't land a blue-eyed, well-hung lover soon, I'm going to have to start dating black men again. I've about had it with average.”

“Come on, Jadan. Penis size isn't everything.”

“Oh? That's easy for you to say when you have a well-hung hunk getting the job done for you. I don't care what women with small-dicked men say, there is nothing like fucking a man with a big dick. You've had Martin and now Clay. Tell me with a straight face you don't prefer them to those other two medium-sized jerks you dated after Martin.”

Darbi averted her gaze.

“No comment, huh? I thought not. I rest my case.”

Darbi shrugged. “So. You have any prospects?”

She shook her head. “If I were half as gorgeous as you, the men would be tripping over themselves to bare their dicks for my lustful inspection.”

Darbi laughed. “Dani, you are impossible, girl. And you're pretty too, so get off the pity pot.”

Jadan smiled, but shook her head. “No pity pot here, but I'm hardly in your league when it comes to looks. It always amazes me, Sharde, and Willow, that you don't realize just how stunningly gorgeous you are. No wonder your Clay can't keep that big dick of his out of you.”

Darbi blushed. “Dani!”

Jadan held up her hands, palms out, in a show of surrender. “Okay. Sorry. Anyway, it's time you fed me. We can discuss Sharde's gift over breakfast.”

Darbi nodded. “Okay.”

“And if you should just happen to slip and describe just how big your hunk's dick is and just how well he uses it, I promise to forgive you.”

Darbi laughed. “Don't count on that.”

“Oh, well, can't blame a girl for trying.”

Chapter Seven

Clay lay on his back on his weight bench, bench pressing when Amber appeared in the door of his home gym. "You're wanted on the phone, Clay."

He continued lifting the weight above his body. "As you can see I'm busy. Take a message."

"Are you sure? She sounds very eager to talk to you."

"She? What's her name?"

"She said her name is Darbi. What kind of name is that for a sister? What was her mother thinking?"

A rush of pleasure washed over him. He lifted the weight into the prongs above his head and sat up. He reached for the towel on the floor near his feet and wiped the sweat off his body as he walked across the room to the wall that held the phone.

Amber stood watching him with a smirk on her face. "Is she the one who left her perfume all over you last night?"

"Do you mind?"

"You want privacy so you can talk about love and sex?"

"Amber --"

"Okay. I was just asking. She really likes you. She sent you flowers."

He stared at her. "Flowers?"

"Yep. They came half hour ago. A dozen roses. You must have really rocked her world last night."

He narrowed his gaze.

She laughed and left the room.

He waited a moment before lifting the receiver. "Darbi? Hi."

"Hi. Tell me, Clay, am I going to have to do all the calling and all the chasing in this relationship?"

"Maybe." He smiled. "I like having you chase me ... especially if you're going to start showering me with roses."

"Yes, well ... maybe I'd like not to have to work so hard to get your interest."

"You already have my interest."

"Are you going to make me struggle to keep it?"

"No."

"Good. So do you have any plans for tonight?"

"Unfortunately I do, but what about you? Do you have plans for tomorrow?"

"None I can't break."

"Then I was hoping we could spend the day together, starting with breakfast and ending with dinner and dessert."

Her voice softened. "Dessert? What kind did you have in mind?"

"I think you know I'm very fond of chocolate pussy."

"Oh." She sounded breathless. "What a coincidence. I just happen to have one of those lying around."

"I'd be more than happy to eat it for you."

"You would?"

"Oh yeah."

"And I'd be more than happy to have you eat it."

He smiled. "So it's a date, then?"

"Yes."

"What time do you want me to come?"

"Eightish?"

"I'll be there. Can I bring anything ... breakfast? Do you want to eat out or shall I stop somewhere and pick something up?"

"Let's eat in. Do you like pancakes and sausages? Home fries ... grits?"

"I was born in the South, but I wasn't raised there. I can do without the grits."

"Where were you raised?"

"When I was five months old, my parents moved to Jamaica. I had a live-in tutor for six years before I was sent to school in England when I was ten. After graduation from college, I accepted a job in Philly and moved here, where I've been ever since. Philly is home now."

"So no grits for you?"

"No, but I like my pancakes well done and thin and my home fries without onions."

"Got it. So I'll see you tomorrow morning around eight?"

"Yes."

"Bye."

"Bye."

He hung up the phone.

"So are we still on for tonight or are you going to be too busy eating chocolate pussy to take me dancing?"

He clenched his teeth and swung around. "Is that your idea of privacy, Amber? If it is, don't be surprised when you find me listening on the other end of your phone calls!"

She blanched and averted her gaze. "Okay, so I shouldn't have listened. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just don't do it again or I promise you, I might forget myself and spank your narrow behind!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Keep trying me and we'll both find out if I'd dare." He gave her a cool look and left the weight room. He stalked to his bedroom. With his gaze on the red roses sitting on his nightstand, he called Jamaica. "Mom, we need to talk about Amber."

"What about her? Has Paul found her? Oh, Clayton, is, my baby okay? You haven't allowed him to hurt her, have you?"

He shook his head and closed his eyes briefly. "Calm down, Mom. She's fine, but having her here is ... inconvenient. I'm sending her home."

"You can't! Xavier is away on business and you know how impossible she can be when her father's not home."

He resisted the urge to say Xavier wasn't much good at handling Amber when he was home. He'd spoiled and pampered her until she was a certified brat. "Mom --"

"Both Amber and I are depending on you, Clayton. You have three bedrooms and a big pool to help tire her out. How can having her there be inconvenient ... unless ... oh, Clayton, surely your love life isn't more important than your little sister! Will it kill you to forego a few dates for your sister's well being?"

He clenched his jaw. His mother was a pro at making him feel guilty for things that were not his fault. One of these days he was going to put his foot down. But not today. "Fine, Mom. She can stay for a few weeks, but then --"

"Thank you, Clayton! I don't know what I'd do without your help with her. Xavier tries, but she wraps him around her finger with very little effort and I'm desperate to keep her away from Paul."

He wasn't sure she was being kept away from Paul. Who had she been planning to meet the night before? Clearly he would need to keep a closer eye on Amber.

He reassured his mother and hung up. Plucking the small card from the roses, he opened it.

I'm looking forward to seeing you again. Darbi.

Smiling, he stretched out on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. If not for Amber's presence, he could spend the entire weekend with Darbi instead of just Sunday. He wondered what the chances were of getting Damien to run interference with Amber.

A knock on his bedroom door interrupted his thoughts. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Yes?"

"Are you decent?"

"Yes."

The door opened and Amber walked in. She sank down onto the bed beside him and slipped her arms around him. "I'm sorry, Clay. I know having me here is a pain in the neck for you."

He embraced her. "Don't be silly, Amber. You're always welcome here."

She stared up at him, her eyes glistening with tears. "I promise I won't eavesdrop again."

He nodded. "I know honey. Now where are you dragging me to tonight?"

"There's this new club I've heard about --"

He hoped his smile concealed his dismay. Another night spent having his hearing ruined at some teenybopper club. If Amber didn't find some friends of her own soon, he'd be deaf before he turned forty.

* * * * *

The next morning after breakfast, Clay stood behind Darbi in her shower. With the warm water cascading over their nude bodies, he rained kisses against her ear as he cupped her breasts in his hands. Her ass was warm and tight and with the first full stroke into it, he felt as if he were in heaven.

"I love your beautiful ass almost as much as I love your sweet pussy," he whispered.

She tightened her anal muscles around his cock, sending incredible sensations through him. His stomach muscles rippled at the exquisite pressure surround his cock. Darbi was the first woman in years, other than Cami, who could take his entire cock in her ass without squirming in an effort to dislodge a few inches.

Each time he thrust his cock balls deep in her, a jolt of unbridled lust and desire thundered through him. Tightening his hands on her breasts, he struggled not to come. He was determined to ensure he satisfied her before he released his tenuous control and came.

Bending his knees more, he thrust up -- deep, and hard -- in her ass. "Oh, damn, Darbi, you have a sweet ass."

She moaned and tossed her head against his shoulder. "Oooh ... oooh, Clay! Oooh, God! Oh, God, I'm almost there, Clay! Almost there!"

"Come for me," he urged, sliding one hand down from her breasts to rub her clit and stroke into her wet pussy. He pulled his hips back and then thrust into her bottom with long, deep, strokes. He felt her ass jiggling and fucked her harder. "Come for me, baby."

"Oooh, Clay!" She cried out, slammed her ass against his groin, rotating her hips wildly. He shuddered and pinched one of her nipples in an effort to hold back the wave of lust and pleasure washing over him.

"Clay!" She tightened her anal muscles around him as she exploded, drenching his fingers.

Keeping one arm around her waist, he removed his fingers from her pussy and sucked them as he continued pumping into her ass, his climax rapidly building.

She leaned against him, still moaning softly, grinding her big, brown ass against his groin. She reached back and gripped his hips in an apparent effort to draw him in deeper into her.

His control snapped and his orgasm thundered through him. He groaned, gripped her hips, and thrust wildly into her tight passage, his stomach muscles rippling as he came. He'd always loved anal sex, but fucking her ass gave him a pleasure so intense and overwhelming, it bordered on pain. Longing to hold onto the sweet sensations, he eased out of her bottom, ripped off the condom, and turned her around.

With his gaze on her bare, wet slit, he pressed her back against the shower wall. Reaching a hand down to part her slick folds, he gripped his bare cock with his other hand, rubbed the head along her slit, and pressed his cock head against her entrance.

Her eyes flew open and she pressed a hand against his stomach. "Clay?"

"I want some pussy," he told her, his voice almost unrecognizable.

"Get a condom."

He shook his head. "I want it now."

"But, Clay --"

He pushed her hand aside and drove his hips forward. The head of his cock slid between her outer lips and lodged just inside her. He groaned and slipped his hands around her body to cup her ass, intending to slowly impale her on his cock.

She shook her head. Jerking her hips back, she shoved against his shoulders. "Clay! Wait!"

He tightened his hands on her ass and drew her forward, shuddering as several inches of his cock penetrated her pussy.

"No! Clay! Stop! Now!"

He froze, stared at her for several long moments, and then eased away from her. Realizing how close he'd come to having unprotected sex with her against her will, he groaned and sank to his knees, closing his eyes and clenching his fists in an effort to regain control of himself.

"Clay? What's wrong?"

He opened his eyes. She kneeled in front of him, a frown marring her pretty face. "Clay?"

He shook his head, wrapped his arms around her waist, and buried his head against her neck. "Oh, damn, Darbi. You're going to drive me nuts."

She stroked her hands down his back and laughed. "Sex with me that good for you?"

He lifted his head and stared down into her eyes. "Darbi ..."

"Yes?"

He shook his head and stood up. He bent and lifted her to her feet. "I need a shower."

She smiled. "We're having one."

"No. I mean I need a cold shower alone. Do me a favor, Darbi, get out of here and go put on lots of clothes."

She touched his cheek. "It wouldn't have been the end of the world if you'd kept pushing, Clay."

"Then why did you stop me?"

"Not because I didn't want your naked cock in me as much as you wanted it there. I stopped you because that's a big step we shouldn't take lightly. And I knew you'd regret it later -- just as I would have regretted it if we'd have sex the night we met without protection."

"I want to be inside you with nothing between us. I want to come in you so badly I don't know how much longer I can resist the urge." The admission left him feeling vulnerable and fearful that he was in over his head with her.

She cupped his face between her palms and pressed a quick kiss against his lips. "Anytime you want to fuck me without a condom, I'll be ready and willing, Clay."

For a moment, he was tempted to test her resolve. If he gripped her hips and thrust his bare cock at her again, how would she respond this time? Would she push against his stomach to hold him off or would she part her legs and welcome him into her pussy? For the first time he wondered if she was on the pill or using some other method of birth control.

"Clay?"

He sucked in a deep breath. "Give me some time to cool off, honey."

"Okay." She kissed his cheek and stepped out of the stall, pulled the shower cap off her head, and closed the door.

He turned off the hot water and stood shivering under the cool water until he had regained his control.

She'd left the bedroom when he emerged from the bathroom. He dressed quickly and then went into the living room. She stood staring out the patio doors, fully dressed.

He walked over to her, embraced her from behind, and kissed her neck. "I'm sorry I lost my head. I'll try to make sure it doesn't happen again."

She turned in his arms, smiling. "I kind of like that you lost your head. I thought I was going to lose my mind. That was the most intensely sweet ass fuck I've ever had."

"I hurt you, didn't I?"

She shrugged. "Just a little when you were about to come, but I enjoyed every second of it, Clay. Please don't apologize or be sorry for giving me one of the most incredible experiences of my life."

He hugged her. "Let's go for a drive. I need to clear my head."

She linked her arms around his neck. "It's going to be a beautiful day. Why don't we have a picnic? I can make sandwiches and we can take blankets." She smiled at him. "I know of this secluded spot in Fairmount Park."

He arched a brow. "Why would we need a secluded spot for a picnic?"

She stroked her fingers through his hair. "So we can enjoy our dessert in private, of course. There's this big rock with a semi level top where we can spread the blankets. I can lean over it, and you can enter me from behind and have your choice of desserts -- pussy or ass. Your choice. Interested?"

With his cock aching, he studied her beautiful face. "You've made love there before?"

She sighed softly and nodded. "Would that bother you?"

He shook his head slowly, sliding his hands down to hold her ass. "Why should what happened in the past bother me when you're mine now?" He slipped his hands into the waistband of her slacks and panties and caressed her ass. "Besides, I'll make you forget whoever fucked you there."

She moistened her lips. "It was --"

He pressed his finger against her lips. "It doesn't matter who it was. All that will matter is what happens there between us today."

She sucked in a breath. "Aren't you the confident one?"

He slapped her ass and released her. "Yes, I am. I'll go get the condoms and lube."

Later that day after a two-hour drive through various sections of Fairmount Park, naked and aroused, Darbi leaned back against the blankets that covered a large rock, moaning softly.

An equally naked Clay knelt between her parted legs. With his lips and tongue in constant motion, he finger fucked her ass as he feasted on her pussy. He ate her with a slow

hunger that kept her writhing in ecstasy against his mouth. She moaned and shuddered through two wonderful climaxes, before he withdrew his fingers from her ass, and rose.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "That was wonderful, Clay."

His lips and lower face glistened with her juices. He licked his lips, smiled down at her, and moved between her legs. Leaning over her, he cupped his hands over her breasts. "It's time for dessert. Ready?"

She nodded, eager to have him slid in whichever of her openings he wanted. "Do you want me to turn over?"

"No. Just lay back, scoot your beautiful ass near the edge, lift your legs for me, and close your eyes."

"Close my eyes? What ... what are you going to do?"

He massaged her breasts. "Do you trust me?"

"I'm deep in the woods with you naked. Of course I trust you."

"Then do as you're told, Darbi."

The authoritative tone surprised her. "Are you going to turn caveman on me, Clay?"

He narrowed his gaze, his green eyes glittering in the afternoon light. "It's time you realized you're my woman and I'm in charge of this relationship. Not you." He pinched her nipples -- hard.

Even as she gasped, a shudder of pleasure danced down her spine at the new element he introduced in their relationship. Although she had enjoyed chasing him, she liked the idea that he was now ready to take control.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Darbi."

Her heart racing, she did as he asked. Asked? Ordered was more like it. She caught her breath as he inserted the tip of the lube into her rear.

Using the weight of his upper body to press her legs against her body, he leaned forward, pressing his cock against her ass.

"Yes!" she whispered as he pierced her bottom. She was so aroused she would have welcomed one hard, painful thrust that sent him plowing deep. He had other ideas. Holding her hips, he took possession of her ass with a slow, delicious movement that allowed her to enjoy each inch of the thick, hard cock invading her.

By the time he was balls deep in her, her pussy had flooded again and her bottom felt hot and stretched -- just as she liked it. She licked her lips and cupped her hands over her breasts.

He leaned over her, placing his hands on the blanket beside her body and started to fuck her ass. She knew he had exhausted his patience on the exquisite slide into her and had no plans to linger. From the first few strokes, he fucked her hard and deep, not making an

effort to be particularly gentle. With her legs pressed against her body, he achieved deeper penetration than he had earlier in the shower.

The combination of lying on the hard rock and having her ass filled with a long, thick cock sent her lust meter spinning quickly out of control. She shuddered with each semi-painful thrust into her bottom. And when he leaned over further and pinched her nipples, forcing her legs even lower, she cried out, her pussy convulsed, and she came.

Rubbing his palms roughly over her breasts, he fucked her through her climax, eliciting gasps of pleasure-pain from her as he deepened his thrusts with an almost mind-numbing fierceness before he groaned her name, slammed his hips against her ass, driving his cock in as deep as he could get it, called out her name again, and came.

He lay against her, touching his lips against hers. "My woman ... my pussy ... my ass. Mine. All mine."

Her position was highly uncomfortable, but she had enjoyed the rough fuck. "Oh, God, yes! Yes, Clay! I'm yours!"

"Damn right you are." He pressed a quick kiss against her lips before he lifted his body, withdrew from his cock from her, and sliding his hands along her legs, allowed her to lower them.

She rose on shaking legs and leaned against his damp chest, feeling weak and stiff.

He lifted her head and stared down at her, a smile on his handsome face. "Damn, that was good."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

He arched a brow. "Don't try and tell me you didn't and expect me to believe it."

"You think lying on this damned rock while you slammed into my ass like a jackhammer was fun?"

He reached a hand down to probe her pussy, slick with her release. His smile turned into a grin. "You're very wet for someone who didn't enjoy what just happened and let's not forget this was your idea."

She flushed, bit her lip, and then laughed. "Arrogant, overconfident, bastard!"

"Don't forget handsome, skillful, and well-hung."

She sighed. "And so modest too."

He laughed and tipped up her chin.

She stared up at him. "You enjoyed hurting me, didn't you, Clay?"

He frowned. "If I'd thought I was doing anything you didn't want, I would have stopped."

"Are you saying you think I like pain?"

"I'm saying I know you enjoyed our fuck, Darbi, so don't try to tell me you didn't. Now part your legs for me and give me a kiss."

Unable to resist him, she spread her legs, and parted her lips.

Holding her by the ass, he drew her close and pressed several, long, warm kisses against her lips before trailing his mouth across her cheek to her ear. "Will you trust me not to hurt you, sweetheart?"

His voice was soft and reassuring. She nodded. "Yes, Clay."

"Good. Now bend over the rock and part your lovely legs for me."

She drew away from him. "Clay?"

"I want some pussy and you're going to give me some. Aren't you?"

"Yes," she whispered. She turned, lay her upper body over the rock, and spread her legs wide for him, eager to be fucked again.

* * * * *

The next six weeks passed in a whirlwind of excitement for Darbi. There was no longer any doubt that she had become Clay's woman and he was in charge of their relationship. She and Clayton saw each other four to five times each week. He took her to expensive restaurants, sent her extravagant bouquets that had all the women in the office sighing with envy, gave her sinfully delicious and outrageously priced chocolates, and swept her off her feet.

They generally had sex several times during the week. Sometimes he made soft, sweet love to her, almost as if he worshiped her body. At other times, he fucked her hard and fast, but still with an underlying tenderness.

Then there were the times when they had anal sex. Their anal encounters were rarely gentle, so he always made sure she had a vaginal climax before he entered her ass. Once he had his entire cock buried in her ass, he seemed to lose his ability to control himself. He would fuck her with the hunger of a man having sex for the first time in years.

Although anal sex with him was frequently tinged with pain, particularly just before he came, she loved his big dick plowing in and out of her ass, driving them both into a sexual frenzy which left them both almost incoherent.

Each sexual encounter was intense, physically and emotionally. Even though he never attempted to touch her without a condom again, he would often lie trembling in her arms with his face buried in her breasts after he'd come.

Later, she realized, it was during those times when he seemed so vulnerable that she began to slowly fall in love with him.

* * * * *

As Sharde became more involved in planning her wedding, she took more time off from work. Darbi temporarily took on more of Sharde's duties. The added responsibilities,

combined with long dates with Clayton proved taxing, but exhilarating. No matter how tired she was, she looked forward to every date with him. She knew she'd done the unthinkable and fallen in love with him when she realized how lost and restless she felt on the few nights a week they spent apart.

"Hello? Anyone in there?"

Darbi blinked, shook her head, and looked at Jadan and Willow who sat in the seats in front of her office desk. "I'm sorry. My mind wandered. What did you say?"

Jadan and Willow exchanged quick glances before Jadan spoke. "We're heading out clubbing tonight and since you're not seeing your hunk, you are coming with us."

Darbi shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm a little tired. I think I'll just stay in and watch a movie tonight."

Willow rolled her eyes. "Hey, girl, you're thirty-two, not forty-two. That's too young to stay home on a Friday night waiting for a man to call."

Darbi blushed. "I don't plan to wait for him to call. He has other plans."

"Doing what?"

She shrugged. "I have no idea. He didn't say and I didn't ask, but we're spending the day together tomorrow."

"Great. And we three are spending the tonight together." She rose. "Don't make us drag your big butt out of your condo, girl. Eight o'clock tonight we're going clubbing. End of story. Be ready or else."

Darbi looked at Willow who grinned and followed Jadan out of the office. Darbi shrugged, deciding it might be nice to go out with the girls again. Whenever she and Clay danced, it was slow and close together. Although she loved slow dragging with him, feeling his cock hardening as they swayed close together, it would be fun to let her hair down by going a little wild on a club floor.

Later that night, she, Jadan, and Willow shared a small table at a new club on Delaware Avenue. The club's clientele seemed to range from twenty up to the late thirties.

The dance music was fast, the lights low, and the atmosphere festive. A tall, handsome man with smooth, dark skin, and the assurance of a Billy Dee Williams stopped by table. He smiled at Darbi. "Hi. Would you like to dance?"

He had a deep voice that sent a pleasant tingle down Darbi's spine. Had she not been involved with Clay, she would have eagerly accepted the invitation. She smiled, but shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm sitting this one out."

He smiled and moved away from the table.

Willow stared at her, shaking her head. "Girl, do not bother trying to tell us you are not in love with Clay after turning down that big, handsome, well-hung hunk."

Darbi laughed. "Get a grip, Will, and how do you know he was well-hung?"

Willow grinned. "Girl, any man that fine has just got to have a big dick to back up all that sexy masculinity."

Jadan nodded. "Ain't it the truth."

Jadan and Willow laughed and high-fived each other.

Willow and her lover Marquee had an open relationship and occasionally slept with others. Darbi shrugged. "Then why don't you go ask him to dance?"

"I think I will." Willow rose. "Who knows? Maybe the dance will lead to a fuck. Marquee's out of town and I am feeling lonely and neglected. Wish me luck."

Darbi and Jadan watched her weave her path through the people crowded around the dance floor before a handsome blonde paused by their table, his gaze on Jadan. "Would you like to dance?"

"Love to." Jadan rose and followed him onto the dance floor.

Darbi sat sipping a drink when a tall man with dark hair standing on the edge of the dance floor attracted her attention. The shape of his head and the width of his shoulders reminded her of Clay. He stood talking to a slender blonde. When the blond turned, Darbi smiled. She looked all of sixteen or seventeen with her long, beautiful hair framing a pretty, honey-golden complexion. Her dress was tight and short, exposing her modest breasts and long legs.

Apparently the man liked his women biracial and young enough to be jailbait. About to look away, Darbi caught her breath as the man turned and she found herself looking at Clay. She blinked and shook her head. It wasn't Clay. It was Damien. But the strobe light shone on his temple, highlighting the silver there.

She sat, stunned, gasping as the man ... the man? The man was Clay. He put his arm around the girl's slender shoulders and led her onto the dance floor. Darbi looked away and swallowed the contents of her drink, tears stinging her eyes.

When she looked up again, she couldn't locate Clay or the girl on the crowded dance floor. She wiped an angry hand across her face. Damn him. How could he cheat on her when she gave herself to him so freely? Except for that first time they'd had anal sex, she had never denied him anything he wanted. He'd taken her in the shower, in the park, on her patio, and in his pool.

How could he want someone else when she was willing to do anything to please his cheating ass?

She gave an angry shake of her head. Damn him!

When another man asked her to dance, she nodded, and followed him onto the dance floor. And if he wanted to take her home and fuck her, she'd let him. Clay wouldn't be the only one not sleeping alone that night.

She spent the rest of the evening at the club with the man who introduced himself as Jamal. He was tall, dark, and had a slow, warm smile that warmed her each time he turned it

on her. Nevertheless, when he asked for her phone number at the end of the night, she stammered.

“What's wrong, Darbi?”

She moistened her lips and met his dark gaze. “I'm sort of seeing someone.”

“Is it serious?”

She was in love with another man who apparently didn't share her view of the importance of fidelity in an exclusive relationship. She shrugged. “It is for me.”

“But not for him?”

Even now Clay might be lying in bed with his jailbait lover, holding her and whispering sweet words as he fucked her into an incredible climax. “Unfortunately not.”

“But you're not ready to break it off?”

A shock of pain flashed through her at the thought of ending her relationship with Clay. “I don't know. I ... I have to think about it and weigh my options.”

“Can I give you my number in case you decide it's time to move on?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“So what's wrong, Darbi?” Jadan asked as she drove Darbi home after dropping Willow off.

Darbi sat in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead. “Nothing.”

“Then why did you spend so much time slow dancing with that tall, dark, hunk with the ready smile?”

She sighed. “I saw Clay at the club.”

“Why didn't you introduce us ... oh, my God. You mean you saw him with someone else?”

“Yes. She looked about sixteen. She was probably older than she looks, but still. He's a 39-year-old ... pervert.”

“What did he have to say for himself?”

“I ... I didn't confront him.”

“Why not?”

“I supposed I should have, but I wasn't ready for a scene.”

“Are you going to?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What would be the point, Dani? He'd just lie and deny it and make it worse.”

“How do you know if you don't at least give him a chance to explain himself? As strange as it seems, he might actually have an explanation.”

"There's no explanation that will satisfy me. It's over between us."

Jadan sighed. "If you need to talk."

She nodded. "Thanks, but I just want to go home and ... sleep on it."

* * * * *

The private line in Clay's bedroom rang as he stepped out of the shower the next morning. Wrapping a towel around his body, he walked into his bedroom, glancing at the clock on his tallboy. It was just after six a.m.

He sat on the side of his bed and picked up his cordless phone. Noting Darbi's number, he smiled. "Hi, honey."

"I hope I didn't wake you, Clay, but I wanted to reach you before you left."

Noting the cool tone, he frowned. "Did you want me to stop and pick up something on the way over? I'm just about to dress and I'll see you in about forty minutes or so."

"Actually I called to cancel our date."

"Why?"

"I'm not feeling well. I think I just need to stay home and be lazy today."

"We don't have to go out or make love. Why don't I pick up some soup, give you an hour or so to sleep in, and then come around ten or eleven?"

"That sounds great, but I just want to sleep and rest today, Clay. I have a long day tomorrow and need the rest."

He sighed, feeling disappointment settle on his shoulders like a lead weight. "Okay. I'll talk to you later tonight --"

"I'm going to turn the ringer off, Clay. I just want to rest."

He raked a hand through his hair, frowning. He couldn't recall the last time she'd been too tired to see him. "Is there something you want to tell me, Darbi?"

"No. I'll talk to you."

"When?"

"What?"

"When will you talk to me?"

"Soon. Bye!"

"Darbi --"

"Bye!"

He sat holding the phone after she'd hung up. He dialed her number and got a busy signal. When he tried five minutes later, he again got a busy signal. So instead of turning off the ringer, she'd taken the phone off the hook. Women. If she didn't call him that night, he'd

visit her at her office the following day and insist she tell him what the hell her problem was. Damn if he was going to allow her to start jerking his chain.

With his plans for the day shot to hell, he decided to go work out. He pulled on a pair of shorts over his briefs, put on socks and sneakers, and went to the weight room.

Chapter Eight

Darbi spent the morning lying in bed, fighting the urge to cry. Around eleven, her sadness turned to anger. If he'd wanted to date a girl young enough to be his daughter, he shouldn't have promised her their relationship was exclusive. And if wanted other females, he had no business fucking her ass as if he owned it.

If he thought she'd allow him to get away with making a fool out of her, he was nuts!

She got up, showered, dressed, and got in her car. At his condo, she stood outside the high, black, ornate gate with her finger pressed on the bell. To her surprise, she heard the buzzer that released the lock, almost immediately. She opened the gate and walked into the private courtyard! His car and his SUV occupied two of the four parking spots in front of his condo.

She crossed the brick courtyard to the front door and rang the bell. One of the double hung oak doors opened. The slender blonde who Clay had spent the night before with stood there. She arched a brow and turned to call over her shoulder, "Ms. Chocolate P is here to see you, Clay."

Darbi blushed as Clay, dressed in a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt appeared behind the girl, his green eyes narrowed.

The girl laughed and disappeared behind him into the condo.

He stared after her, the muscles in his jaw clenching. When he turned to look at Darbi, his eyes softened and he smiled. "Darbi. This is a pleasant surprise. I didn't -- hey!" He broke off, his right hand shooting out to catch and immobilize her wrist before her palm could connect with his cheek. "Look, I know you heard what she said, but that's no reason to try to slap me!"

She jerked at her wrist and was surprised when he immediately released it. She glared at him, blinking rapidly to hold tears at bay. "I don't ever want to see you again, you liar!"

"Liar?" His lips tightened. "I don't lie, Darbi. Suppose you tell me what you think I've lied about and we'll work your problem out together."

"You're my only problem! I don't want to see you again. What else do you need to know?" A lump of misery rose in her throat and she turned and walked away.

"Darbi!"

She kept walking towards the gate.

He followed her. His hand closed on her arm just as she reached the gate. He swung her around. Noting the angry look in his eyes, she thought he was about to shake her.

She tried to jerk away. "Let me go!"

"The hell I will!" He tightened his grip on her arm. "What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? It was trusting you, Clay!" She swung her left hand up towards his cheek.

As before, he caught her wrist before she could slap him. "Stop trying to slap me and tell me what's wrong."

"She's what's wrong!"

"She? She who?"

"I saw you last night, Clay. I saw you with her."

"You saw me with who? What the hell are you babbling about?"

"That blonde jailbait inside! I saw you together at the club last night."

Although he arched a brow and stared at her, she saw no evidence of guilt in his green eyes. "You did?"

"Yes! So don't bother denying you were with her."

"Why should I deny it? Of course I was with her. If you saw us, why didn't you come over?"

"And say what? Do what? Last night wasn't enough? She's still here with you!"

His gaze narrowed and he suddenly laughed. "You get more gorgeous every time I see you, but you are being a silly, twit, Darbi! That's Amber inside!"

"I don't care what her name is!"

"It's Amber," he said again.

"So?"

"Amber. My little sister, Amber."

"I don't care who ..." She stopped struggling to get away from him. "Your sister?"

"Yes, you lovely, jealous twit! Are you nuts, Darbi? I'll be forty years old in a few months. Why the hell would I want to waste my time with a flat behind eighteen-year-old when I have you?"

She stared him, blinking hard to keep the flood of tears of relief from spilling down her cheeks. "How was I supposed to know she was your sister? You never introduced us."

"That's because you never expressed any interest in meeting her."

"So it's my fault you're so secretive?"

He released her. "You're an insecure idiot, Darbi!"

She sucked in a breath and stared at him. "Don't."

"Don't?" He took a deep breath and when he spoke again, his voice had softened.

"Look, I understand that your ex was unfaithful and in addition to hurting you, it probably made you more inclined to think all men are cheaters. I understand that and I can sympathize with you, but I'm not him. I don't lie and I don't cheat.

"Please tell me what the hell have I done to make you jump to the conclusion that you can't trust me out of your sight? There's something you'd better understand, right now. If I wanted to see other women, Darbi, I would and I wouldn't bother lying to you about it either. I'm not seeing anyone else for one very good reason -- because I have no desire to date anyone but you."

She swallowed and wiped at her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'd better go."

He reached out and drew her into his arms. He held her close, pressing his lips against her cheek. "You're not going anywhere. Come and meet Amber, my very own pain in the ass."

He lifted her chin and wiped at her cheeks. "Why are you crying? Did it hurt when you thought I was with another woman?"

"Why should I care? I just didn't like the idea of your trying to be sneaky."

"I see. So you'd have been okay with my seeing another woman, as long as I'd told you beforehand?"

"Yes."

"Liar!"

"Who says I'm lying? I spent the night dancing with this tall, ebony hunk."

"Did you?" His gaze narrowed and then shrugged. "If that's supposed to make me jealous, it doesn't. You might have spent the night dancing with him, but you're here now with me."

She lighted her chin. "Who says all we did was dance?"

"I do."

"A lot can happen during a dance ... kissing, grinding ... even fucking."

"Really? You might have kissed him, but you sure as hell aren't going to convince me you slept with him."

His confidence annoyed her. Why the hell was he so sure of his hold over her? "Why not?"

"Because you're a one-man woman and I'm your man." He bent his head and kissed her lips. "I meant it when I told you I don't sleep with more than one woman at a time. As long as we're sleeping together, I won't be warming any other woman's bed. Okay?"

She averted her gaze and nodded. She hated that while he was so sure of her, she was not yet sure of him.

Almost as if he understood her fears, he smiled at her. "You're my woman and I'm your man, Darbi. You are the only woman I want in my arms and in my bed. I haven't thought about another woman since the night we met. You satisfy all my needs and I have no interest in any other woman. Okay?"

"Yes."

"Good." He kissed her again, put his arm around her shoulders, and urged her back across the courtyard to the open front door where Amber stood with a smirk on her face.

Clay bent to whisper in her ear, "Don't mind her. You'll like her once you get to know her."

She cast him a dubious look, but smiled and extended her hand when he introduced her and Amber.

The introductions over, Clay turned to Amber. "Take the keys to my SUV and get lost."

Amber grinned. "How long do you want me to stay lost?"

"Call Damien and spend the night with him."

"What? You know he only has one bedroom. He'll expect me to sleep on his sofa."

"So?"

"So, I'm not sleeping on his sofa. Why should I? How long does it take you to eat pussy? Is she a nympho you have to do all night before she's satis--"

Feeling an angry flush spread across her face, Darbi clenched her hands into fists.

Clay swore softly and pointed towards the front door. "Get out of here before you make me forget myself, Amber."

She bit her lip, casting a brief, contrite look at Darbi. "That was mean. I'm so --"

"I'm not interested in hearing anything you have to say, Amber. Get out! Now!"

"But, Clay! I said I was so --"

"Out!"

Darbi watched her snatch up a set of keys on the hall table and run out the door. She sighed and looked at Clay. "Go after her and tell her it's okay, Clay."

His jaw clenched. "The hell I will! She's a brat and it will do her good not to get away with the shit she dishes out for once."

She tugged at his hand. "She's upset, Clay."

"So am I."

“Yes, but you’re not an insecure teenager. Go after her and tell her everything is okay.”

He hesitated, swore softly, and then left.

Darbi closed her eyes and leaned against the wall near the front door. Taking several deep breaths, she savored the knowledge that she was still the only woman in Clay's life.

“Are you all right?”

She opened her eyes as Clay reentered and closed the door behind him. She nodded. “What about her?”

“She's a pain in the ass. I don't know what happened to the sweet, little teenager who never had a bad thing to say about anyone. For the last few months, she's gone out of her way to be disrespectful and as nasty as possible.” He stood in front of her, cupping his palms over her cheeks. “I'm sorry if she embarrassed you.”

She smiled. “I'm too relieved she's your sister and not your jailbait lover to be anything but pleased.”

He pressed his body against hers. “Yeah? Does that mean you're ready to take our relationship seriously?”

She moistened her lips. “Are you?”

He smiled. “I have from the moment I allowed you to catch me.”

“But ... you said you only wanted sex. Has that changed, Clay?”

He caressed her cheeks, his gaze tender. “Yes.”

Her heart racing, she swallowed. “It has?”

“You are extremely dense today. What part of yes are you having difficulty understanding, honey?”

“What ... does that mean?”

He laced his fingers through hers and rotated his hips against hers. “It means you are my woman and I'll be damned if I'm going to stand aside and let some black guy you think you want to marry take you from me.” He bent his head and pressed a long, warm kiss against her mouth. He lifted his head and gazed down into her eyes. “If your mythical black lover wants a black woman, he can get his own. You are mine.”

She linked her arms around his neck. “I'm feeling a little confused, so be careful about what you're promising, Clay. I might misunderstand what you're saying.”

“There's nothing to misunderstand. You're my woman and I'm keeping you. Surely there's nothing unclear about that.”

“For ... how long?”

“Forever. Does that clear things up for you?”

She swallowed. “That's a long time.”

He shrugged. “It might just be long enough in a pinch.” He stepped back from her and took her hand. “Let's go to bed.”

In his bedroom, he quickly undressed them both. Taking her in his arms, he pressed his nude body against hers. She linked her arms around his neck. Swaying with him, she happily drowned in the endless, warm, arousing kisses he pressed against her parted lips.

Moving his big hands over her back and butt, he stroked his tongue between her lips, in search of hers. She moaned and wiggled her body, eager to feel the cock hardening against her stomach buried between her legs. Returning his kisses, she massaged and gently pumped him until he was rock hard.

She pulled her lips away from his and reached between their bodies to wrap her fingers around him. "I want you, Clay."

He removed her hand from his now fully erect shaft. "You're going to get me." Instead of leading her to the bed, he led her to one of the chairs by his patio doors.

She cast him a quizzical look. "Clay?"

He placed his hands on her shoulders and bent her over the chair. "Kneel on the chair with your back to me and hold on," he whispered against her ear.

She kneeled and gripped the back of the chair. "Clay, shouldn't we go to bed?"

"No. I'm going to fuck you right here."

Stepping behind her, he cupped her breasts in his hands and rained warm, soft kisses against her neck and shoulders.

She felt his thick length against her butt and shivered. "So who's stopping you?"

He fingered her slit. "You're wet and ready for me."

"Yes."

"Then part your legs for me, sweetheart."

She loved when he ordered her to part her legs in that low, vibrant voice that commanded her obedience. She willingly gave it.

He gripped his cock and slid the head along her slick folds, sending waves of delight all through her.

"Oh, God, yes, Clay!"

"You're my woman and I want you right now."

"Yes. Right now, Clay."

He moved forward until she felt his length sliding between her cheeks. Her heart raced and her lips parted. For one awful moment she thought he was going to thrust his bare cock into her ass without any lubrication.

She gave a small sigh of relief when his cock slid past her anus and came to rest between her legs. Her relief was short-lived. He gripped her hips and drew her backwards. She felt his cock pressing against her slit. While she enjoyed the sensation the contact generated, he shoved his hips forward.

She let out a surprised gasp, as he slid half his bare cock between her outer lips and into her pussy. She turned her head and looked at him, her heart pounding.

Still holding her hips, he stared down between their bodies, apparently fascinated by the sight of her half-impaled on his bare cock.

She wet her lips. "Clay, you're only half way inside me, it's not too late to pull out and put on a condom. It will only take a few moments and then you can be back inside me."

"I'm inside you now and I'm staying there."

"But, Clay --"

"No, Darbi. Don't waste your time trying to talk me out of this. It's too late. I'm staying inside you and when I come, I'm coming deep inside you."

With that terse statement, he pulled her hips towards his, forcing the rest of his hard, thick, gloriously naked cock deep into her pussy.

"Oooh!" She closed her eyes and gasped as the wonderful sensations rippling through her body. It had been over seven years since she'd had a naked cock spearing her. "Oh, Clay. Clay, make love to --"

"Be quiet, Darbi. I don't want to talk and I don't want to make love. I just want to fuck you."

She swallowed disappointment and gripped the back of the chair.

Leaning over her back, he cupped one hand over her breasts, slipped the fingers of his other hand inside her pussy. Rotating his hips, he nipped at her neck and fucked her with hard, deep thrusts, shooting his cock in and out of her with a speed and fury that gave her little time to enjoy what they were sharing.

Just as she experienced the telltale tightening of her belly that signaled the beginning of her climax, he groaned. Wrapping both arms around her waist, as if he expected her to try to get away from him, he thrust his length deep into her, and came, shooting jets of his seed deep into her unsatisfied pussy.

Darbi gasped, stunned, that for the first time in their relationship, he had taken his satisfaction without first seeing to hers. With him still inside her, she pressed her cheek against the back of the chair. Was this the beginning of the end of their relationship? Now that he'd fucked her without protection and come inside her, found he lost interest in her?

Breathing deeply, he released her waist and eased his cock out of her. When he backed away from her, she got off the chair. Keeping her gaze averted, she moved past him. As she bent to pick her clothes up from the floor, he caught her hand and turned her to face him.

"I know you didn't enjoy that and I'm sorry," he told her.

She heard the contrition in his voice and swallowed the urge to cry. She was old enough to know that sooner or later, every man thought of his own satisfaction first. Some men did it on a regular basis. He'd only done it once. There was no need for her to go to pieces. After a warm bath and maybe a brief cry, she'd be fine.

She shrugged. "It's all right. I just need to go. I'll call you later."

"You're not going anywhere, Darbi." He squeezed her hand and led her to the bed.

She shook her head. "No, Clay, I --"

Placing his hands on her shoulders, he pushed her onto the side of the bed. When she sat, he knelt in front of her with hands on her thighs. "Part your legs for me, sweetheart."

She hesitated. "Clay, I don't think --"

His hands tightened on her thighs. "Don't think, Darbi. Just do I ask."

"Clay --"

"Do it, Darbi."

She moistened her lips and slowly parted her legs.

He smiled and spoke to her in a soft voice. "That's my beautiful, sexy, forgiving woman." He bent his head, touching his tongue to her clit.

She shivered and allowed her legs to part further.

He lifted his head and looked up at her. "It's time to enjoy my favorite dessert. Move closer to the edge of the bed and place your legs over my shoulders."

Balancing on the edge of the bed, she slipped her legs over his shoulders and sighed with anticipation as he bent his head to her pussy. She stroked her fingers through his hair. "Oh, Clay, I should have known you wouldn't leave me unsatisfied."

"Never," he whispered. He eased a finger into her anus and buried his lips between her legs.

Within minutes of his tongue and mouth touching her, she collapsed against the bed, quivering in ecstasy as she came. "Oh, Clay, you have a wicked tongue."

He laughed softly. Rising, he placed her legs on the bed, parted them, lay over her, and thrust his cock into her.

"Oh, my God!" She moaned and wrapped her arms and legs around his body. They enjoyed a leisurely fuck. This time he was careful to shower her with demanding kisses and warm caresses. And this time, he made sure she came first before he clutched her tight under his tense body and jetted his seed deep into her.

As he lay shaking on top of her with his lips against her ear, he spoke in a soft, almost humble voice. "Am I forgiven?"

She held him close, stroking her hands down his back to his ass and answered without hesitation. "I would -- had you done anything requiring my forgiveness."

He sighed and settled against her. Although his weight was uncomfortable on her, she didn't protest. She bore it until he finally rolled off her and onto his side.

"Let's shower."

She nodded and they rose and went into the bathroom together. He had a large, custom-made Jacuzzi tub. She lay on top of him with her breasts pressed against his chest, kissing and nipping at his shoulder.

Although his cock was buried deep in her, he was content to hold her ass in his hands and occasionally give her a few, gentle, brief strokes that didn't require either of them to come.

They dozed together with the warm jets of water washing over them. When they woke, they showered, and returned to his bedroom. He pulled on a pair of shorts over his nude body.

She reached for her clothes.

He took them from her and placed them on his bed. He went to one of his walk-in closets and returned with a sweatshirt. "Wear this."

She held it against her body. "This is just barely going to cover my ass."

He grinned. "That's the idea. We're alone here, why hide one of your most alluring assets?"

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm."

She slipped it over her body. It fell just an inch or so below her butt. "What did I tell you?"

"It's perfect. I'm hungry. What about you?"

"Starving. What do you have on hand?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. Mrs. Martin shows up and keeps the cabinets and refrigerator stocked."

"Is that your cleaner?"

"Housekeeper ... sort of. She doesn't actually clean anything. There are two other women who do that, but she sorts of supervises things so that everything runs smoothly, the place is always clean, and I don't starve if I actually decide to eat at home occasionally. And I never have to worry about tripping over her or the cleaners."

"Hmmm. Well, let's go to the kitchen and see what we can find to eat."

"We could order something and have it delivered."

She shook her head, eager to try out his kitchen. He sat at the island in the middle of the room while she scrambled some eggs, made hash browns, wheat toast, and fried turkey bacon.

After they ate and put the dishes in the dishwasher, they went to his rec room. He had an oversized leather recliner he'd had custom made. He turned on a smooth jazz CD and they cuddled in the recliner.

For a while she was content just to lie against his, smiling as he absently caressed her. The day that had started out so miserably was turning into something completely different. She recalled the fuck in his bedroom on the chair without a condom and knew they needed to talk.

“Clay? I know this conversation is a love scene ... actually it’s two love scenes late, but -
_”

“Two love scenes?” He tipped up her chin. “Only people in love make love, everyone else has sex.”

That was a strange thing to say considering he’d used the term a number of times.

“Are we in love with each other, Darbi?”

If he had to ask, clearly he wasn't in love. He hadn't even cared enough to question her about Jamal. She pushed his hand away from her chin and stared straight ahead. “That's not what I want to talk about. I want to know how you feel.”

“How I feel about what?”

“Kids. I know we should have had this conversation before you came in me, but I want to know. Do you want them?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“It would have to happen fairly quickly.”

“Why?”

“I’m not getting any younger and I don’t want to wait much longer if I’m going to be a father. I don’t want to have any kids that I can’t be a full-service dad to. Plus, the mother would need to be a woman who could understand how I feel about marriage.”

She sighed. “But, Clay, don't you think any kid you'd have would feel more secure and loved knowing her parents loved each other and her enough to make the commitment to marry each other?”

“Not if she or he grew up in a loving environment.” He turned her chin and looked at her. “Despite what you might think about their relationships, both my parents are committed to their lovers. Neither Damien nor Amber felt any lack of love growing up with them. Neither did I.”

She lowered her head and stared in the direction of the TV hung on the wall in front of them. “Fine.”

He tipped up her chin again. “Is that question your way of telling me you want to have a baby with me?”

“I want kids. I told you that, but not under the circumstances you want them. And I don't have to have them with you, Clay.”

"The hell you don't! If you think I'll believe for one minute you want any other man to father your kids, you're only fooling yourself." He caressed her cheek and pressed a quick kiss against her lips. "I'd love to father your kids, Darbi. I promise they will feel loved ..." He took a deep breath before going on. "And so will you."

Her heart raced. She stared at him. "Loved? You mean you ... do you?"

He nodded. "I can't ever remember feeling like this with anyone else, so I think I do."

She linked her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, pressing her cheek against his shoulder.

"What about you, Darbi?"

"I ... I think I might love you too."

He kissed her hair. "Then it's settled. We'll have a baby ... maybe two together." He tipped up her chin and gazed down into her eyes. "And I will make sure you both or all know how much I love and adore you. Can you deal with that?"

Like she had a choice? She nodded. "I ... I'll try."

He hugged her close, kissing her hair. "I think this ... no marriage concept might be difficult for you, honey, but I'll do my best to make you happy."

She knew he'd try, but would it be enough? And how would she explain having a baby with a man who wouldn't marry her to her mother? The fact that she was even prepared to consider doing what he asked crystallized her feelings for him in her mind. "I know."

"I want you and I want you to be the mother of any kids I have, Darbi. Are you taking some type of birth control?"

"Yes." She spoke slowly because she knew what was coming.

"I want you to stop."

"That's a bigger step than allowing you to come in me, Clay."

"I know it's a big step, but it's one I want us to take together."

"I'll need to think about that, Clay."

"What's there to think about? Either you want --"

"No, Clay. Don't press the issue. You might not think there's nothing to think about, but you won't be the one who'll have to carry the baby for nine months or face a disappointed mother."

"I know that, but I'll be there with you every step of the way. It's not as if I'm asking you to do this alone."

"And I'll take that into consideration when I make my decision."

"Darbi --"

"Clay, please. Let me sleep on it. Okay?"

He sighed. "Okay."

She sighed and laid her cheek against his shoulder.
He held her and she dozed in his arms.

He made love to her twice in his big waterbed that night. When he pulled out of her and moved to lay behind her, she pressed her knees tightly together, wanting to keep every drop of his seed buried deep in her. She did it without conscious thought. When she realized what she'd done, she knew she'd made her decision.

The next morning, she woke to find him propped on an elbow in the bed beside her, staring down at her.

She blinked, then smiled. "Hi."

He leaned over and kissed her. "Hi."

She stroked her hand over his cheek, loving the feel of his five o'clock shadow. "Why are you staring?"

He pushed the sheet covering her body aside and stroked her breasts. "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are?"

She widened her smile and rolled onto her side. When he moved behind her, she pressed her bottom against his groin. "Clay?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Did you mean what you said last night?"

"About what?"

She elbowed him. "You know what I mean."

He laughed. "About loving you? No. I just said that to get some pussy."

She bolted into a sitting position and swung around to stare at him.

He remained on his side, grinning.

She took a deep, calming breath and lay back down, settling against him.

He tightened his arm around her waist and kissed her ear. "Of course I meant it."

She compressed her lips together and blinked rapidly to keep her eyes tear free. "I ... kind of meant it too."

He cupped her breasts and whispered against her ear. "I know you did."

"You cocky bastard!"

He laughed and nipped at her ear. "I'm cocky just because I know you're in love with me?"

"I said I kind of meant it."

"Whatever." He stroked his fingers through her pussy, found her wet, and rolled her onto her back. "We're going to have at least one baby together, aren't we?"

"Why are you always so sure of everything -- including me?"

“Because I love you and I know you love me. And you want to have my baby. Don’t you?”

She shivered at the idea of feeling his baby growing inside her. “Oh, God, yes, Clay. I want to have your baby.”

He smiled and caressed her cheek. “Then part those lovely legs of yours for me, sweetheart.”

She parted her legs and moaned with pleasure as he slipped inside her. “Oh, Clay, sex with you with a condom was so good. But without a condom, it’s off the scale.”

“Way off the scale,” he whispered and silenced her moans with his lips.

This bare cock lovemaking was likely to become very addictive, she thought, as she wrapped her arms and legs around him. She surrendered to the endless waves of pleasure washing over her, pulling her under until she happily collapsed under a wall of ecstatic delight.

Chapter Nine

"So? How are things between you and Clay?"

Seated in the sauna with Sharde and Jadan on either side of her, Darbi sighed. "They're going so good, I'm getting scared, Dani."

"If they're going good, why are you scared?"

"Because things are going so good. Whenever we're out, he never looks at other women, his ... sexual interest in me is stronger than ever, he's a great lover, and he has no problem with my weight. He thinks I'm gorgeous."

Sharde leaned against her shoulder. "Newsflash, Darbi, you *are* gorgeous."

She smiled. "He certainly seems to think so."

"How are things with his sister, the brat?"

"Surprisingly enough, they're pretty good. She called me last week and we had lunch. She didn't say one bitchy thing during the entire meal, but for such a tiny girl, she has a huge appetite."

"Maybe she's eating for two."

Darbi frowned and turned to look at Jadan. "Do you know her?"

"No. How could I? I don't even know him. Speaking of which, don't you think it's time you introduced him to your friends? How long have you two been an item now?"

"Two months."

"He still littering your wastebasket?"

"Dani!"

"Okay. None of my business." Jadan leaned past her to look at Sharde. "Girl, I stopped by unexpectedly one Saturday morning and there must have been ten used condoms in her

trash. I'm telling you, when I saw all those condoms I was amazed she could still walk! Of course, when she did, she was doing it bow legged."

Sharde and Jadan laughed.

Darbi sighed and gave Sharde a warning look. "Do you want to tell us about your love life with Jeff?"

Sharde's smile turned into a grin. "Nope."

"I thought not."

"Never mind, Sharde and Jeff, they're old news." Jadan grinned at Sharde before turning back to face Darbi. "So when do we -- as in me and Willow -- get to meet him?"

"I'm not sure."

"How about sometime this weekend? Willow will be back from her trip tomorrow afternoon and I'm not leaving for my sci-fi convention until next Thursday so how about sometime this weekend?"

"The weekend is booked."

"The entire weekend?"

She nodded. "He's been working a lot of overtime this week so he said he just wanted to relax and watch a movie tomorrow night. Saturday is his company picnic." She bit her lip. "That's the first time we'll be together as a couple at one of his company functions and we'll be there most of the day. On Sunday, we're having dinner with a woman he says is like a second mother to him."

"He's introducing you to his second mama? Then he must be serious." Jadan squeezed her hand. "I think you have him hooked, Darbi."

She hesitated. "I hope so because for the last two weeks ... we've been making love bareback."

"Bareback?"

Sharde and Jadan spoke at the same time.

Darbi nodded.

Sharde and Jadan exchanged a long look before Sharde spoke. "That's a big step for you. Have you changed your mind about marrying black?"

"I didn't expect or want it to happen, but I'm in love with him. And he says he's in love with me."

"That's a good thing, Darbi. So why don't you sound happy?"

"He doesn't believe in marriage. If I get pregnant, I can't expect him to marry me."

"What?"

She shook her head and clasped Jadan's hand. "Don't get the wrong idea, Dani. He'll stand by me and assume financial responsibility. I know he'll make any child we might have feel loved and wanted. He just won't marry me."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I don't know."

"Are you still on the pill?"

"No."

"So you really are trying to get pregnant. Are you sure that's wise, Darbi? If you're not sure you can handle being an unmarried mom and if you want the ... thrill of him coming in you when you make love, you can still take the pill."

"I think Jadan's right, Darbi. If you're not sure, you should go back on the pill until you are. You can always go off again, but once you're pregnant, you're pregnant."

"I am sure I'd love to have his baby, but ..." She sighed and nodded. "You're both right. I'll get back on track."

Sharde and Jadan both hugged her and kissed her on either cheek.

"Perk up, Darbi. As fast as things are moving, I have a feeling what you two share is real and he'll soon realize being married to a woman he loves who's having his baby is the best thing that ever happened to him."

"And if he doesn't, you can always ask him to marry you," Jadan said.

"No, I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

She stared at Sharde. "Why not?"

"Yes. Why not? Things might have moved faster for me and Jeff if I had been more assertive and told him right away what I wanted and needed."

"I've been plenty assertive. I'm the one who tracked him down after he'd decided I was only going to be a one-night stand. I went to his office and told him I wanted him as my lover and I asked him out and followed it up with roses and a phone call until he said yes."

"Then asking him to marry you should be a piece of cake."

"Word," Sharde said and she and Jadan high-fived each other.

"One of these days I'm going to have to get myself a better class of friends." Darbi cast her eyes ceiling ward and laughed. Sharde and Jadan joined in and they started to discuss the wedding.

* * * * *

Clay sat back in his seat as Damien walked through the open door of his office. "Just the man I want to see."

About to sit on the sofa, Damien gave him a wary look. "If it's not about business, I don't want to hear it."

"What kind of remark is that?"

Damien sat on the sofa. "What do you want, Clay?"

"Nothing too taxing. I just need you to take Amber for the weekend."

"The hell you do! You dumped her on me unexpectedly two weeks ago. I came home tired and found her sprawled in my bed, leaving me to sleep on the damned sofa."

Clay struggled not to smile. "If I hadn't sent her to you, I would have turned her over my knee and spanked her narrow ass raw!"

"That would have gone over well with your mother and Xavier."

"If they don't like how I handle her, they can take her home and handle her themselves!"

"So? What did she say to piss you off?"

"That skinny little brat had the nerve to ask me if Darbi was a nympho I had to fuck all night before she was satisfied."

Damien tossed back his head and laughed.

Clay stared at him through a narrow gaze. "What's funny about that?"

When he sobered, Damien arched a brow. "Well? Is she?"

"That's something you'll never know. Are you going to take Amber this weekend?"

"Why should I? I have a life too you know, Clay."

He nodded. "I know, but I really need this weekend, Damien."

"Things are really heating up between you and Darbi?"

"I'm in love with her."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"What does Betty think of her?"

"I'll find out this weekend. We're having dinner with her on Sunday." He studied Damien's face. "What about you? Who are you seeing? Anyone special?"

Damien shook his head. "No."

"Are you still seeing Cami?"

He shrugged. "Why do you ask? Are you worried that we might be having unprotected sex behind your back?"

He was hardly in a position to comment on that again. Nevertheless, he was Damien's older brother. "Are you?"

"That's none of your business, Clay."

He sighed. "Fine. About this weekend?"

"If I take her this weekend, you're going to owe me big time."

He nodded. "Ok."

* * * * *

The following afternoon while serving up hamburgers and fries in Fairmount Park, Darbi noticed Clay standing several yards away, his head bent as he listened to a pretty woman with golden skin and long legs. He had introduced her as Cami Washington. When Darbi inquired at which office she worked, Cami and Clay had exchanged a quick look before he told her Cami was a friend rather than an employee.

As Darbi watched, Cami frequently put her hand on Clay's arm with an annoying familiarity.

"That's Cami."

Darbi blinked and smiled as Amber appeared in front of her with her plate extended. "Yes. Clay introduced us earlier." She glanced at Amber's plate, already laden with potato salad, mixed vegetables, and several mini sausages. "What can I get you?"

"Two cheeseburgers."

"Two?"

Amber nodded. "I'm starving."

Amber accepted her two burgers and moved along. There were several people behind her. By the time Darbi served them, Clay and Cami had disappeared.

"Hi, Darbi."

She smiled as Damien stopped and held out a plate. "Hi, Damien. Ham or cheese?"

"Hamburger."

"Two?"

"One. Thanks." He smiled and glanced around the plateau. "Have you seen Clay?"

"The last time I saw him he was talking to Ms. Washington."

Damien turned to face her, his gaze narrowed. "He was with Cami?"

"Yes. Why?"

His quick smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "No reason. How long are you going to be playing chef?"

She glanced at her watch. "Just for another ten minutes."

"I'll see you around before you leave."

Another line had formed behind Damien. She nodded and starting serving again.

Her relief arrived and she handed over her apron and serving fork.

Smiling and nodding at several people whose name she couldn't recall, she made her way to the spot where she'd last seen Clay. Several yards beyond the spot was a path that wound around a bend. She stood staring down the path. Moments later, Clay and Cami

appeared. Although they weren't touching, they walked close together and Cami looked as if she'd been crying.

Darbi released a small, relieved breath when she could detect no signs either of them had hastily straightened their clothes. There were no traces of the mauve lip gloss the woman wore on Clay's face or lips.

The warm smile that spread across his face when he spotted Darbi chased away her lingering unease. She waved.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi, Clay. I was wondering where you'd disappeared."

"Cami and I took a short walk." He glanced at the other woman. "All right?"

She nodded and smiled at Darbi. "Forgive me for stealing him, but Clay and I are old friends."

Darbi smiled and slipped her hand through Clay's arm. Old friend or not, if the woman disappeared with Clay again, she'd better be prepared to be snatched bald. "Well, I have him back now and that's all that matters."

The woman averted her dark gaze, nodded, and stepped around Darbi.

Clay squeezed her hand. "It's nearly three. We've been here for three hours. I think it's safe to leave everything in Damien's hands. Let's go home."

"What about Amber?"

"She's spending the weekend with Damien, lucky dog!" He smiled. "While I get to spend mine with you."

She smiled. "Who's the lucky dog?"

"Me."

"Right answer."

"Hey, my mama didn't raise no idiots! Let's go say our goodbyes and get out of here."

Later that night, as they lay in a naked tangle of arms and legs in the rec room in the doublewide lounge, with soft jazz playing on the stereo, she asked him about Cami.

He kissed her shoulder. "What about her?"

She looked up at him. "How long were you two lovers?"

He tensed. "What makes you think we were lovers?"

"The way you two looked at each other. I know you were lovers, Clay. I just want to know for how long and when did it end between you?"

He sighed. "She was my first love."

She compressed her lips and sat up, drawing out of his embrace. "Why didn't you mention her when you told me about Whoopie?"

"I knew you two would meet sooner or later and I didn't want you to misunderstand."

"So how long did it last?"

"Why is that important?"

"Because I want to know."

"It started when I was sixteen and she was eighteen. We went hot and heavy for about two years before we admitted we weren't in love with each other."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Clay, don't think I'm going to believe for one second that you haven't touched her in ... what? Twenty years?"

He rose from the chair and walked across the room.

She stared after him, absently noting how perfect his big, hard body was. Although they had not made love, whenever they were alone, they often wandered around in the nude. She loved gazing at his bare body and he loved to caress her breasts and ass, even when they just cuddled.

"Clay?"

He turned from the floor to ceiling double door that led to the walled patio and pool area. "Through the years we've become friends with benefits."

"When did it end between you?"

"When I met you."

"Did you love her?"

"I have a deep affection for her, but I was never in love with her. She is always going to be someone I care deeply about, but you are the woman I love, Darbi. Please don't make any more of my relationship with Cami than that."

She rose and crossed the room to him. Sliding her hands down his chest and over his stomach, she kneeled in front of him. Tilting her head back, she stared up at him. "I'm okay with your past relationship with her as long as she realizes you are now mine. And if I catch her disappearing down any more wooded trails with you, I'll slap her so damn hard, she'd end up in the middle of the following week!"

"She just needed to talk."

"About that?"

"She's in love with a man who doesn't love her."

She tensed and stared up at him. "Who?"

"I don't know. She didn't say."

She stroked her hands over his pubic hair. "Are you sure you're not the man she's in love with?"

"Of course I'm sure. She just needed to talk to me."

“As long as that's all she wanted from you.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his pubic hair. “This is mine and I'll be damned if I'll share it or you with anyone else.”

“I'd never ask or expect that of you, Darbi.”

“Good,” she whispered, parted her lips, and outlined the length of his cock with her tongue. She kissed his balls and slowly drew his flaccid shaft between her lips and into her mouth.

“Ooh, honey.”

Cupping her free hand under his balls, she sucked him with a leisurely hunger, savoring the experience of feeling him slowly, steadily lengthening and thickening in her mouth.

When the tremors in his body signaled he was about to climax, she continue to gently fondle his balls, but drew back until a third of his cock remained between her lips.

“Oh, honey, here I come!”

She withdrew his cock and pressed it against her lips. The first jet of cum shot against her mouth. She parted her lips and pumping him, directed the next eruptions onto her tongue.

She held him by one hip and swallowed each mini explosion. When the last of his seed splashed against her tongue, she kissed his cock and rose to face him.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his lips against her neck. “I love you.”

She stroked her hands down his back. “I love you too.” She drew away to smile at him. “Now I want to go to sleep in your arms.”

He took her hand and they went to the bedroom. Half an hour later, she lay awake listening to the sound of deep, regular breathing. She slipped out of bed, pulled on one of his pajama tops, and walked to the living room. Sinking into the loveseat, she called her mother.

“Hi, Mom, I know it's late, but I needed to talk to you.”

“Darbi! This is a surprise, darling. I almost didn't answer the phone because I didn't recognize the number.”

“I ... I'm not at home, Mom. I'm with ... a friend.”

“A male friend?”

She closed her eyes briefly. Why was her mother always so perceptive? “Yes. I wanted to tell you about him.”

“I'm listening.”

She moistened her lips. “I think things are getting serious between us and I wanted you to know about him. His name is Clay Frazier and he --”

“Frazier? Isn't that the name of your company's main rival?”

She nodded. Her mother had always taken an interest in her career and they often discussed her professional options. "Yes."

"Is that ... wise?"

"Probably not, but ... we've been seeing each other for about ... nine weeks and --"

"You're spending nights with him."

"Yes."

"Somehow I got the impression he was white."

"He is. Is that a problem for you, Mom?"

"If you're spending nights with him and telling me about him, he must be very special."

"I ... I love him, Mom."

"How does he feel?"

She smiled. "He loves me too."

"Then why don't you sound happier, Darbi? Is there something you're not telling me? He's not married. Is he?"

"I wouldn't knowingly sleep with a married man, Mom."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to tell you about him." She fell silent and waited for the question she dreaded.

"Will I be meeting him soon?"

"It's early days yet, Mom. I just wanted to ..." She moistened her lips, recalling all their lovemaking without a condom or birth control pills. "I ... it's early days yet."

"If he loves you and makes you happy, Darbi, that's all that matters to me. I understand that things have changed and you might no longer share my values ..."

She sighed in relief, knowing that was as close as her mother would come to telling her she would reluctantly accept Darbi living with Clay. "It's not that, Mom, it's just that ..."

"He doesn't share them?"

"No."

"But you love him anyway?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Then ... I will do my best to not be so old-fashioned and accept things that make you happy."

"Thanks, Mom. I know it's late, so I'll let you go. I love you."

"I love you, Darbi."

"Good night."

"Good night."

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the chair, praying she would not have to test her mother's new resolve.

Chapter Ten

Clay kissed her awake the next morning. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

Smiling, she rolled from her side on to her back and opened her eyes. Dressed in a pair of sweat shorts and holding a tray, Clay sat on the bed. She sat against the headboard and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Good morning, Prince Charming."

He kissed her cheek. "I fixed breakfast." He caressed her thighs.

She parted them.

He reached between her legs and stroked her pussy. "Let's eat, then I want some pussy."

"Hmmm. I should have known you had an ulterior motive for making me breakfast."

He grinned. "What can I tell you? I can't get enough of you."

She rewarded him with a quick kiss. Her nostrils twitched. "Something smells absolutely delicious. What did you make?"

"Lift up the warming covers and see for yourself."

She did and caught her breath. A long, black jeweler's box was under the first cover. She picked it up and looked at him. "What is it?"

"Open it and see if you like it."

She removed the top. Inside was a diamond tennis bracelet. "Oh, Clay! It's beautiful!"

"So are you. Turn it over."

She turned the bracelet over. Her eyes misted as she read the inscription: *I love you. Clay*. She slipped her arms around his neck. "Oh, Clay! I love you too!"

He kissed her cheek, took the bracelet, and put it around her left wrist. He removed the covers from the two remaining trays revealing an omelet and lightly buttered toast. "Now, eat up."

“You only brought one fork. Are we sharing?”

He leered at her. “You’re having eggs and toast for breakfast, I’m having pussy.”

She laughed and picked up her fork. After she ate, she went into the bathroom. When she returned twenty minutes later, he crawled between her legs and ate her. Just as she was about to come, he rose above her and thrust into her.

She moaned, shuddered, raked her nails down his back, and exploded. He sucked her tongue into his mouth and fucked her hard through her climax. As she lay savoring the sweet aftershocks of pleasure, he groaned and came.

While she normally liked having him lay on top after he’d come, her breasts were sore. She touched his shoulder. “Clay? You’re feeling kind of heavy.”

“I’m sorry, sweet.” He rolled off her.

She turned onto her side, he curled his body behind hers, and they fell asleep. As they showered together later, she shook her head when he wanted to suck her breasts. “Clay, don’t.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. They’re just a little sore. They’re always sore just before I get my period.”

“Is it time for your period?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Then I guess you’re not pregnant.”

“Are you sure you want me to be?”

He nodded. “Of course I’m sure. That’s not a decision I made lightly. I’m looking forward to fathering babies with you and watching your stomach grow into a sexy round ball.”

She felt a flash of guilt, but it didn’t seem an appropriate time to tell him she was back on the pill. She grimaced. “My stomach is already round enough, thank you.”

“I love your stomach and when it gets rounder and sexier, there will be even more to love about it and you.”

Her eyes misted and she linked his arms around his neck. How could he say such sweet things she knew he meant and yet not want to marry her? “Last night after you fell asleep, I called my mother and told her about you.”

He tensed and lifted his head to look down at her. “And?”

“And ... she will try to be ... open minded.”

“She will? You told her I’m white?”

“Yes.”

“And that we don’t need marriage to --”

“I didn’t exactly tell her that.”

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I wanted her to know about you, but I didn't want to dump a heavy load on her all at once."

"Darbi --"

"She's not ready to hear you're not interested in marrying me, Clay."

"On, honey, don't make it sound as if I don't care about you."

"I know you love me and I know my mother. I'll have to work my way up to leveling with her. Okay?"

He kissed her cheek. "Okay."

* * * * *

"So you're Clayton's woman."

Darbi blushed as she and Betty Johns stood side by side checking their make-up in the restaurant's rest room that night. "Yes ... but I don't know for how long."

She watched the other woman's dark eyes widen. "What's wrong? Please don't leave him. I've never seen him so content. You're good for him."

"I love him, but --"

"He loves you. Even if he hasn't admitted it to you, surely you must know it. I knew the moment I saw how he looked at you."

Darbi put her blotter away and turned to face Betty. "He has told me how he feels."

"Then what's wrong?"

"He doesn't believe in marriage and I need marriage to feel as if ... I need that final commitment of marriage."

"Oh. Is that all?" Betty dismissed her statement with a wave of her hand. "I've known that boy since he was ..." She grimaced. "Since he was actually a boy and I am telling you he loves you. Has he told you how close we are?"

She nodded.

"Do you know how many women he's wanted me to meet in all the years I've known him?"

He'd said he'd never really been in love, but surely he'd thought he was a time or two. "Two or three?"

"You are the only woman he's ever gone out of his way to introduce me to, which in itself tells me how deeply he feels about you. Just give him a little time to get used to the idea that you need the commitment of marriage and I know he won't let you down."

"You think so?"

"Of course I do." She surprised Darbi by reaching over and hugging her. "Just give him some time and things will work out fine."

* * * * *

"I thought you and Darbi were an item."

Seated in one of the airport's lounges waiting for his flight, Clay put his drink down and frowned across the table at Damien. "We're more than an item."

"Hmmm. Then why did you leave her to disappear with Cami at the picnic on Saturday? Where did you two go? What did you do while you were together?"

"I'll tell you what I wasn't doing and that's having unprotected sex with her."

Damien's gaze narrowed. "You had sex with her while Darbi --"

"No, I didn't have sex with her! You know damned well I don't sleep with more than one woman at a time. She needed to talk. We talked."

"What about?"

"What is your interest in what we discussed, Damien? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No."

"Fine." He finished his drink and rose. "Thanks for the lift. I'll see you in two weeks."

Damien shrugged.

Clay turned at the lounge door. Still seated, Damien gave him a cool look. He walked back to the table. "What's wrong?"

Damien shook his head. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just tired."

"See me to my gate."

"You're a big boy, I'm sure you can find your gate without me holding your hand."

"Fine, Damien. Hold down the fort."

"Don't I always?"

He turned and strolled from the lounge. He'd considered himself extremely lucky when Damien had given up a job with a big IT corporation to assume the job as his vice chairman of the board. For the first time in two years, he wasn't so sure he was leaving Fra-Tech in good hands.

Lately Damien had been moody and short-tempered. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect Damien was suffering from unrequited love. But as far as he knew, Damien wasn't seeing anyone in particular.

At his gate, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned. Damien stood behind him, a grimace on his face.

He smiled and palmed the back of Damien's neck. "If you need to talk ..."

"I know. Maybe when you get back. I'll keep at least two steps ahead of Calder Tech until then."

He nodded. "Thanks. And keep a close eye on Amber. She's been so nasty lately I'm really starting to worry about her."

"Me too. Have a safe flight, Clay."

"Thanks."

* * * * *

Three mornings later, while Darbi was in the middle of a meeting with Sharde, the buzzer on Sharde's desk sounded and Sharde's secretary announced there was an Amber Frazier Matlin in the reception area who wanted to see Darbi.

The moment Darbi saw Amber had been crying she was glad she hadn't sent her away. "What's the matter, Amber?"

"I can't keep it in anymore. I have to talk to someone."

"Damien --"

"I can't tell him. He's worse than Clay!"

She sighed. At the moment, she had issues of her own, but if Amber needed to talk, she'd have to provide an ear. "Okay." She glanced at her watch. "Let's go have coffee."

"Can we make it lunch? I'm hungry."

She nodded. They left the office and Darbi drove to a coffee shop where she and Clay often met for coffee when they wanted to see each other during the day, but were pressed for time.

She ordered a vegetable salad, toast, and a cola. Amber ordered two cheeseburgers, a large order of fries, and a strawberry milkshake.

Sipping her drink, Darbi watched Amber devour both cheeseburgers and fries in less than fifteen minutes. The milkshake quickly followed. When she sat back against her seat, Amber gave her a wary look. "So? What's going on with you and Clay?" She pointed to Darbi's left wrist. "Did Clay give you that?"

"Yes."

"May I?"

Darbi extended her wrist across the table.

Amber studied the bracelet for several moments. "This must have set him back a few grand. He must really like you."

"I like him too."

"If he's going to give you gifts like that, I'll bet you do. I suppose you know he's filthy rich and a good catch. If you land him, you won't ever have to work again. Did you know he owns houses in Jamaica and England and he has sizable stock holdings in --"

"Amber, how I feel about him has nothing to do with this bracelet or how many houses or shares of stock he might own!"

"Really?"

"Yes, Amber, really!"

She struggled. "I'm just feeling a little bitchy. So how are things for you two?"

"I think they're going fairly well. When he returns, it will be three months since we started dating and I'm planning a special weekend."

"Are you having a party for him?"

"No. I'm missing him and I just want to spend a lot of time with him when he returns."

Amber leered. "In bed letting him bang your chocolate pussy? Are you one of those sistas who prefer rich, handsome white men? Me? I'll take a well-hung, poor brotha every day of the week over a rich, white guy with a flat behind." She grinned. "Not that Clay's behind is flat, but he is rich and white."

Darbi tightened her lips. She was not in the mood for any of Amber's nonsense. "You know, you probably could have benefited from having your skinny little ass spanked more when you were a younger brat than you are now."

Amber's green eyes widened, then she tossed her head, and laughed so hard tears steamed down her cheeks.

Darbi watched in silence as Amber took several minutes to regain her composure. She finally wiped at her cheeks. When their gazes met again, Darbi saw a grudging respect in Amber's gaze. "I guess that's telling me." She sighed. "Okay. I'm sorry."

"Fine, but that had better be the last time you make such a personal remark about me, girl. My preference in men is none of your business, but for your information, I do not prefer white men."

"Then why are you allowing Clay to fuck you so often you're starting to walk bow-legged? If it's not his skin color that turns you on, it must be his money. And he has an awful lot of that, as you probably know. You should know that he won't marry you and even if you do manage to trap him into marriage, he'll make you sign a pre-nuptial agreement that limits what you can expect --"

Darbi sucked in an angry breath but exploded anyway. "You disrespectful little bitch!"

"Did you just call me a bitch?"

"Yes, I did. Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"

Amber rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"Whatever hell! I'm serious. Damien and Clay may take your shit, but I don't intend to. Is that clear?"

"My shit?"

"Your shit."

"You wouldn't talk to me like this in front of Clay!"

"Have I made myself clear?"

Amber gave her a defiant stare.

Darbi stared back.

It took several minutes, but finally, Amber shrugged and averted her gaze. "Fine."

"Good. Now, you want to tell me what's really bothering you before I decide to slap your skinny, half-white, flat ass into the middle of next week?"

"I'm black."

"Whatever! What's your damned problem?"

Amber shrugged. "I guess you know, huh?"

"That you're pregnant?" She nodded. "How far along are you?"

"About ... three months. Oh, Darbi. Clay is going to freak when he finds out! And Damien will be rolling up his sleeves wanting to ... he and Clay are so ... crazy when it comes to me. They think it's okay for them to whore around, with both of them fucking Cami until she can't walk, but I'm supposed to keep my knees pressed together until I've graduated from college and gotten married."

Darbi blinked. "What? What did you say about Cami?"

"What do you mean? What did I say?"

"They both sleep with her?"

Amber's green eyes widened and she pressed a hand against her lips. "You didn't know? Oh, shit! Don't tell Clay I told you or he'll throw a fit. I thought you knew!"

She stared at Amber, wild thoughts chasing each other around in her head. Was that why he didn't believe in marriage because he and Damien shared their women? Is that why Damien had looked dismayed at the picnic when he learned Clay and Cami had gone off together? Had he feared they were having a quickie without him? Did this sharing explain Clay's initial willingness to believe she'd slept with Damien? Would he expect her to sleep with his brother? And did he plan to sleep with Damien's woman?

She closed her eyes briefly. *Get a grip, girl. Get a grip. No matter what he and Damien used to do, you know he's not interested in sharing you with any other man. And he doesn't want any other woman. So don't lose it.*

She opened her eyes and looked at Amber, who was still staring wide-eyed at her. She spoke with far more confidence than she felt. "That's over now. He is no longer sleeping with Cami. Clay and I are in an exclusive relationship."

“Oh? Oh, well. Good, but he and Damien are still unreasonable when it comes to my having a lover.”

“Their feelings might be annoying to you, but I'm an only child and I would have loved to have two older, adoring big brothers.”

“Adoring? They're not adoring. They're ... draconian.”

“What about the father?”

She lifted her chin. “What about him?”

“Does he know?”

She nodded.

“How does he feel about it?”

“He was surprised like me because I'm on the pill and he used a condom. How is that for luck? He says he'll do whatever I want.”

“What do you want?”

“To be able to have my baby ... by myself.”

“You don't want to marry him?”

“No. Marriage is not in my game plan.”

Didn't any of the Fraziers believe in marriage? “Then what's your problem?”

“My problem is going to be Clay and to a lesser extent Damien. It's going to be easier to tell my parents than them.”

“Why are you so afraid of telling Clay?”

“Because he's going to freak out like a nut. Trust me. I know him. And Damien will threaten to kick his ass.”

“Who's ass?”

“Paul's.”

“I think you should just tell them both. Being pregnant isn't the end of the world.”

Amber tossed her head angrily. “And what do you know about being pregnant?”

Darbi moistened her lips and met Amber's gaze. “You might be surprised.”

Amber's gaze widened and she leaned forward. “You mean --”

Darbi shook her head. “Let's talk about something else.”

“Like that?”

“Like the special meal I'm going to make Clay on Saturday night.”

“He's coming on Friday night.”

“I know, but his plane isn't due into Philly International until nine 'o'clock. By the time he gets home it will be well after ten. He'll be tired. I'm going to drive him home and let him sleep. On Saturday I'm going to make him a special dinner.”

"Then you'll tell him?"

She shrugged. "Let's concentrate on your problem, Amber."

* * * * *

Clay grinned when he spotted Darbi on deplaning. He rushed forward to draw her into his arms. "Hi, sweetheart!"

She returned his embrace before pulling away to smile at him. "Hi, honey. Let's pick up your bags." She turned away.

He caught her hand.

She turned to face him. "What's wrong?"

"Honey? You called me honey."

"I did?" She frowned. "I ... I didn't realize it. You don't like being called honey?"

He drew her back in his arms and gave her a bear hug. "I love it."

"Oh. Then it's okay?"

"It's more than okay, but it's the first time you've ever called me anything but Clay ... or cocky and arrogant bastard."

She laughed and kissed his cheek. "Let's get your bags and get out of here."

He nodded.

"Do you want to drive?" she asked as the valet parked her car in front of them.

"No." He accepted the keys from the valet and tipped them. He handed her the keys. "It's been a long day and I'm tired. You don't mind driving back?"

"No."

Inside the car, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I've missed you and I'm so glad you're back, Clay."

"I missed you too."

"Close your eyes and sleep if you like."

He smothered a yawn. "You're sure you won't mind?"

"No. You can make it up to me tomorrow."

"Thanks." He closed his eyes and settled against the passenger seat.

When Darbi woke him, they were parked in his courtyard. Getting out of the car, he saw his bags in the foyer through the open front door.

He frowned. "You should have awakened me."

She placed her hands against his chest. "You were tired and I'm not some delicate ninety pounder unable to lift a few bags. Look, you're dead on your feet. I'm going home and I'll call you tomorrow."

He caught her hand. "Is Amber here?"

"No. She's staying with Sharde and Jeff because Damien has a date and she didn't want to be alone."

"Then why are you leaving?"

"Because you need to rest and I need to do a little work."

"Can't you do it here?"

"No." She stood gazing up at him, a troubled look in her eyes. "We need to talk, Clay."

"So talk to me."

She shook her head. "It can wait until tomorrow."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay." He walked her back to her car, kissed her, and stood watching until the automatic gate closed after she drove through. He reentered the house, went to his bedroom, undressed, and was asleep soon after he slipped into bed.

The ringing phone woke him the next morning. He groaned and rolled onto his side. He picked up the cordless phone on his nightstand. "Hello?"

"Clay?"

He sat up. "Cami? What's wrong?"

"Clay, are you alone?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I really need to talk to you."

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"No, I mean I need to see you."

He glanced at his bedside clock. 11:16. Damn. He'd wanted to have a late breakfast with Darbi. He sat up. "Cami, I just woke up. What's wrong?"

"I know you have other interests now, Clay, but I really need someone to talk to. Can you come over?"

"When?"

"Now?"

He shook his head. Damn. He wanted to see Darbi, but Cami had always been there for him. Through the years when relationships had ended badly and he wanted or needed a soft, willing woman, Cami had always been there. She had never once turned him away. If she needed to talk, he could wait a few hours longer to see Darbi.

"Ahh. Sure. I just woke up. Let me get a shower, have a cup of coffee, and I'll see you in about an hour."

"Thanks, Clay."

He ended the call and then dialed Darbi's number. He got her voice mail. "Listen honey, I have to go out for a few hours. I'll call you when I get back."

He was halfway to Cami's place before he realized he'd left his cell phone home. He swore softly, but since he didn't expect to be with Cami for more than an hour or so, he decided not to go back for it.

* * * * *

Darbi put her groceries down on her kitchen counter. She unpacked her bags, putting away the expensive steaks she'd just picked up at the butcher's. She saw the message indicator light blinking on the wall-mounted phone. She glanced at the clock over the kitchen doorway. 11: 30. She'd have plenty of time to cook the steaks, sauté a medley of vegetables, bake a few potatoes, and have time to spend half an hour soaking in her favorite bubble bath before Clay arrived.

After a surprisingly long night's sleep, she'd awaken with the conviction that no matter what had gone on between Clay, Damien, and Cami, it was over. There was no way Clay could want her as badly as he did if he were interested in anyone else.

Based on that belief, she had taken another big step yet in their relationship. She thought about her trip to the jewelers and the ring she had picked out for him. In buying it, she had gambled that if his feelings were as strong he said, he'd want to do whatever it took to make her happy. She closed her eyes. *Lord, please let him accept this ring.*

If he did, it would change their relationship in a way so exciting, just thinking about it sent shivers of anticipation through her. But she was getting ahead of herself. He had to arrive and accept the ring before she started dreaming of a real future with him.

She opened her eyes. The phone rang as she moved across the kitchen to check her messages. She picked it up. "Hello."

"Hi, girl, I didn't expect to find you answering the phone today. I thought I'd just leave a message."

"Hey Dani. Why not?"

"I thought you'd be too busy with Clay."

She smiled. "He's still home. He slept on the way home from the airport so I decided to let him sleep in."

"Big plans for today?"

She nodded. "You know today is the third anniversary of our first date. I'm making him a steak dinner."

"With your special sauce?"

"Yes."

“Oh, my, if you don’t have him now, you’ll have him once he tastes that sauce of yours.”

She laughed. “And I’m going to wear this little black dress I paid a fortune for. He loves me in black. I bought special candles so we can eat by candlelight. We’ll dance and then later, I have a new black teddy I think he’s going to love. I’m telling you now, do not call me tonight or tomorrow morning because I expect to be very busy.”

Jadan laughed. “Oh, I heard that, girl. Are you going to tell him?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Listen, have a great anniversary night and on Monday, Willow and I want to meet for lunch. It’s time we discussed a party to introduce him to your friends.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I’ll talk to you on Monday.”

“Okay.”

As Darbi made her preparation for the special night she and Clay would share, she kept expecting the phone to ring. When she hadn’t heard from him by four-thirty, she remembered that she’d never checked her messages.

She ran a tub full of her favorite bath beads and took her cordless phone into the bathroom with her. Sliding down into the slick, wet silk of the warm water, she closed her eyes, and listened to her messages.

She frowned as she finished listening to Clay’s message. He’d left it at twelve-thirty. It was now after four-thirty. So why hadn’t he called her? She dialed his private line in his bedroom and his got his voice mail. She tried the number to the rest of his condo and his cell phone. She received voice mail on each line.

She left a message asking him to call her as soon as possible and settled down to enjoy her soak. She called him several times over the next two hours. At nine p.m. as she sat in the dark living room wearing the new dress she’d bought especially for him and that night, she decided to call Damien.

Amber answered on the third ring. “What are you doing calling here? I thought Clay would have you in bed by now.”

Didn’t she wish. “He’s not here. Is he there?”

“He’s not with you?”

“No. I haven’t seen him today. He left a message while I was out saying he had to go out and he’d call me when he got back, but that was nearly eight hours ago. Now I’m starting to get worried.”

“I haven’t seen him since he got home. I called him last night around eleven and got my head chewed off for waking him and didn’t expect to see him again until Monday night when he gets home from work.”

“Is Damien there?”

"He's in his study working, but he's been here all day. Do you want me to get him?"

"No. I'm probably overreacting. I'm sure he's fine."

"Hold on. I'll ask him."

After several minutes, Damien got on the phone. "Hi Darbi. I haven't heard from him since yesterday afternoon when he called to tell me he was on his way to the airport for his flight home. But I'm sure he's all right. If you like I'll call around to a few of his friends."

She blinked, realizing she had no idea who his friends were -- other than the damned Cami, of course. Should she ask Damien about the hussy? She decided doing so would call her faith in Clay into question. "Thanks, but I'm sure I'll hear from him in a little bit. Sorry to bother you."

"I'm sure he's all right, Darbi."

She nodded. But he wouldn't be once she got her hands on him. "Thanks. Good night."

At ten p.m. she warmed up part of the vegetables, ate them, had a glass of cider, undressed, and went to bed. She woke a little before twelve a.m. and called Clay's private number. She hung up when the voice mail message started.

She went back to bed and lay sleepless for what felt like hours before falling asleep.

Chapter Eleven

At eleven-thirty, Clay stood over the bed where Cami finally slept. He brushed his hand against her cheek and quietly left her apartment. Forty-five minutes later, he let himself into his bedroom.

He stripped down to his briefs and sat on the side of his bed while he checked his messages. When he saw all the messages from Darbi, he groaned. He glanced at the clock, decided it was too late to call her, set his alarm for eight a.m. and fell into bed.

“Where the hell have you been?”

Clay rolled onto his back, opened his eyes, and stared up into Damien's frowning face. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He squinted at his bedside clock. “What the hell is wrong with you, Damien? It's two-thirty a.m.”

“So you're all right, huh? Man, are you in trouble.”

He looked up and saw Amber standing in the doorway. He frowned at her and tugged the cover on the bed over his briefs. “What are you two doing here in the middle of the night?”

Amber shook her head. “I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, Clay. Darbi called around nine p.m. last night looking for you. She spent the day planning a special night for the two of you. She bought a new dress, candles, the works, and you stood her up.”

He raked a hand through his hair. “I did not stand her up. I called her and told her I had to go out.” He paused. “How do you know she planned something special for last night? Why would she tell you and not me?”

Amber rolled her eyes. “Last night was the three-month anniversary of your first date. I told her you wouldn't care about anything as romantic as that.”

Oh, damn, he was in trouble. He closed his eyes briefly. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"Get real, Clay. She wanted to surprise you. Where were you?"

"With Cami."

Damien, who had stood silently while he and Amber talked, tensed. "With Cami? You stood Darbi up and then spent the night with Cami?"

He cast a narrow stare at Amber. "Go to bed, Amber."

"Go to bed? I'm not a child, Clay. I'll go --"

He pointed a finger at her. "Do not make me repeat myself."

She turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

He rose and faced Damien. "How many damned times do I have to tell you I only sleep with one woman at a time? I did not sleep with Cami."

"Then why the hell spend all day and half the night with her while Darbi sat alone waiting for you?"

"I didn't know she planned anything special. Had I known, I wouldn't have stayed with Cami so long."

"Why were you with her in the first place?"

"She wanted to talk."

"And that took all damned day and most of the night?"

"I've never seen her so ... sad and depressed. She's in love with some bozo who doesn't love her."

"Why tell you -- unless you're the bozo she's in love with?"

"It's not me!"

"And I'm supposed to believe that? What the hell is wrong with you, Clay? Are you going to start playing with Darbi's emotions the way you've played with Cami's for years? Damn, I never knew you were such a selfish bastard! You have two women in love with you. Instead of picking one and sticking to her, you want them both!"

Behind the anger, he heard tension in Damien's voice. He saw the pain in his gaze and sank down on the bed as he realized he was looking into the eyes of a man in the grip of jealousy. "You're in love with her! Why didn't you tell me, Damien?"

"Fuck off, you selfish bastard!"

When he rose and touched Damien's shoulder, Damien jerked away from him and stormed out of the bedroom, slamming the door.

He sank onto the side of his bed. Damn, he was in some deep shit.

His bedroom door opened and Amber peeked in. "Damien just stormed out looking like ... is he all right? Are you all right, Clay? You two didn't ... fight. Did you?"

"No, honey. Please go to bed."

"Okay, but you should call Darbi."

He shook his head. "It's too late."

"You shouldn't wait, Clay. She was so excited when she told me about planning last night and then when she called Damien's place, she was so worried. She must be out of her mind by now thinking you're with another woman."

"What? She knows better than that!"

Amber shrugged. "But you were with another woman."

"Not in the way you're making it sound."

"Whatever. I'm not the one you have to convince, which is just as well because I don't know if I'd believe you didn't sleep with her ... in light of the history between you two."

"Do me a favor and just please go to bed, Amber. I am not in the mood for any of your damned backtalk."

To his surprise, she crossed the room and bent to kiss his cheek. "When she finds out you've been with Cami, it's not going to be a good thing. Call her, Clay. Please." She kissed his cheek again and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

He picked up the phone and called Darbi. He got her voice mail. He listened to her greeting, hesitated, and then spoke. "Honey, it's Clay. I'm sorry about last night. I got held up and ... I'll call you in a few hours. I love you."

"Clay?"

He tensed as Darbi picked up the phone. "Yes. I'm sorry I --"

Her voice rose. "Where have you been, Clay?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. Did he dare admit he'd been with Cami? He knew he'd have to tell her eventually, but decided that confession would be best made in person. "I was with a friend."

"All day and all night? Why didn't you call me, Clay?"

"I left my cell phone here when I left."

"And this ... friend doesn't have a phone?"

He hesitated to admit that he'd been reluctant to call her while he was still with Cami. "Yes, but I didn't expect to be there that long and the time just got away from me."

"This ... friend you were with ... what's his name?"

Shit. "I was with Cami."

He heard her suck in an angry sounding breath. "You stood me up to spend the entire day and night with that ... with her?"

He was definitely in deep shit. "Darbi, I didn't stand you up. I left a message --"

"Telling me you'd call me in a few hours! What the hell were you doing with her all that time, Clay?"

His grip tightened on the phone. "Talking."

"You expect me to believe you spent twelve hours talking to her? Did you talk before or after you fucked her?"

"What the hell is wrong with you, Darbi? I didn't fuck her!"

"No? Well, even if you didn't fuck her last night, you can start from tonight on because I don't ever want to see you again!"

"What? Darbi --"

She hung up.

When he redialed her number, she answered in a cold, angry voice. "It's over between us, so please don't call me again, Clay."

"Honey, please don't overreact. I know you're upset, but I promise you I did not --"

"I don't care about your promises. You spent all those hours with a former lover and expect me to believe nothing happened? Well, I don't believe you, Clay."

"You don't ... are you calling me a liar?"

"In a word -- yes!"

"Darbi --"

"And it's not exactly the first time you've lied to me, is it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Why didn't you tell me about the little threesome you had going with her and Damien?"

Damn Amber's big mouth. "That relationship was over the moment I met you."

"Is that what you would have expected of me? To sleep with you both?"

"Hell, no! Damien and I ... I know our relationship with Cami is difficult to explain, but ... it's never happened with anyone else. We do not share our women. We've never even dated the same women. I love you too much to --"

"Tell it to, Cami."

"Darbi --"

"Leave me alone, Clay!"

She hung up again.

He tossed the phone across the room and stretched out on his bed, taking slow, deep breaths in an effort to hold onto his temper. Who the hell did she think she was to accuse him of lying and cheating? What the hell did he need with a relationship with an insecure woman who didn't trust him? She didn't want to see him? Fine. She could go find herself that elusive black man she was forever tossing into his face.

* * * * *

After hanging up on Clay, Darbi got up and dressed in a sweat suit. Tears stinging her eyes, she picked up the phone again.

"Hello?" A sleepy male voice answered on the fourth ring.

She bit her lip. "Jefferson ... I know it's late and I'm so sorry for bothering you, but I need to speak to Sharde."

"Darbi? Is something wrong?"

"Can I please speak to Sharde?"

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No."

"Hold on a second, I'll wake her."

Sharde got on the phone several moments later, her voice sleep-slurred. "Darbi? Girl, what's wrong?"

"It's Clay, Sharde. It's over between us and I ... I'm sorry to disturb you, but I need to talk."

"Ah ... okay. I'll come --"

"No. I don't want to be here in case Clay comes."

"Are you in any shape to drive?"

"Yes, I --"

"Never mind. I'll get Jeff up and --"

"No. Don't do that."

"Jeff and I will come get you and take you to my place where we can talk. I don't want you driving over here. Stay there and we'll be there in about forty minutes or so."

* * * * *

"Why didn't you call her and explain where you were?"

Clay paused in pacing his living room to face Betty, who sat on his sofa, her dark gaze trained on him. "I knew she had a problem with my relationship with Cami and I didn't want to call her from Cami's."

"If you knew she had a problem with Cami, why did you stay with her so long?"

"Betty! Surely you can understand. Cami was ... inconsolable. I was afraid to leave her."

"All the more reason you should have called Darbi."

"I love her and I know she loves me, but she's insecure about our relationship."

"Why do you think she's insecure?"

He gave her a weary look. "I have no idea. I've never given her any real reason not to trust me."

"You've gone out of your way to assure her you won't marry her and you wonder why she's feeling insecure?"

He clenched his jaw. "I've also gone out of my way to tell her time and time again that I love her and she's the only woman I want."

"That's wonderful, but some women need more, Clay."

"I've given her all I have to give."

"And what if that's not enough for her?"

He tightened his lips. "Then she has a problem."

"That's not the attitude to take with the woman you love, Clay. You're a good man but you're making too many mistakes with her. You need to rethink this no-marriage nonsense and explain why you didn't call her from Cami's."

"I told you why. She wouldn't have understood."

She sighed. "Maybe not, but at least she would have known where you were instead of worrying."

"If I had realized she was worrying, I would have called."

She nodded. "I know you would have. Now, you'll have to convince her you love her and that --"

He shook his head. "I tried to explain and she called me a lying cheat and hung up on me. If that's the way she wants it ... fine."

"I know you're hurt and angry, Clay, but try to look at it from her standpoint. How would you have felt if your positions were reversed and she'd spent so much time with a former lover?"

He tightened his lips. "I'd like to think I would have at least been willing to listen to her before deciding she was a lying cheat!"

Betty tilted her head and looked at him. "And if she'd spent that time with her ex-hubby?"

"I trust her, Betty, but she clearly doesn't trust me! What kind of relationship can we have now that I know just how little she thinks of me?"

Betty rose and crossed the room to him. She touched his arm. "She's a woman in love with an attractive, successful, wealthy man. Instead of your love giving her confidence, it might make her feel unworthy of you ... that you couldn't possibly really love her as much as she loves you. And she does love you, Clay. A woman so deeply in love with a man is a vulnerable creature easily hurt and confused."

"I have feelings that can be hurt too, Betty. I'm not made of stone."

She squeezed his hands. "I know that, Clay and I can see the hurt in your eyes."

He swallowed and took a long, deep breath.

"I know this is difficult for you, but I think you need to swallow your pride and beg her to see you so you can explain and ask for her forgiveness."

"But I haven't done anything! I swear I did not sleep with Cami."

"Did she want you to?"

He sighed, glanced briefly away, and nodded. "But I didn't. I told her I was in love with Darbi and she didn't press the issue. It's not as if she really wanted to sleep with me. She just wanted comfort. Maybe I shouldn't have stayed with her so long, but we've been friends for nearly twenty-four years. I couldn't leave her when she was so upset."

"And now you have Darbi upset with you. I understand your loyalty to Cami, Clay, but what about the feelings of the woman you love? Friends are important and should always be cherished, but shouldn't the woman you love come first with you?"

"She does! If she had only told me she planned something special, there's no way I would have stayed so long with Cami."

"But you would still have gone to see her when she called you?"

He nodded. "Yes. I can be friends with Cami and still have Darbi be the most important person in my life."

"You'll have to make her believe that, Clay." She squeezed his hand again. "Why don't you call her?"

He shook his head. "I didn't do anything wrong and I'm not apologizing for being there for a friend who's always been there for me."

"We're talking about the woman you love, Clay."

"I'm not apologizing, Betty."

She sighed. "Put your pride on the back burner. Then take a few hours to think about what she means to you. When you have, decide what you want to do and how much you're willing to extend yourself for her. And if you need to talk again --"

"I know. Thanks."

She kissed his cheek, hugged him. "I have to go."

He walked her to her car and waited until she drove through the gates before going back inside.

Once in the living room, he resumed pacing. He was still at it when Sharde arrived unexpectedly an hour later. He gave her a cool look as she sat on the sofa Betty had occupied. "What brings you here, Sharde?"

"I want to talk to you about Darbi."

He shook his head. "Stay out of this."

"I can't. She's one of my best friends, Clay."

"How does that give you the right to interfere in our relationship?"

"I'm not interfering because I'm nosy. I'm here because I care about both of you. She's so hurt."

"And you think I'm not after being accused of lying and cheating? Why the hell does everyone keep acting as if I have no feelings? I never gave her any reason not to trust me."

"Maybe you think you didn't, but your ... insistence that marriage isn't necessary doesn't exactly inspire confidence in a woman, Clay."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you going to accuse me of cheating too?"

"No, but then I'm not in love with you. If I were, I'd be just as upset as she is at your spending so much time with an ex-lover."

"She's not just an ex-lover. She's a friend of over twenty years. If Darbi can't understand that, she's the one with the problem."

"Clay --"

"Did she ask you to come here?"

"No."

"Does she know you're here?"

"No. When I left, she was finally asleep. I won't stay long --"

"Then at the risk of appearing rude, would you see yourself out?"

Sharde compressed her lips and rose. "Fine, I'll go, Clay, but, unless you're planning to throw me out, I'm going to have my say first."

He stared at her.

She crossed the room to stare up at him. "Do you remember when Jeff didn't want to commit to me?"

"What has your bonehead finance got to do with this?"

Her dark eyes spat sparks at him. "You can call him a bonehead if you like, Clay. And you know what? You were probably right about that -- then. The strange thing is, you're acting the same way he did. Tell me, Clay, is it a white guy thing?"

His nostrils flared. "That's a damned racist remark, Sharde."

She shook her head. "You know damn well it isn't. It was just my attempt to ... get you to see sense."

"Well, it didn't work."

She sighed. "How can I get through to you? Jeff nearly lost me to you because he didn't think the commitment I needed from him was important. If he hadn't come to his senses and if you hadn't gone to visit your mother, we would have ended up as lovers."

"Well, we didn't and that's fine."

She nodded. "Yes, it is because I wouldn't trade him for two of you and I'm sure you feel the same way about trading Darbi for me."

“Look, Sharde, I’m delighted you’re so happy with your damned bonehead, but I’d rather not discuss my personal life with you anymore.”

“Fine. Just hear me out and I’ll go.”

“Make it quick because I’ve heard about all I want to from you.”

She laughed. “And I used to think you were so charming.”

“Speak your mind and leave.”

She nodded. “All right. You can waste time worrying about who’s right and who’s wrong and complain that she doesn’t trust you and you’re not apologizing all you want. But when you’ve finished whining, realize that you’re running the risk of losing her. She’s stronger than I am. I had to take Jeff back because I love him so much and life without him seemed unbearable.

“Darbi has the strength of character to love you and still move on without you in her life. If that’s what you want, keep being stubborn and she’ll be out of your life.”

“That’s her choice.”

She shook her head. “Lord, you’re an ass. It’s taken you nearly forty years to really fall in love with someone and you’re prepared to throw it away for the sake of your pride? I hope your pride keeps you happy when you lose her.” She glared at him and stalked out of the living room.

Amber appeared in the doorway. “She’s right, you know.”

“I am not apologizing for something I didn’t do.”

Amber shrugged. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“I intend to.” He crossed the room and walked past her out of the living room.

She followed him into the front foyer, watching as he picked up his car keys from the hall table. “You’re going out?”

“Yes.”

She bit her lip. “I need to talk to you. Can I come along?”

“No. We can talk later. I’ll want to know why you felt the need to tell Darbi about Cami and me and Damien.”

She sighed. “She told you I did that?”

“No, but it wasn’t Damien, so that leaves you. Why did you do it? If you hadn’t, she might not have been so quick to think I’d slept with Cami.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t mean to. Oh, Clay, please don’t think I did it intentionally in some effort to drive a wedge between you two. I didn’t. I thought she knew and didn’t care. It wasn’t until I saw the expression on her face, I ... I’m so sorry, Clay. I ... I didn’t mean to do or say anything to harm your relationship with her. I know how much she means to you.”

He swallowed hard and gave himself a mental shake. Just because he was hurt and angry was no reason to toss an unfair weight on Amber's slight shoulders. The fault was his. He sighed and caressed her cheek. "Knowing of that relationship didn't help, but it's not the cause of our present problems. It's not your fault, Amber. I should have told her the truth."

"Why didn't you? You're always so ... honest."

"She doesn't trust me."

"She loves you, Clay. So don't be too hard on her."

"I don't want to talk about this right now. I'm going out. We'll talk later."

"Where are you going?"

"To see Cami."

Her eyes darkened and she clutched at his arm. "No, Clay! Don't do that! You'll just make things worse with Darbi when she finds out you're with Cami again."

"Things can't get any worse between us."

"So you're going to sleep with Cami?"

"No, I am not going to sleep with her!" He stared at her. "Do you think I slept with her?"

Although she quickly shook her head, he noted with annoyance that she averted her gaze so he couldn't see the expression in her eyes.

If everyone who knew him well, including Damien, Amber, and even Betty, had to ask if he'd slept with Cami, small wonder Darbi didn't believe him. He swore softly and left the house, closing the door quietly behind him.

Ninety minutes later, he and Cami sat opposite each other in the booth of a small café.

"I'm so sorry I caused you so much trouble, Clay. It was selfish of me to keep you from your Darbi for so long."

He sighed. "You needed to talk."

"I did, but I wouldn't have done it had I known it would cause so much trouble with her. I know I asked you to sleep with me, but I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Who have you been talking to?"

"Betty came to see me and Amber called me. They're both worried about you. Betty told me the trouble you're in because you spent so much time with me and Amber called me a few choice names for breaking you two up."

"What?"

Cami struggled. "Amber and I have always gotten along well, but I've never heard of some of the uncomplimentary names she came up with. I think it's safe to say she really likes your Darbi."

"She's not my Darbi anymore."

She squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry, Clay."

He withdrew his hand. "I'm in deep shit with her and Damien. They both think we slept together. Hell, everyone thinks we slept together."

He saw something flicker in her eyes. "Did he seem to mind?"

"Yes, he minded. He accused me of toying with your emotions for years. I've never done that." He swallowed slowly. "Have I?"

She shook her head. "Of course you haven't."

"That's a relief. I'd never intentionally do anything to hurt you."

"I know. Now what about you and Darbi? Would it help if I went to see her and told her the truth?"

"I doubt it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm very sure. You're the last person she'd want to see."

"There must be something I can do to help."

"This is something Darbi and I will either have to work out by ourselves or not." He sipped his coffee. "Who is he, Cami?"

She lowered her gaze and wrapped her hands around her cup.

"Cami? Damien is angry with me because he thinks I've jerked you around and toyed with your feelings and that you're in love with me. I know you're not ... at least I hope you're not."

She remained silent for several moments. Finally she sighed and met his gaze. "Damien is a handsome charming man, but he's never been very perceptive where women are concerned."

He swallowed the urge to tell her he suspected Damien was in love with her. "That's your way of saying ... what?"

"I love you, Clay. I'll probably always love you, but I am not in love with you. I've always enjoyed having you in my bed, but I don't lose any sleep over who you might be sleeping with."

"Thank God!"

Her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"So who is the man that has you so unhappy?"

"Did Damien mind when he thought we'd slept together?"

"You've already asked me that. Yes, he minded. I thought he was going to take my head off."

"Why? Why should he mind?"

He shrugged.

She moistened her lips. "He's ... he's the one ... the man I'm in love with."

Clay closed his eyes briefly. "Oh, thank God!" He reached across the table and closed his hands over hers. "That is such a relief."

She blinked. "You're not ... you don't have a problem with that?"

"No! Why should I? I'm delighted."

"You're delighted. What about Damien?"

He squeezed her hand. "Why don't you call him and tell him how you feel?"

"I'm too old for him, Clay. He's only thirty years old. I'm forty-two. He wants kids ... I can't have any. What do I have to offer him that would make him interested in anything more than an occasional roll in the hay with me? Why should I burden him with feelings he'd probably rather not know I have for him? He's so young and so handsome, he could have any woman he wanted."

He shook his head. "Trust me, Cami and call him and tell him how you feel."

"Do you know something I don't, Clay?"

"I know he considers you far more than a roll in the hay."

"Are you saying ..."

"I'm saying you should call him. You won't be disappointed."

She nodded. "Okay. I will." She sighed. "At least I will, if you'll call Darbi. Amber and Betty both said you're being stubborn."

He released her hand. "Don't you start on me too, Cami, because I swear I'm in a foul mood and I just might tell you where to go and how to get there."

"You go ahead. I can take it."

He shook his head.

"Let me guess. You want me to take the fast train to hell?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I need time to think."

"You should call her and beg her to forgive you."

"For something I haven't done?"

"Yes ... if you love her."

"I do."

"Then call her."

He shook his head.

"Please, Clay. When I think of how miserable I felt when I called you ... please don't let the woman you love feel like that because your pride is more important than her feelings. Call her and do whatever you have to do to make things right with her."

"I'll think about it."

* * * * *

"Darbi, I know you're hurt and I would be in your place too, but I honestly don't think he slept with her."

Seated in the sauna at the health club, Darbi kept her eyes closed. "Then why didn't he call me, Sharde?"

"I don't know, but I think you should at least hear him out before you refuse to talk to him."

"It hurts too much. I spent over eight hours waiting for him to call me while he stayed with her ... talking ... or so he says."

"Darbi, he did not sleep with her."

She opened her eyes and glared at Sharde. "How do you know he didn't?"

"No man who is as into you as he is would risk sleeping with another woman."

"That's easy for you to say now. When the shoe was on the other foot, you didn't believe Jefferson when he denied sleeping with that bimbo he picked up in a bar after your first fight."

Sharde sighed. "No, I didn't, but I was wrong ... just as you are. Take a day or so to be angry at him ... call him every name in the book, and then hear him out."

"No!"

"Darbi! You are not in a position to be so rigid! Talk to him ... if not for fairness's sake, then for your own sake. If you're going to end it and go it alone ... you're going to need to be sure you're doing the right thing by both of you. You're not the only one you have to consider anymore."

She sighed and nodded slowly. "I know that, but --"

"Come on, girl. Don't just think about it. Talk to him."

"I'll think about it."

"Darbi! You are as stubborn as he is!" Sharde hugged her. "Okay. Think about it -- hard -- and then call him. Now, let's get out of here and go home."

"Okay, but I've kept you away from Jeff long enough. I'm going to spend the night in my own bed and let you get back to spending yours in Jeff's."

Sharde frowned. "Are you sure? Jeff and I have our whole lives ahead of us. Being separated a couple of nights will make our reunion that much sweeter."

"I'm sure, but I'll be fine on my own tonight. It will give me time to think over what you've said and decide what's best for both of us."

* * * * *

Clay left his office and crossed the hall to Damien's. He paused at Damien's secretary's desk. "Is he in, Paula?"

She smiled and nodded. "And he's in an exceptionally good mood too."

"Good." He walked to Damien's closed door and paused with his hand on the knob. "Can I ...?"

"Sure."

He nodded, tapped on the door, and then went into the office. Damien sat behind his desk, a smile on his face, and an absent look in his eyes.

Clay closed the door and leaned against it. "You've talked with Cami?"

Damien nodded. "Can you believe it, Clay? She loves me too."

He smiled. "I know. You two will be very good together."

"Yeah, but it wasn't easy convincing her of that." He frowned. "I owe you an apology, Clay. I shouldn't have said half the things I --"

"No apologies necessary, Damien. You were hurt and angry." He grimaced. "I certainly know what that feels like."

"What about you? Any movement between you and Darbi?"

He shook his head. "I'm on my way to Calder's now to see her."

"You are? Great! Who finally got through to you?"

"Cami."

Damien grinned. "She's great, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is."

"What did she say?"

"She reminded me of how miserable she felt when she thought loving you was hopeless. When I was with her, trying to comfort her, I nearly cried with her. I don't want Darbi feeling that way if there's anything I can do to avoid it."

"Thanks, Clay."

"For what?"

"For being there for Cami when she needed someone. I'm just sorry it caused so much trouble with Darbi."

"So am I, but I'll make things right with her."

"Good luck, not that you'll need it."

"Oh, I'm afraid I will. I've called her three times today and she's refused to speak to me each time."

"Damn. You know Cami is willing to talk to her."

"I know and I appreciate that, but I don't think that will help ... at least not yet. If there's any hope of our relationship surviving, I'll have to convince her I love her too much to want anyone else."

"Since that's true, I'm sure you'll succeed."

"I'd better or I'll be up the damned creek without a boat or a paddle."

"I'll hold down the fort."

He nodded. "Thanks."

He left the office and drove across town to Calder Technologies. He pulled into the parking lot. Although he didn't see Darbi's car in the lot, he knew she sometimes enjoyed the thirty-minute walk to work. It was late August and a little warm to walk, but he was certain she was at work. He parked his car in the lot facing the exit door she used when he picked her up after work.

He turned on his car stereo and sat waiting. Unless she chose to work late, she should exit the building within the next twenty minutes or so. Half an hour later Sharde and Calder exited the building.

He got out of his car and stood by it as the couple approached.

He and Calder exchanged cool looks. He saw Sharde squeezed Calder's arm and whisper something to him. Although he narrowed his gaze, he continued walking past Clay to his car.

Sharde stopped by him with a smile. "Hi, Clay."

"Hi. I think I owe you an apology."

She shook her head. "Not if you're here to see Darbi, you don't."

"I am. And I am sorry I was so rude."

She smiled. "Apology accepted."

"Good. I'd hate to think you no longer found me breathtakingly charming."

She laughed. "Oh, Clay. I am so happy to see you here to make things right with her I'd love to kiss you."

He arched a brow and tapped his cheek. "So who's stopping you?"

"Jeff would probably wring your neck."

"He could try, but I doubt he'd be successful." He lifted his right foot. "I'd love an excuse to put my foot up his ass."

She shook her head. "You're impossible, Clay!"

He laughed. "Is Darbi still inside?"

"No. She left work early."

Great. He'd wasted nearly an hour. "Is she home?"

Sharde hesitated. "Clay --"

He shook his head. "I don't want or need a lecture, Sharde. Please. Just tell me where she is so I can try to make things right with her."

"She's home."

"Thanks." He turned.

She touched his arm. "Clay, I think you should do whatever is necessary to get her to forgive you. This is not a time when you and she need to be separated for any longer than necessary. She needs you now more than ever."

"Why now? What's wrong? Is she sick?"

"I can't say any more without breaking her confidence. Just trust me when I say, it will be worth your while to do or say whatever you have to do to win her back." She squeezed his arm. "Good luck, Clay."

He nodded. "Thanks. And good luck with bonehead over there."

"Clay!"

He laughed. "Thanks, Sharde."

"You can thank me by making her happy."

"I'll do my best."

"I know you will."

He nodded and got in his car and drove to Darbi's condo. He was surprised to see his SUV parked in her second parking space. He found a parking spot a block away. His heart raced and his mouth felt dry as he slowly walked back to her condo.

Standing in front of her door, he took several deep, calming breaths before he rang her bell.

Amber opened the door. "Clay!" She glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing about yourself and my SUV." He studied her face, noting the tearstains. He caressed her cheek. "Have you been crying? What's the matter, honey?"

She lowered her gaze. "Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yes!"

"You've been crying."

"It's nothing, Clay. Really."

He was going to have to make time to talk with her -- after he'd talked with Darbi. "Is Darbi here?"

"Yes, but I don't think she wants to see you." Amber bit her lip. "I think --"

"It's all right, Amber. Let him in."

Amber stood aside and he walked inside. Darbi, dressed in a baggy sweat suit stood a few feet in front of him. He clenched his right hand into a fist to keep from rushing at her and gripping her in a bear hug. He smiled. "Hi, honey."

"Hi."

He stuck his hands in his pant pockets. "We need to talk."

She nodded. "Yes, but I think you need to talk to Amber first."

He looked at Amber who met his gaze, then quickly lowered her head. He touched her and slipped his hand under her chin. He lifted it and looked down at her. "I'm listening, Amber."

She closed the door and trained her gaze on the floor. "You're going to have a fit. Promise me you won't go ballistic."

He glanced at Darbi, who just shook her head. "I promise I will try to listen with an open mind. Now what do you need to tell me?" He cupped her face between his palms. "I don't bite."

"You will when I tell you what's wrong."

She hadn't wrecked his SUV. She hadn't asked for any money in a week. What did that leave? "What's wrong?"

"I ... I'm pregnant, Clay!"

He blinked. "What? What did you say?"

"I'm pregnant."

He released her face and stepped back. "Pregnant? You mean ... you're having a ... a baby?"

Her shoulders shook then she lifted her head and gave him a defiant look. "That's what being pregnant generally means."

"How the hell can you be having a baby?! You're only eighteen!"

"I know how old I am, Clay."

"And you're going to school in just a few weeks!"

"That's not going to happen now, is it?"

"What the hell do you mean it's not going to happen?"

"I'm not going to Harvard or any other school next month, Clay! I'm pregnant and I don't have time --"

"Who's responsible for this?"

"Is that your clever way of asking who the father is?"

"Yes, damn it, it is! Who the hell is he?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because after I take my foot out of his ass and he picks up what's left of his teeth, we're going to have to discuss when you two are getting married!"

Amber's nostril flared and she cast a quick look at Darbi, who had remained silent. "What did I tell you? Didn't I tell you he'd go ballistic and insist I had to get married?" She turned her gaze back to him. "I have news for you, Clay, I don't want to marry the father."

"Too damned bad. You should have thought of that before you let him get you pregnant."

"Just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean I have to get married."

"Why the hell doesn't it?"

"Stop yelling. Why do you keep cursing, Clay? You never curse at me!"

He took a deep breath and raked both hands through his hair. "Okay. You're right. I'm sorry."

"So we're not going to talk about marriage?"

"Yes, we are going to talk about marriage, Amber! You are not going to be a single mom!"

"Why not?"

"Because if this ... male cared anything about you, he'd want to do the right thing."

Tiny sparks flared in her gaze. "And what's the right thing?"

"He'll marry you."

"Oh? Then I guess you don't care about Darbi, do you?"

"What?"

Darbi spoke in a sharp voice. "Amber! Don't!"

She spun around to face Darbi. "I have to. You're standing here. You can see how ... sanctimonious he's being when he doesn't have any room to talk."

"This is between you and him, Amber. I didn't betray yours, so don't betray my confidence."

"I have to." Amber tossed her head and gave him a sweet smile. "Why do I have to get married just because I'm pregnant but you don't have to marry Darbi when she is too?"

"When she is ..." He turned to stare at Darbi. "What? Darbi? What ... you ... you're pregnant?"

She sighed. "Yes." She looked at Amber. "Thanks a lot. I hope you're happy."

Amber blushed and spoke in a quick, defensive tone. "Well ... you should have told him yourself then I wouldn't have had to."

"You didn't have to tell him, but you know what? I think I've had enough of you Fraziers to last me awhile. Why don't both of you take a hike?" She shook her head and walked down the hall towards her bedroom.

Clay turned his attention back to Amber. "We'll have to talk later, but you should know that my mind isn't going to change."

"Neither is mine."

She gave him a direct stare and left.

He hesitated only briefly before following her outside. "Drive carefully, Amber."

She tossed her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "I know I've been a pain in your butt, but I do love you, Clay."

He hugged her. "I love you too, honey."

"Will you do something for me?"

"Of course, if I can."

"Go make things right with Darbi and tell her I'm sorry."

He nodded and watched her drive away before he went back inside.

Darbi stood in the living room by the patio doors, watching his approach with a weary look in her eyes. He touched her cheek. "How long have you known?"

"A little over two weeks."

"How ... pregnant are you?"

"About four or five weeks. I think I must have conceived very soon after the first time we made love without a condom."

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "Yes. I am definitely pregnant."

"Sharde was tossing hints all over the place and Amber obviously knew. Why did you tell them before you told me?"

"I found out for sure while you were away."

"Why didn't you call me and tell me?"

"I wanted to tell you under special circumstances. I was going to tell you on Saturday night. I had this special night planned for us. Nothing elaborate, but it would have been special because it was the third anniversary of our first date. That seemed an appropriate time to tell you."

"I didn't know, but I promise you nothing happened between me and Cami." He cupped her face. "I swear it, Darbi. It was a dumb mistake not to call you, but ... nothing happened."

"Would you tell me if it had?"

"Yes."

"Even if it meant I'd kick your ass permanently to the curb?"

"Even then." He shook his head. "How could you think I'd want anyone else, Darbi, even Cami when I've never made any secret of how I feel about you?"

"She was your first love and --"

He pressed his fingers against her lips. "She's a special friend, but you are the woman I love. I'm sorry I missed the special night you had planned for us. And I should have leveled with you about our relationship with Cami, but the information wasn't mine alone to share." He released her face and slipped his arms around her. "I know I hurt you, but I'll make it up to you and --"

She pressed her hands against his chest. "Do you think you're out of trouble that easy?"

He sighed. "I promise you that I did not sleep with her and her interest in me was strictly as a result of my being related to Damien."

"What do you mean?"

"They're in love with each other."

She stared up at him. "Is she nuts? She prefers him to you?"

He smiled. "Every day of the week. It seems I've just been a Damien substitute for the last two years."

"You mean she doesn't want you?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"Strange, but they do say there's no accounting for taste."

"Hmmm. Let's talk about something really important."

"Such as?"

"Are you going to forgive me?"

"If you didn't sleep with her --"

"I didn't."

"Then what's there to forgive?"

"Darbi! Please. There is nothing to forgive, but if you think there is, I need you to forgive me."

She sighed, then lay her head against his shoulder. "It's not going to be this easy, Clay."

He hugged her. "Fine. Make me sweat and beg. But first let me tell you that Amber is sorry."

"Is she?"

"Yes. Look, I know she can be trying, but she's really a sweet kid."

"Hmm."

"Okay, let's leave that for now. Right now I have other needs."

"And those are?"

"I need to make love to you."

She shivered. "If I let you do that ... that would make me weak."

“Or just hopelessly in love with me.”

She drew away from him, locking her dark gaze with his. “Which doesn't mean I plan to be weak for you.”

“What's so weak about two people in love making love?” He took her hand. When she didn't pull away, he led her to her bedroom.

Eager to see concrete evidence of her pregnancy, he undressed her quickly and slipped his hands over her stomach. He frowned and looked up at her. “It doesn't seem any rounder. You're sure. Right?”

“Positive, or I wouldn't have told anyone.”

He looked up at her. “Have you told your mom yet?”

She narrowed her gaze. “Do you want to talk or do you want to spend time trying to convince me why I should forgive you? Take off your clothes and make up your mind.”

He pulled off his clothes and took her in his arms. “Let's go to bed.”

She shook her head. “I want you to take me on the chair.”

He glanced at the chairs on either side of her patio doors and shook his head. “They don't look very comfortable.” He stroked a hand over her stomach. “We have to be careful.”

She laughed. “Clay, don't lose it. Okay? I'm only a few weeks. We're a long way from the time when I need to start worrying about my back or anything else. I want to sit on your lap on the chair and lower myself slowly onto your cock.”

His cock stirred. “Which entrance?”

She reached back and palmed her cheeks. “I want to feel you in my ass.”

He wanted vaginal sex, but nodded. He just wanted to please her.

She linked her arms around his neck and offered her lips.

He resisted the urge to ravish her mouth and grope her. He embraced her and kissed her slowly. She parted her lips and leaned against him. Determined to show her that he loved her too much to want any other woman, he kept a tight rein on his emotions while quickly arousing hers.

When she leaned against him, trembling, he released her. He slipped a condom over his cock, picked up the tube of lubrication, and sat in one of the chairs by the patio doors. He lubed his cock and beckoned to her. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She crossed the room to him and turned her back to him. He watched with interest as she placed her hands over her cheeks and parted them. He caressed each cheek before slipping lube into her rectum. Capping the tube, he dropped it at his feet and gripped the base of his cock. He placed his other hand on her waist. “Sit down, sweetheart.”

Still holding her cheeks apart, she squatted over him, and slowly lowered her hips. He groaned and closed his eyes as her warm, tight ass slid over the head of his cock.

He gripped her hips and gave an impatient tug. As she sat on his lap, his cock was forced up into her body. Forgetting his resolve to make slow love to her, he thrust up at her and fucked her hard.

She moaned and leaned back, allowing her head to rest against his shoulder. "Oh, Clay! Fuck me."

He was so hard and she was so tight, he knew he wasn't going to last much longer. "I intend to." He slipped a hand around her body and probed her pussy. She was slick and he could feel her inner muscles contracting.

It wouldn't take much to make her come. He released her other hip and palmed one of her breasts. Rubbing his thumb over her engorged clit, he licked her neck and fucked her with long, deep movements.

He fought to retain control of himself as he worked hard to ensure she peaked before he came. This was not the time to come before her. Just as he despaired of making her come, she moaned, shuddered, her thighs and ass began quivering, and finally, she came.

He bit into her shoulder and after a quick series of thrust, he came.

While he could normally make love to her at least twice before he needed a nap, he felt spent. He urged her to rise. He groaned in protest when she tightened herself around the sensitive head of his cock before he drew it out of her.

He discarded the condom, took her hand, and they stumbled over to the bed and tumbled in together. Within in moments, he was asleep with her body curled against his.

* * * * *

The next morning, Darbi shook her head and rolled away from Clay when he reached for her. "We'd better get up and shower. I have a full day ahead of me to make up for leaving work early yesterday."

He sat on the side of the bed beside her. "Will you be able to squeeze in lunch or a cup of coffee with me some time during the day?"

She shook her head and rose. "I think we both needed last night, but nothing's really changed."

He sighed. "What?"

She touched his shoulder. "I love you and I think I believe you didn't sleep with her, but I need some time to ... process things, Clay."

He stared up at her. "What does that mean?"

"It means I need some time away from you."

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against her. "Darbi. Honey, we just had over two weeks away from each other."

"When you spent the night with her, you crushed my hopes in a way that makes them difficult to recover."

He lifted his head and looked up at her. "Darbi, she's my friend and she needed a shoulder to cry on and a substitute for Damien. Please don't punish me for being there for someone who's always been there for me."

"I have issues I need to work through, Clay. I can't do that around you."

"Darbi, we need to talk about the baby and our --"

"I know and we will. Just give me a little space and time to deal with my issues."

"What issues?"

She closed her eyes. "I don't know how I'm going to tell my mother."

"Why should that be so difficult? It's not as if I won't be there loving and supporting you."

"That's not going to be enough to appease my mother."

"Darbi --"

She shook her head. "I'll work out a way to tell her. I need a clear head for that and I rarely have one when you're around. We need some time alone and you need to work things out with Amber."

"There's nothing to work out. I expect her to get married."

"She's right. You're a hypocrite."

"I am not! She's my little sister. I want what's best for her."

"Why is marriage best for her, but not for you?"

He shook his head. "You knew how I felt about marriage from the start."

She nodded. "And you knew how I felt about it. So it was just plain stupid for us to have unprotected sex."

"We can be committed to each other without marriage, Darbi."

"I'd better get dressed." She turned away.

He caught her hand.

She turned and he drew her back towards the bed. "If we're going to be separated for a few weeks, I need you one last time."

"Clay --"

He stroked a hand over her stomach before sliding his fingers along her slit. "Don't say no."

She felt the familiar rush of moisture between her legs as she looked down at his cock. He was hard and she wanted him for what might be their last time together. She swallowed and licked her lips.

She didn't protest when he lay on the bed and urged her to stretch out on her side in front of him. "I need you." He stroked her pussy. "Please."

She lifted her leg and sighed with pleasure as she felt the big head of his cock sliding between her lips and into her pussy. She pushed her hips back and reached between their legs to cup her hand over his balls.

He laid her top leg over his hip and pressed his lips against her neck. "I love you."

She moaned and closed her eyes as he moved inside her. His lovemaking of the previous night had held a greedy, needy quality. This time he made sweet love to her, making her feel beautiful and desirable with every slow, deep thrust.

When she came, he cupped both hands over her breasts and rained kisses against her neck and shoulders, heightening her pleasure. As the last flutter of delight danced through her, he thrust his cock deep and hard into her pussy in rapid succession.

She pressed her ass against his groin and licked her lips as he shuddered behind her and blasted his seed into her.

They lay with her still impaled on him for several moments after he'd come before she sighed and eased away from him. She did it slowly so that his cock remained in her body for as long as possible. She sat up.

He sat up beside her. "Honey --"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "I need time, Clay."

He sighed and nodded.

She kissed his cheek. "I'm going to shower. Could you ... be gone when I come out?"

He nodded again.

She caressed his hair. "Just give me two weeks and we can talk."

He engulfed her in a brief, fierce hug before he released her.

She rose and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

When she emerged from her shower with a towel wrapped around her body, he'd left. She sighed and sank down on the side of the bed. *Get it together, girl. You asked him to leave. He left. But if he really cared, would he have left? Oh, girl, get real. You can't have it both ways.*

* * * * *

"How do you think Darbi feels knowing you think if a man really cares about a woman he's knocked up, he'll marry her when you won't marry her?"

Clay arched a brow at Amber, seated next to him on the sofa in his office. "She knows I love her."

She shrugged. "So? Maybe that's not enough."

“What?”

“If it were, you wouldn't have been home right after work the last week and what ... a half? You'd have spent most of the night with her and then come creeping home sometime after twelve a.m. as you were doing before she kicked your butt to the curb.”

“She didn't kick -- she just needs time to ...”

“To what? Decide that maybe she can do without a man who refuses to marry her after knocking her up?”

His nostrils flared. “I didn't knock her up!”

Amber gaped at him. “Oh, my God, Clay! You mean it's not your baby?”

“Of course it's mine!”

She frowned. “Then if you love her, and it's your baby, why won't you marry her?”

“She understands and I asked you here to discuss you, not me and Darbi.”

She slipped her arm through his. “Clay, you need to understand that I am not getting married. I've already talked to Mom and Dad and they understand. I'm going to put off school while I have the baby, but I will go. Promise. You might think I'm an airhead, but I know the value of education and I will make you proud of me, Clay.”

He shook his head. “Oh, honey, even if you don't go to school, please don't think I'm not proud of you. I know I don't always show it, but I love you very much and I really wouldn't change a thing about you.”

“Good because right now, Mom and Dad want me to come home.”

He stared at her. “You're too young to be a single mom, Amber. You don't know what you're getting yourself into.”

“Maybe I don't, Clay, but I know what feels right. Going home to Mom and Dad and having my baby there feels right.”

“You can't do this by yourself, Amber.”

“I won't have to. I'll have Mom and Dad and Damien and --”

“Damien? He's all right with this?”

She shrugged. “I think being in love has mellowed him. He ranted and raved at first, but after Betty and Cami talked to him, he calmed down. So I'll have them and you, Clay?” She looked up at him, her green eyes clouded with worry. “I know you don't approve, but can I count on you?”

He sighed and hugged her. “Of course you can count on me.”

She linked her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. “I knew you wouldn't let me down, Clay.”

“Never.”

She drew out of his arms and rose. “I'd better go pack my bags.”

"You're not leaving for another week or so."

"I know, but in case you haven't noticed, I've bought a lot of clothes over the summer and I won't be able to fit most of them soon."

He stood up and caressed her cheek. "I know you think I've been hard on you, honey, but you know it's only because I love you."

"I've always known that, Clay ... even when I was being the most difficult." She clutched his hand. "Walk me to the door."

At the door, she smiled up at him. "Do the right thing by Darbi, Clay."

"I intend to. I'll take care of her and the baby."

She sighed and shook her head. "You're going to have to marry her to keep her."

He shook his head. "No one is going to force me into a marriage I don't want."

She rolled her eyes. "I'll see you when you get home." She kissed his cheek and left. He closed the door and sat behind his desk. He ordered a dozen roses to be sent to Darbi at work and then called her. "Hi, honey."

"Clay." Her voice warmed. "Hi. I can't talk long. I'm on my way to a meeting."

"Okay. I just wanted to talk to you and see how you were."

"I'm fine, Clay."

"Really? Not missing me at all?"

"Of course I do, but I'm a big girl. I might have to learn to cope."

Oh, hell. "No! Let's not talk about coping without me, Darbi."

"I don't want to, but you should know that I can if I have to, Clay." She sighed. "Now I have to go. Have a great day."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"When I said I needed space, I didn't expect you to call me every day."

"Do you want me to stop calling you?"

"I ... no."

"Then I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay."

His phone rang again just after he put it down. He lifted the receiver. "Hello."

"Clayton! Darling, I have some news for you."

"Mom. How are you?"

"Considering things, I'm well."

"And Xavier?"

"He's as well as can be expected. When I first told him about Amber, I thought he was going to have a stroke. He still thinks of her as a little girl."

"I know the feeling."

"Yes, well, we'll all have to learn to cope."

"You had news you wanted to share?"

"Yes."

She sounded excited. He smiled. "Good news?"

"Oh, yes, Clay. We wanted you to be the first to hear our news."

"Oh, Mom. You're separating? I'm sorry."

There was a silence before she spoke. "Separating? Where do you get these ideas, Clayton?"

At the surprise in her voice, he realized he'd been expecting them to separate for years ... just as he'd been expecting his father and Damon's mother to separate. He frowned. He wasn't sure why since both couples had always seemed very happy. "So you're not separating?"

"Far from it!"

Of course they weren't. She loved Xavier and wouldn't have sounded so happy if they were separating. "Good."

"When we discussed the baby, we realized it was time we behaved in a more responsible manner."

"What do you mean?"

"We didn't want our first grandchild to think his grandparents didn't care enough about each other to solidify their commitment to each other. Xavier asked me to marry him and Clayton, I was so ... happy and stunned, I started crying, and I could barely get the yes out."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her sound so happy. "He did? Congratulations, Mom! I'm very happy for you and Xavier." He frowned. "How did Dad take the news?"

"Well, he was very surprised when I called and told him I wanted a divorce immediately." She laughed. "After the shock wore off, I think he was afraid once he's free, he'll have to marry Velva."

"Why shouldn't he want to marry her, Mom? He loves her."

"Does he? Strange he's never wanted to marry her. Sometimes I don't think you Frazier men have marriage in your blood."

"He married you and he does love Velva, Mom."

"Then he should make an honest woman out of her!"

He shook his head. After twenty-some years of living with Xavier, she didn't really have much room to talk. But apparently she was feeling self-righteous now that Xavier was finally going to make an "honest woman of her."

"Maybe marriage isn't important to her."

"Are you serious, Clayton? Take it from me, if and when a woman really loves a man, she wants and needs to know he wants and needs her enough to ask her to marry him. I ... I didn't think marriage was important ... until Xavier asked me to get a divorce and marry him." Her voice broke. "Then ... then I knew what had been missing from our relationship the entire time we've been together. Don't get me wrong, Clayton, I know and have always known he loved me, but when he asked me to marry him ... it turned my world upside down in the most incredible and happy way."

"I ... I'm very happy for you, Mom."

"Good. We'll be getting married as soon as possible. Xavier wanted to ask you to be his best man, but he was afraid you'd say no."

"Why should I say no?"

"He's afraid you've harbored ill feelings for ... living with me all this time."

In the beginning, while he'd readily accepted his father's extramarital relationship, his mother's with Xavier had taken some getting used to. As a nineteen-year-old, he had hated Xavier until he'd seen how happy he made his mother. "I'd be delighted to be his best man. Is he there?"

"He's working."

"I'll call him and tell him myself."

"Oh, Clayton, would you? It would mean so much to him and to me. I don't think either of us has given much thought to how you must have felt all these years until we realized we were going to be grandparents. I'm sorry, Clayton. This must have been a difficult situation for you at best."

"No, Mom, no. I've been an adult for a long time now. I understand and have understood you two love each other. Please don't waste any time on regrets on my behalf at a time when you should be very happy."

"Oh, Clayton, you are such an understanding man. I hope that one of these days you'll meet a woman who makes you as happy as Xavier makes me."

"I am seeing someone special, Mom."

"Who? Why haven't you mentioned her? How special is she?"

"Very special."

"Will I get to meet her soon?"

"It's early days yet." Early days? He was in love for the first time in his life with a woman who wanted something he'd thought he couldn't give her.

"Have you asked her to marry you yet?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

He sighed. "I ... I don't know."

"If you love her and she loves you, think about it, Clayton."

He nodded. "I will ... I have been."

"Well, I'm off to go shopping for a wedding dress before I meet Xay to pick out our rings. I love you so much, Clayton."

"I love you too, Mom."

"Bye, darling."

"Bye, Mom."

He hung up and sat back in his chair. His parents were getting a divorce and his mother was remarrying. Hell had frozen over. Just maybe it was time he reevaluated his priorities.

He picked up the phone and called his father. Damien's mother answered. "Clayton! How are you?"

"Hi, Velva. I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm great."

He hesitated, wondering if she'd mention his father's impending divorce. When she didn't, he spoke again. "Is Dad there?"

"Yes. Hold on a second and I'll get him."

Several minutes later he heard his father's voice on the line. "Clayton! Boy, how are you?"

He wondered how old he'd have to be before his father stopped calling him boy. "I'm fine, Dad. How are you?"

"Hell has frozen over, Clayton. Your mother and I are getting a divorce."

"Yes. I know. She just called and told me. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Mom thought you might have been ... dismayed."

"Dismayed? Where does your mother get those ideas, boy? Actually, I was somewhat relieved. I've been trying to get up the nerve for sometime now to ask her for a divorce."

"You have? Why?"

"I'm not getting any younger, boy, and Velva is getting more gorgeous with every passing year. I decided last year that it was time I asked her to marry me before some young buck came along and tried to take my woman from me."

"Have you talked to her about this yet?"

"No. I wanted to talk to your mother first."

"And now? Are you going to tell her now that you want to marry her when the divorce is over?"

"I plan to wait until the divorce is final and surprise her."

"Sounds romantic, Dad, but I think if I were you, I'd give her a heads up."

"Why?"

"I'm thinking she'd like to know how much you love her."

"She knows that, boy."

"I'm sure she does, but I've lately come to the conclusion that we have to do some things we might view as ... unimportant to keep the women we love happy."

"We? Are you in love, boy?"

"Yes, Dad, I am."

"Tell me about her."

"She's amazing, Dad. She ..."

* * * * *

On Friday morning Darbi and Sharde worked through lunch, which they shared in Sharde's office. "This feels awkward asking this, but are we still on track, Darbi? We're determined to outbid Fra-Tech to win this next government contract."

She nodded. "I love him, but I work here and we never discuss business when we're alone. He knows I'm going to do all I can to help Calder Tech outbid Fra-Tech."

"Don't you find it difficult?"

She sighed. "Not so far. We're on track. I've gone through résumés and arranged for several interviews. We'll be ready to outbid them."

"What will happen when things work out for you two?"

"Don't you mean if?"

Sharde shook her head. "No. I mean when. He loves you and I know you love him. You'll be able to work things out. Then what?"

"Then I'll have to resign and worry about another job after the baby's born."

"I'm sure things will work out for you and Clay, Darbi. There's no way two people could love each other as much as you do without being able to give and take until you can reach a compromise."

"Compromise?" She shook her head. "Things didn't work out with Martin, but I still believe in and need to be married to a man who claims he loves me."

Sharde smiled. "So. Are we still on for tonight? It's time you met Jeff's best man, Benton Savage. Since it's just going to be the four of us, I thought we'd have a cozy dinner at our place." She lowered her gaze. "You know, if you want, you could invite Clay and we could maybe invite Jadan to make a sixth."

"Jadan's away and are you sure you want to have Jeff and Clay together in such a confined space?"

Sharde laughed. "It's going to have to happen sooner or later. Jeff will be on his best behavior. So invite Clay if you like and maybe we can get Willow."

"Thanks, but I think I'll come solo."

"Okay. Ben will like that as he'll get to flirt with you."

She smiled. "I'll look forward to that."

After lunch, she returned to her office. Instead of working, she sat at her desk, staring at the ring she had bought for Clay with such high hopes. Would she ever get him to agree to wear it?

The ringing phone interrupted her thoughts. Her secretary was at lunch, so she picked it up herself. "Good afternoon, Calder Technologies. Darbi Raymond speaking."

"Hi, honey."

She smiled. "Hi, Clay. How are you?"

"I'd be great if you'd have dinner with me tonight."

She sighed. "You know I'm Sharde's matron of honor?"

"Yes."

"Well, Sharde wants me to meet the best man tonight. We're having dinner at their place."

"How about coffee afterwards?"

"I'm feeling a little tired. I'm going home and going to bed after dinner."

"Tired? Are you all right?"

"Yes. I just have to adjust to being pregnant. Look, I should get back to work."

"Darbi, I need to see you soon. We need to talk."

"I know and I need to see you too. I'll call you and we'll set up a date."

"Okay. Enjoy yourself tonight."

"How will you be spending the night?"

"I'll probably watch a movie."

"I'll call you soon, Clay."

"Okay. Take care, honey."

"You too."

During dinner, Darbi found Benton Savage, a handsome blond with a Bruce Willis smile, friendly and charming. He flirted with her throughout the evening. As they said good night, he held her hand and sighed. "Why are all the good ones already taken?"

She smiled. "You're sweet, Benton."

He grinned. "It's Ben, and I'd rather be considered sexy."

She smiled and leaned close to speak in a mock whisper. "Newsflash, Ben, you're sexy as hell."

He laughed and released her hand. "I do so love a woman with good taste."

She laughed and got in her car. Driving home her thoughts turned to Jadan. She wondered what Jadan would think of Benton. Jadan made no secret of her preference for dating tall, handsome blonds. Maybe she'd ask Sharde about Benton's preference in women.

At home, she undressed and took a bath. As she lay with her body surrounded by the slick oil, her thoughts turned to Clay. The fact that he had called every single day for the last ten days surely must mean he felt a need to talk to her. Why would he need to talk to her every day if he didn't really care about her? And why should a rich, handsome man who could have any woman he wanted pursue her unless need and love motivated him? If that were the case, maybe she was being unreasonable in expecting him to view marriage as she did.

She got out of the bath, dried off, slipped on one of his pajama tops he'd given her, and got into bed. She fell asleep quickly, only to wake in the middle of the night, longing for him. The memory of his sometimes tender, sometimes greedy passion made her ache for him. If he made her believe he loved her, could she come to terms with just living with him?

Oh, Clay! What am I going to do? She drifted back to sleep only to wake just before dawn, her decision about her future with Clay made. She rose and called her mother.

"Mom? I have some news that's not going to thrill you. Are you sitting down?"

* * * * *

The smell of freshly brewing coffee awakened Clay from a restless sleep. He rolled over onto his back and lay staring up at his bedroom ceiling, yawning. He hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks. There was no reason he shouldn't lie there until he fell back asleep.

He frowned. Amber must be feeling sentimental on her last day with him before returning home to Jamaica. He should probably get up and join her for coffee, but he felt as if he'd spent most of the night lying sleepless thinking about Darbi. He had to find a way to win her back.

He turned onto his side and glanced at the clock. 6:20 a.m. He frowned. If Amber had roused herself before her normal ten a.m. rising time to make him coffee, the least he could do was get up and drink a cup with her.

He pulled on a pair of pajama bottoms and started towards the kitchen. On the way, he noted that Amber's bedroom door was open. Her bags, which had been lined up on the floor the night before, were gone. He frowned, then realized she must have moved them to the foyer for easier packing into his SUV when he took her to the airport that afternoon.

He glanced around the room and saw an envelope on her pillow. He walked into the room and picked it up when he saw his name sprawled across it. Sitting on the unmade bed, he opened and read it.

Dearest Clay,

I looked in before I left, but you were fast asleep. So I kissed you and let you sleep. Damien picked me up at six this morning and will drive me to the airport this afternoon so don't worry about how I'll get there.

I know I've been a pain in the neck, but you know I love you, not just as a big brother, but almost like a second father. I'll call you in a few days when you come off your natural high.

All my love,

Amber.

He smiled, then frowned. If Amber had already left, who was in the kitchen? And what natural high was she referring to? He slapped a hand against his forehead. No one was in the kitchen. She must have set the automatic coffee maker before she left.

As big a pain in the neck as she'd been, he was going to miss her. He rose and headed towards the kitchen. He caused in the doorway, a wide smile spreading across his face.

A barefoot Darbi, wearing nothing but one of his pajama tops, stood at the counter, putting two cups on a tray.

"Darbi!"

She turned to face him, a smile lighting her beautiful face. "Hi, honey."

Honey. She must have decided to forgive him. His smile turned into a grin.

"After a sleepless night, I woke up early missing you. So I decided it was time we talked to see if we could iron out our differences. So here I am."

"Amber let me in and then called Damien to come pick her up. You slept through the whole process. Are you glad to see me?"

"You know I am." He crossed the room and wrapped his arms around her. "Oh, baby, I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, Clay."

The feel of her hands caressing his back aroused him. He told himself they needed to talk first, but he ached for her. Overcome by his hunger, he pushed up the top and slipped his hands between her legs. She was wet.

He turned his head and kissed her. As her lips parted under his, he stroked his fingers between her wet folds and into her cunt. She moaned and ground herself against his fingers.

He dragged his lips away from hers and stared down at her. "I need you."

To his surprise, she opened her top, revealing her nude body, leaned back against the wall, and parted her legs. "Show me how much."

"Here?"

She rubbed her pussy and licked her lips. "I'm wet and ready. I want you right here and right now ... unless you have something better to do."

He tore off his pajama bottoms, popped his cock out of his briefs, moved between her legs, and thrust forward.

"Ooooh, yes!" She moaned and slipped her arms around him as he pushed into her wet warmth.

He shuddered, feeling as if all the nerves in his body were centered in his cock head. The deeper he pushed into her, the more incredible the sensations buffeting his body. When he felt her pubic hair against his, he groaned and slid his hands down her body to cup her big, round ass.

"Oooh! Clay!"

"Have I ever told you how fond I am of your big, brown, round ass?"

She gave him a seductive smile. "Hmmm. You might have mentioned it once or twice."

He gently squeezed her ass and slowly fucked his cock in and out of her sweet pussy, staring down into her eyes, which were still open.

"Oh, Clay, I love this and I love you!"

He smiled, pushed all the way back inside her, and held himself still. "It does feel good, doesn't it?"

She stroked her fingers through the hair at his nape. "If it only felt good, I wouldn't want to melt every time I feel you sliding all the way inside me. It's so much more than good."

He lowered his head until his lips were within inches of hers. "That's because we're so much more than in love with each."

"I think you're right," she told him, closed her eyes, and urged his lips down onto hers.

He wanted to be tender and slow, but as he felt her inner muscles rippling around him, he lost his ability to control the build up of his passion. He lifted one of her legs, and started to drill his cock into her, shuddering with lust and love. He dragged his lips away from hers and sucked one of her breasts between his lips.

She moaned and raked a hand down his back. Deciding her breasts must still be sore, he gentled his lips and tongue against her nipple. When it hardened, he kissed his way across her body to her other breast. Squeezing and caressing her ass, he gently sucked her until she cried out, and showered what felt like a river of pussy juice over his cock.

Her internal contractions set off his own eruption and he came, thrusting deep and hard into her as he pumped his seed into her flooded cunt. He leaned against her with his

face pressed against her neck for several moments after he came before the feel of her belly against his reminded him that pressing all his weight against her might not be a good idea.

He straightened and stroked her cheek. "That was ... intense. You are incredible."

She smiled, slowly sliding her tongue along her lips.

"Don't do that or you'll make me hard again."

"And that would be bad because?"

"We need to talk."

She nodded. "Yes. We do."

He kissed her and took her hand. "Let's go to bed."

"And how much talking are we going to get done there?"

He squeezed her hand. "I promise we'll talk first." He buttoned his pajama top over her breasts, picked up his bottoms, and led her to the bedroom.

She paused at the door. "I left something in my shoulder bag in the living room I want to get. You go in and I'll be there in a second."

"Don't be long."

"I won't."

He propped the pillows against the headboard and was sitting up with his bottoms on when she walked into the room with her shoulder bag. She slipped into the bed beside him, placing her bag on the nightstand.

His top barely covered her ass and pussy. He placed a hand on one of her thighs. "Does your presence here mean you're ... what does your presence here mean?"

She sighed. "I love and want you so much, my desire for you weakens my resolve."

"Why is that such a bad thing?"

"Because even though I love you, my needs haven't changed, Clay." She turned to look at him. "I know you love me and I believe you when you say you didn't sleep with Cami, but I need to know you want and love me enough to marry me even though it's not something you believe in or want."

"And if that's not something I can do?"

She closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath. "Then I have to move on."

"Move on? What does that mean?"

"It means end our relationship. That would tear out my heart, but I'll do it, Clay, if I have to."

So it was time to decide how much she meant to him. Either he compromised his principles or he'd lose the only woman he'd ever loved. "I've never had to compromise or change anything to get a woman I wanted, Darbi and --"

She pressed her fingers against his lips. "Before you say anything else, I have something I need to give you."

He nodded.

She reached into her shoulder bag and withdrew a small jeweler's box. "I was going to give this to you the night ... you went over her -- Cami's place."

"What is it?"

She opened the box, revealing what looked like an eighteen-karat gold diamond ring, which must have cost several grand. "It's a ring."

"So I see." He stared at the diamond in the middle of the gold band. Hell, if he didn't know better, he'd almost think it was ...

She lifted the ring from the box, tossed the box aside, and took his left hand in hers. She hesitated and then slid the ring over the third finger.

It fit perfectly.

He stared down at the ring glimmering on his finger before he looked up at her.

She watched him with wide eyes. "So? Do you like it?"

"It's very nice and it fits, but it looks like an engage --"

"It is ... an engagement ring."

"It is?"

She nodded. "So?"

He stared at her. "So what?"

"So ... will you marry me?"

"Marry you? I ..." He saw fear and a hint of tears in her gaze. The certainty that she expected him to hurt and or disappoint her saddened him.

Either he married her or he lost her. He'd grown accustomed to making multi-million dollar decisions with very little second guessing. None of those decisions had been as important as the one he needed to make now. Yet this one was far easier.

He smiled. "Yes. Yes, I will."

She gasped, pressing a hand against her breasts. "What? Did you say yes?"

He nodded. "Yes, I did. Yes, I will marry you."

She moved her hand from her breasts and pressed it against her lips, then she tossed her arms around his neck, and sobbed.

He held her, whispering softly to her until she gulped, sniffed, and pulled away from him.

He wiped her cheeks and kissed her lips.

"You mean it? You'll marry me?"

“Darbi, how many ways do you want me to say yes before you believe me? Yes, I will marry you.”

“But ... you don't believe marriage is necessary to be happy or express a commitment.”

He shrugged. “You do believe it and I've had more than enough time away from you these last two weeks to last me a lifetime. I love you. If you need us to be married, then that's what I want too.”

She pressed her trembling lips together. “I can't believe it's this easy, Clay. You were so set against marriage.”

He nodded. “That was before I realized you might want me, but you were prepared to go on without me. Even if I were prepared to live without you, which I'm not, I'm not prepared to live apart from our child. I want it all, Darbi ... more success in business, you in my life, and a healthy kid or two with you ... maybe three or four.”

“Hey. Two will be just fine.”

He grinned and slipped his arm around her waist. He pulled her down onto the bed and slipped between her legs, grinding his cock against her. “Think how much fun we'll have making an entire brood ... no condoms ... just your sweet pussy and my bare cock ... fucking and making babies year after year.”

She wrapped one leg over the back of his thigh. “In your dreams, buddy! We've having two babies tops, then that bad boy is going to have to start wearing a raincoat again.”

“Don't count on it.” He grabbed his cock, aimed it at her pussy, and thrust into her with one hard lunge. “You're mine and I'm an old-fashioned guy who intends to keep you barefoot and very pregnant.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Oh, I love your cock. I love it! I want to ride it and you.”

He rolled them over so that he lay on his back with her sitting on top of him. She placed her hands against his chest, bent her legs on either side of his body, and lifted her hips until only the head of his cock remained inside her body.

She looked down. “I love the sight of your dark length piercing my cunt.”

He gripped her hips again and held her still. “Is that what this is all about?”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“Is it because my cock looks dark? It won't be this color in the winter time.”

“Are you nuts, Clay? The color of your cock and your face haven't mattered for a long time. I'd love you if you were orange. Okay?”

“You're sure?”

“I'm very sure. Now you want to get back to the pleasurable business at hand?”

He released her hips. “Hell, yeah.”

Smiling, she slammed her hips down, gasping and shuddering with pleasure as his cock shot up into her as deep as it could go.

“Oh, shit, honey!” He closed his hands around her hips.

“No!” She pushed his hands away. “I want to be in control.” She slid down onto him and slowly ground herself against him.

He closed his eyes, his lips parting.

As they fucked hard and fast, she decided that barefoot and pregnant might not be such a bad thing. At least not as long as she got to ride his big, bare cock year after wonderful year.

She lay against his body and sucked his nipples as she fucked him with a greedy enjoyment until he groaned, grabbed her ass, and rutted ruthlessly into her as he blasted his seed into her.

She opened her eyes and smiled down at him. “That was good. I love having a pussy full of your cum.” She nibbled at his lips. “I just might let you keep me barefoot and pregnant after all.”

He wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, baby, I love you so much.”

“That’s the way I planned it, honey.”

“I can believe it. Once you set your sights on me, I really didn’t have a chance of resisting you for very long.”

“That’s the way things should be between us.” She kissed him. “So. When will you marry me?”

“Why wait? Let’s get married tomorrow.”

She laughed and eased off his cock, loving the feel of their combined fluids seeping out of her body onto his pubic hair. “Oh, no. I want to parade you around for a few weeks with my ring on your hand so everyone will know you are so taken by me.”

He slapped her ass. “Whatever you want is fine with me, as long as everyone knows we belong to each other.”

“We’re always going to belong together.”

“Damn straight.”

“Damn straight is right.”

“Let’s talk about a biggie. When are you going to spring me on your mom?”

“Very soon.”

“Is she going to be happy?”

“Are you nuts? What’s not to like about you? You’re handsome, successful, and nuts about me. She’ll love you.”

“Am I going to have to keep a permanent tan?”

“No! She knows how I feel about you and she knows you’re white. She just wants me to be happy. You make me happy. She’ll love you. End of story.” She rolled off him and lay on her side.

He slipped behind her, curling his body against hers.

“Hmmm. I’ve missed going to sleep like this with you. I love you, honey.”

“I know you do.”

She smiled. “Arrogant bastard.”

“That’s me. Your arrogant bastard.”

“You’d better believe you’re mine,” she told him and fell asleep.

Clay eased out of bed and left the bedroom. In the living room, he sat staring at the ring on his finger, grinning. He was an engaged man, soon to be a married one. Why the hell had he ever thought being married would be such a bad thing? He was not his father. Perhaps his parents’ marriage hadn’t lasted because they weren’t in love. Both his parents had married to satisfy their parents. He was going to marry Darbi because he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

He called Betty to tell her he and Darbi was getting married. After she finished sobbing softly with happy tears, he hung up and called his mother and then his father.

“We’re all three getting married? Damn, hell has frozen over. I’m very happy for you, Clayton.”

Clayton instead of boy. Damn. Hell had frozen over. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You make arrangements to bring your woman to meet us, Clayton, and Velva and I will make her very welcome.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He returned to the bedroom and slipped into bed. He cuddled behind Darbi, stroking his hand over the belly swelling with his baby. Soon, he’d be a husband and a father. His emotional future, which had looked so bleak when Sharde met him at the airport with her bad news, shone bright and full of potential, and happiness.

Although he wasn’t particularly religious, he offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving to the generous God who had allowed the mix up which had resulted in he and Darbi being booked into the same hotel room.

 THE END 

Marilyn Lee

Marilyn lives, works, and writes on the East Coast of the US. In addition to thoroughly enjoying writing erotic romances in various genres, she enjoys roller-skating, spending time with her large, extended family, and rooting for all her favorite hometown sports teams. Her other interests include collecting Doc Savage pulp novels from the thirties and forties and collecting Marvel comics from the seventies and eighties (particularly *Thor* and *The Avengers*.) Her favorite TV shows are forensic shows, westerns (*Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* are particular favorites), and mysteries (Charlie Chan movies in particular). Her all time favorite mystery movie is probably *Dead, Again*. She's seen nearly every vampire movie or television show ever made (*Forever Knight* and *Count Yorga, Vampires* are favorites).

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