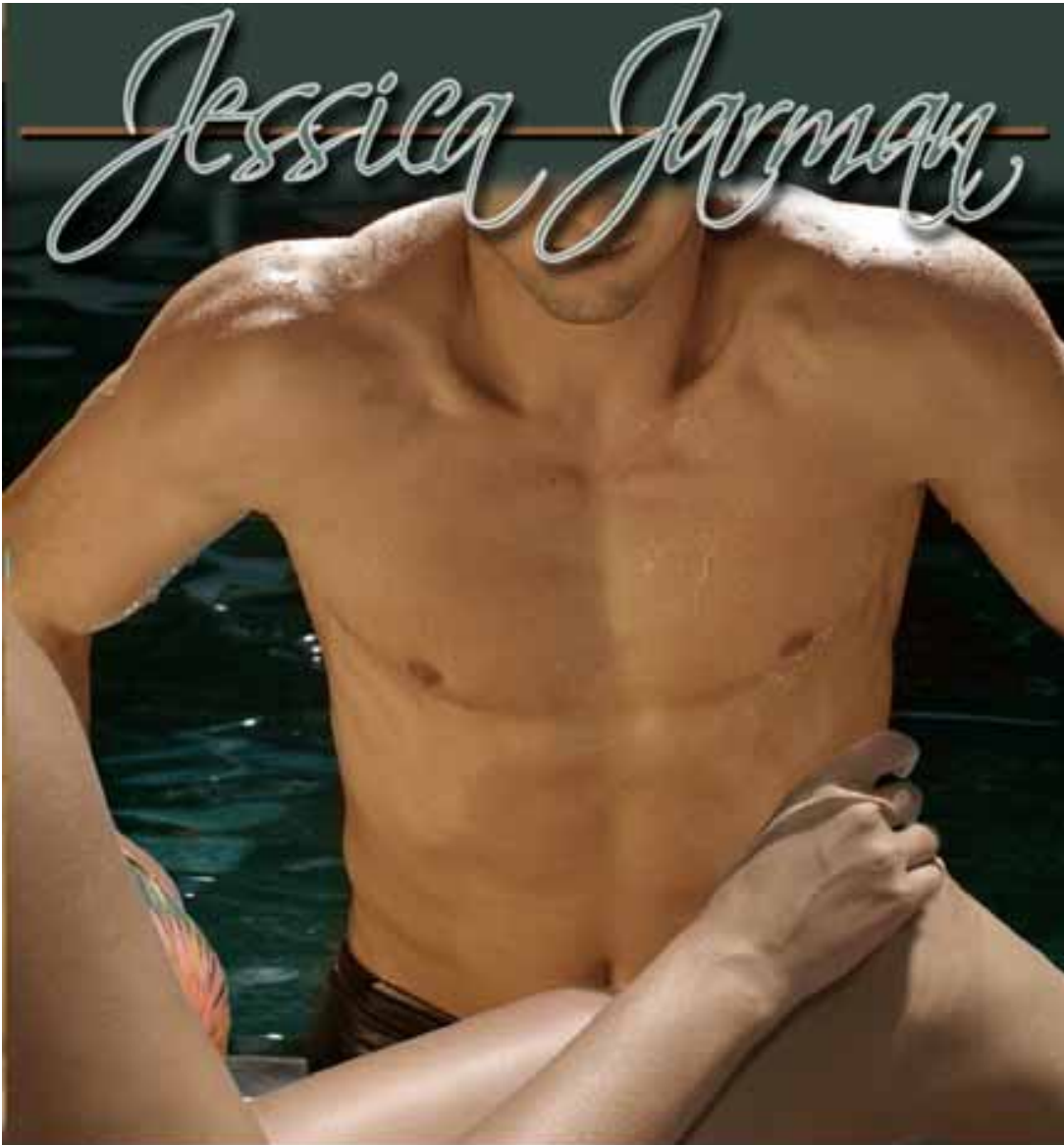


Jessica Jarman



The Boy Next Door

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The Boy Next Door

Jessica Jarman

Dedication

To Brian—you deserve an award for putting up with your crazy wife. I love you!

To the “smart chicky”—Angie, I’ve learned so much from you, and really, you rock...you rock out loud.

Chapter One

Darcy Phillips stared at the canvas before her, gnawing on her bottom lip. Finished. Finally finished. She dropped the brush in the jar of cleaning solution with a sigh. The painting had consumed her for days, and nights.

Fatigue swept over her as she studied the image again. Her lips curved. It had been worth the sleepless nights, as always. It was the best she'd ever done, and turned out just as she had imagined.

The sexiness of it rocked her. A woman lay on a tousled bed. Alone. But that didn't take away the sensuality of the piece. Long brown hair spilled over the pillow and curled around her arms stretched above her head. Her chin was lifted, her eyes closed and a small smile curved her lips. A slight arch of her back raised her bare breasts in a provocative offering, their pert tips illuminated by the slash of sunlight slipping through the large window beyond the bed. The sheet pooled low around her waist, draping seductively across her flat belly. A pale leg, bent and uncovered, offered a brief, tantalizing glimpse of the gentle curve of her ass. Darcy imagined the woman just had one helluva rip-roaring orgasm. It was perfect.

Tilting her head side to side to work the kinks out of her stiff neck, she went into the small kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee. She grimaced as the lukewarm, bitter liquid filled her mouth. With a shrug, she gulped the rest down. Caffeine was caffeine.

She walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower and stripped off her clothes. Once under the spray, she braced her arms on the wet tiles and closed her eyes. Her body, though tired, hummed. Painting, especially sensual works, gave her such a charge.

Thoughts raced through her head. She had to go see Richard. Sadly, a nice bout of sex was the last thing on her mind at the thought of her

fiancé. They had to talk. Seriously. The atmosphere within their relationship was so icy she feared frostbite when in the same room as him. She sighed. Maybe he was working too hard. Maybe she was. Who knew? Yep, a talk was in order here. She wasn't beginning the rest of her life like this. No way. Darcy turned off the spray and went about getting ready to see the man she was supposed to marry.

Twenty minutes later, she strode the last block to the art gallery Richard Norton owned. He'd been pressuring her to give up her tiny loft, but Darcy hung on to it, saying it was the perfect studio and within walking distance of his gallery and apartment. It also allowed her to have her own space.

With a deep breath, she entered the gallery and stopped cold. Damn. She never got used to seeing her works displayed. It always floored her. Her work on display. Her work selling. Holy shit, who would have thought? Growing up, everyone had looked at her art as a cute hobby, never a career avenue. Her bank account proved them wrong, she thought with a smile.

"Hey there, beautiful."

Her smile widened into a grin as Justin Tarnell, the gallery's manager, strode toward her.

"Hi, how're you?" She turned her face up for his quick buss on the cheek.

"Good, good. And you?" He frowned down at her. "You looked wiped. Been partying?"

"Working. Worth the sleepless nights."

"Can't wait to see it. I assume it's as incredible as the rest of your work."

Darcy felt her face flush from the compliment. It meant a lot coming from Justin. He knew his stuff and if he thought her work was good...wow.

"Is Richard in?"

"No, he's still upstairs." He referred to the apartment Richard kept above the gallery. "He had a late night apparently too. Not working."

Darcy inwardly cringed. Richard and Justin barely tolerated each other. Richard kept the other man around because he was the best at what he did. Justin stayed around because he loved his work. Darcy knew if he could afford it, he would open his own gallery and get the hell out of this one.

“Well, I’ll head up. I need to talk to him.”

“Uh oh, sounds ominous.” He took her arm and walked her to the private elevator in the rear of the gallery. “Let me know if you need anything. You know, some muscle to beat some sense into the idiot or something.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She laughed as the doors slid shut between them.

On the ride up, she closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. She was not looking forward to this. Whenever the subject of their relationship had come up, he’d always brushed it off and tried to assure her everything was fine. He said she was too paranoid, took things too seriously. Well, not this time. They were going to talk this out.

She opened her eyes as the doors opened to reveal the large, stark white living room of his apartment. Squaring her shoulders she stepped inside and, after a quick look around the apartment, headed for the bedroom. He was probably still in bed. If he’d been out partying, as Justin seemed to think, it wasn’t surprising.

The low murmur of Richard’s voice greeted her as she stopped outside the room. He was probably on the phone. Ignoring the cold knot in her stomach, she quietly opened the door, not wanting to disturb him.

She stopped dead in her tracks at the sight that greeted her. Disturbing him shouldn’t have been a concern. He was much too busy to notice her entrance. Her purse slid from numb fingers and landed with a dull thud on the soft carpet. Richard was in bed all right, but sleep was not on his mind.

Darcy stared with morbid fascination at the blonde straddling his head. Oh, but it didn’t end there. Another blonde head bobbed up and down over his groin. Yes, her fiancé was a busy, busy man.

The coldness in her middle suddenly dissipated and hot, rolling fury swept through her, roared in her head. The son of a bitch! All of the stupid reassurances he'd fed her over the months flooded her mind as she watched his hand run up the naked back of the woman riding his face and the other tangle in the curls of the one giving him head. Sure, she was paranoid and silly. Yep, their relationship was peachy.

She grabbed the vase sitting on the small dresser next to the door and let it fly. It hit the wall to the left of trio. Exploding, shards rained onto the pillows and sheets. The screams and shouts sent a dark thrill through her. She pulled the large diamond ring off her left hand and threw it at them. The women scrabbled off Richard to stand next to the bed, trying desperately to cover up.

"Darcy!" Richard sat up, his gaze darting between her and the shattered vase.

"Are you nuts?" one of the women cried.

"Nuts? No, if I was nuts, I would have gone with my first instinct to strangle the lot of you." Darcy managed to force the words through her clenched teeth.

"Darcy, honey." Richard stood and wrapped the sheet around his waist. "Calm down. This isn't what it seems."

"Oh really?" She cringed at the high pitch of her voice and the lump of tears forming in her throat. "So you weren't fucking two women?"

"Darcy..."

"Don't use that damned patronizing tone with me, you asshole!" She picked her purse up and looked into his wide eyes. "Don't let me keep you. I'm out of here."

She ran from the room to the elevator and stabbed the down button, struggling to hold it together. No, no, no! This was not happening. A sob welled up in her throat. Dammit all, she'd known something was off. Why hadn't she listened to her gut?

"Come on, come on," she whispered, desperate for the door to open.

"Darcy, wait." Richard came up behind her and grabbed her arm. "Please, sweetheart, let me explain."

She yanked her arm away and turned to face him. "Explain? How can you explain this away? God, I'm such an idiot! I trusted you. Even when I felt something was off, I trusted you. I didn't listen to my gut. Well, I won't be making that mistake again."

"It was just sex, nothing more. Just sex. It didn't mean anything."

A roar filled her head, and unable to hold back, she slammed into his chest with her fists. Over and over again until her hands hurt. Richard grabbed her wrists and held them against him. "Please, sweetheart, don't do this."

"God, can't you come up with anything better than that? It meant nothing? It means everything! I don't want to be with a man who thinks sex is nothing. We were supposed to be married in a few months and you're screwing other women." A ragged cry of relief spilled from her as the elevator opened.

"I have needs, Darcy. You can't blame me for that. If you had been more..."

"More what? You're saying I'm to blame? You bastard."

He grabbed her arm again to prevent her from leaving. "If you had tried a little harder in bed, I wouldn't have had to go elsewhere. I love you, Darcy, I really do, but I need more physically than you're willing to give."

She shoved him away and mortification swamped as tears burned down her cheeks. "Fuck you. Stay away from me."

She got into the elevator and hit the lower floor button.

"Damn it, Darcy. You freaking cold bitch. If you weren't such a frigid ice queen, this wouldn't—"

Sobs racked her body as the closed doors cut off his slapping insults. Had she really been so blind? Why hadn't she listened to that little voice in her head telling her things weren't right?

She bolted into the gallery and sped for the door.

“Hey, Darcy, is he coming down?” Justin approached her and came to a screeching halt. “What the hell did he do? Did the bastard hurt you?”

She shook her head as he wrapped his arms around her. “Did you know?” she whispered against his shoulder.

“Know what?” He rubbed her back in long strokes.

“That he’s a cheat? I walked in and saw...”

Justin pulled away and looked down at her. Darcy’s heart stopped. Betrayal burned in her.

“You knew? And you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t know, Darcy, I swear I didn’t.”

“But it doesn’t surprise you.” A bitter laugh burst through her lips. “You knew what kind of man he was and I was too stupid to see it.”

“Let me take you somewhere. We’ll talk.”

“No.” She pulled away and summoned up a small smile through the tears. “I need to be alone. I just need to go home.”

“Okay, but you call me later. If you need anything, anything at all, you call me.” He stared at her until she nodded.

“I’ll call. Take care, Justin.”

She ran for the exit. She needed to go home.

Chapter Two

Home. Darcy rolled the word around her mind as she sprawled across the sofa. Home was where you came when things went wrong. And boy, were things going wrong.

After the scene with Richard and the two bimbos, Darcy had run to her loft, angry and hurt. But, it wasn't home. After a day of sitting staring at the walls, she had packed and run home to Minnesota. She surprised herself by making arrangements to stay there permanently again. The more distance between her and Chicago, the better.

Coward.

Embarrassment stained her cheeks as memories flooded her mind. Throwing the vase. Her ring. Man, she hated to think where it landed. The names, the insults he'd thrown at her echoed in her head.

Bitch. Frigid. Ice Queen.

Darcy just couldn't go back there, couldn't face seeing him day in and day out. Thank goodness she hadn't signed anything that gave him rights to any of her future pieces. Something had stopped her.

She'd loved him, or at least convinced herself she had. If she was honest, it'd been obvious something was off with the relationship. Unable to put her finger on exactly what, she'd tossed thoughts and doubts aside. Maybe it was because he'd been so instrumental in her success. Her work had been on display at his gallery when she made it big. Damned poor reason to stay with a man.

In any case, she was home. A bit unexpectedly, true, but easily explained away with the excuse of her parents' big fortieth anniversary

party. They were just thrilled she was here. Their only child, their baby, was home and that was all that mattered.

Although back in town, Darcy hadn't told them this was a permanent move. How would they react to her news? Ecstatically, Darcy was sure. But they'd bombard her with questions, and she couldn't very well tell them she could hardly stand the sight of her cheating slimeball of an ex-fiancé.

That would warrant a full explanation, and that was a conversation requiring more energy and patience than she possessed at the moment.

Her parents certainly didn't need to know the entire truth. She was coming home and that was that. Already she'd contacted the local community college and found they were hiring art instructors.

With her background, it wouldn't be too difficult to find a position. The art department's chair had been quite excited to speak with her and they'd arranged an interview. Darcy certainly didn't need the money, but she had loved teaching when she'd been a graduate student. It seemed like the perfect choice now she was looking for a fresh start.

A movement outside the sliding glass doors caught her attention. Someone was in her parents' backyard. Sitting up, she angled herself to get a better view. Her parents probably hadn't even noticed the man. They were upstairs in the kitchen while she was in the family room situated in the walkout basement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Broad shoulders stretched the cotton deliciously as he untangled the hose. Her gaze slid down past his narrow waist and hips to his tight bum encased in faded blue jeans. Yes, siree, he was a hottie.

He turned on the water and began dousing her mother's roses and other assorted blooms. Darcy licked her lips and shifted in an effort to alleviate the tension building between her legs. Her nipples pebbled

under her T-shirt and hot wetness pooled in her pussy as she pressed her legs together, gaze fixed on Mac's hard body working out in the yard.

God, it'd been a long time since she'd had sex. Life was busy, she'd told herself, and it was normal to lose interest when you got older. Of course, her so-called lover had been getting it elsewhere. Yet she felt anything but uninterested as her longtime friend finished his task and returned to the shed to pull out the lawn mower.

She mentally shook herself. Mac was a friend, pure and simple, even if her thoughts about him weren't always platonic. Getting involved with him in any other way was a surefire way to mess up the one real, consistent friendship she'd had. Mac had a way of getting her to step back and experience something else besides her obsession, her art.

Darcy leaned further back into the cushions and allowed her eyes to drift shut. Putting extra effort into it, she pushed Thomas MacAllister out of her mind and tried to rest, quite unsuccessfully. Thoughts raced—her upcoming interview, the unavoidable explanations she would have to give her parents about Richard, arranging for the shipment of her things. Finally, her thoughts slowed. She drifted happily between sleep and wakefulness until the sound of the terrace door opening made her sit up with a start. It was him.

Mac grinned as he reached behind him to slide the door closed. "Hey, you."

"Hey back." She returned the grin. "How're you?"

"Great. Mom said you were back in town. Just had to see for myself."

Darcy raised her arms in a small shrug and swung her feet to the floor. "Well, there ya go. You've seen me."

Mac chuckled and walked around the coffee table. Lowering himself to the sofa next to her, he commented, "You've been a stranger around here lately."

"I've been busy." *Don't you sound defensive? Get a grip.*

"I'm sure you have. Which is why I'm wondering what you're doing here a week early and without el crepo."

He never had liked her fiancé. "His name is Richard."

"Yeah, whatever. So what gives? Where is he?" He ran a finger up her bare arm, from wrist to just under the sleeve. She shivered as heat zipped through her body, burrowed in her belly.

Whoa, what was that?

"Not here."

Grasping her left hand, he stared pointedly at her bare ring finger.

"We split up." She pulled her hand back. "Happy?"

"As a matter of fact..." He trailed off and leaned over to capture her lips with his.

Okay, okay. Time out. What was going on here? This was her friend and he was...he was... Well, he was a damn fine kisser. His lips, firm and warm, teased and slid along hers. Then came his tongue. Hot and sweet, he coaxed her lips open to delve into her wetness. A whimper escaped her as she felt the muscles in her pussy contract and her breasts grow heavy, nipples puckering against the soft cotton of her shirt. Desperate to get closer, she wrapped her arms around his neck. The smell of freshly cut grass clung to him, mingling with his own spicy scent. The combination was intoxicating and Darcy felt her head swim.

Mac shifted his weight and pushed her back into the cushions. He yanked her skirt up to her waist and placed a knee between her thighs, the pressure and movement causing the fabric of her panties to rub against her sensitive, swollen clit.

Warmth swam in her belly and dove straight into her pussy, becoming hotter and wetter as she strained against his leg, thighs clamped down on either side. A moan vibrated in her throat. God, he felt so damned good.

He slid his hands under her shirt and up her torso to cup her breasts. "No bra? You make this easy, Darc."

Pulling the cotton up, he lowered his head to take one of the rosy tips in his mouth. The gentle sucking and delicious sweep of his tongue against her hardened nipple caused her to cry out incoherently. God, she felt it in every inch of her body. The heat. The firm tug of desire. The slivers of pleasure burrowing hard and fast.

Her hands tangled in his thick hair, fingers curling tightly, holding him fast against her chest. He chuckled and scraped his teeth along the erect peak.

“Oh, Mac,” she gasped.

His fingers replaced his tongue as he moved up to reclaim her mouth. Hands still fisted in his hair, Darcy tightened her grip, not wanting to let go for fear he would leave.

He shifted his knee away from her. One of his hands slid down her quivering belly to rub against her damp panties. He pulled back slightly and stared in her eyes as he pulled the thin fabric down around her knees. His fingers returned to comb through the triangle of curls between her thighs. His gray eyes clouded over as he found her pulsating heat.

“Christ, you’re wet. All hot and bothered, Darc?”

Using his forefinger, he began to trace lazy circles around the sensitive nub. She squeezed her eyes shut in delicious agony. She tried to focus on drawing one breath in and letting it out, but every nerve in her body centered on Mac and what he was doing. The hell with oxygen. Who needed it? Her back arched and her hips circled furiously, urging him to hurry. She couldn’t wait any longer. Why was he going so slow? Lifting her eyelids, she sought his gaze again.

A soft smile kissed his lips and his intense stare burned into her memory.

“Go over,” he whispered, leaning over to trace her lips with the tip of his tongue.

“I can’t,” she said, her voice a near sob as sensation after sensation pummeled her.

“Oh, I think you can.”

A whimper escaped as he pulled away a little, but soon moans slid from her lips as he rained kisses down her torso, her belly and along her inner thighs. His hands slid under her, cupped her ass and lifted slightly. He looked in her eyes as his tongue darted out and flicked across her clitoris. He leaned forward, captured the nub between his lips and sucked gently, rolling his tongue around it.

Thinking was no longer an option. Darcy gripped the couch cushions below her and arched against his mouth, aching for more of the torment. His tongue and lips working her clit, he pulled one hand forward and rubbed a finger along her soft, wet pussy, entering her in a swift motion.

Her breath came out in short cries as his warm breath fanned her clit.

He paused to whisper, "That's it, baby, come for me. Go over."

Her hips vaulted off the sofa. Her body exploded. Every muscle tensed in painful ecstasy. It intensified as he added another finger inside her, stroking and meeting the thrust of her hips. Her pussy began to contract around his fingers. Pleasure pounded her again and again as he continued to plunge his fingers deep within her core until a final tidal wave of heat swept through her.

Unable to move, Darcy closed her eyes and focused again on her breathing. Mac laid his head against her inner thigh. His soft curls caressed the sensitive skin of her leg as his breath whispered across her pussy, wet from his mouth and her juices.

A smile touched her mouth as she thought of the picture they made—her spread eagle on the couch, Mac lying between her legs with his face nearly in her crotch. They really should think of getting up before someone—

"Darcy, honey, are you hungry?"

Good God, her mother!

Darcy sat straight up and reached down to push—

Where the hell was he?

She stood and spun around, looking for Mac. He was gone. What in the world was going on? Suddenly the sound of the lawn mower grabbed her attention. She darted to the door. There was Mac, pushing the mower across her parents' yard.

What just happened here? She was lying down and Mac came in...but Mac was still outside. Had she fallen asleep?

"Darcy?"

Her mother's voice, growing more insistent, drifted down the stairs.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Are you coming up for lunch?"

"Yeah, I'm coming."

Darcy stumbled back to the couch and sank into the cushion.

My God, it was all a dream!

Chapter Three

Mumbling thanks to her mother for the sandwich, she tried to eat, but her mind drifted to the couch downstairs. She'd never had a dream so vivid, so arousing. And it was about *Mac*.

Sure, she found him attractive and had thought of possibilities through the years. But she had never considered acting on them. How was she going to look him in the eye again when her thoughts would be focused on his mouth, his lips, and oh God, his tongue?

"Are you listening to me?"

Darcy glanced up at her mother. "What?"

"Aren't you hungry? You're just playing around with that sandwich. Do you want something else? I could heat something up for you."

Looking down at her plate, Darcy saw the bread of her sandwich broken up into little bits. "I guess I'm not really hungry after all."

She stood with her plate in hand, dumped the mangled mess in the garbage and placed the dish in the sink before returning to her seat at the table. Grabbing the variety section of the newspaper from near her father's elbow, she began to read.

"What're your plans tonight, dear?" her mother asked.

"Oh, nothing much. Thought I'd just watch a movie." She shrugged. "Maybe soak in the hot tub and read a book. I don't know."

"It's our card night. You could come with us. We're going to Sue and David's."

"Hmmm, not tonight. I want to get to bed early." And playing poker or thirty-one with her parents and a bunch of their friends just didn't tempt. "Maybe next time."

“Oh, there’s Thomas. He’s such a dear, doing the yard work for me. I better make him a sandwich.” The small woman hopped out of her chair just as Mac opened the door leading to the deck and walked in the kitchen.

Darcy struggled not to drool. He had taken his shirt off sometime during his work, exposing his hard tanned torso. Sweat glistened through the sprinkling of hair on his chest and trailed down. She licked her lips and imagined licking him.

“All done, Aunt Marie. Anything else you need?” He wiped his brow with his forearm. His T-shirt dangled from his fingers.

“No, thank you. You just sit down, and I’ll make you some lunch.”

“You don’t have to trouble, really, I—” Mac started.

“Don’t argue! You took care of my yard, and I’ll take care of you a bit.”

Mac cocked an eyebrow at Darcy as he pulled out a chair and sat. She just shrugged and pretended to go back to the paper in front of her. Looking at him through her lashes, she watched him chat with her father without following the conversation. His chest was more than a bit distracting. Couldn’t he at least have put his shirt back on? Of course, it wasn’t bothering anyone but her. She focused on one bead of sweat as it trailed down the tight muscles past the table’s edge, where her imagination had to take over.

She’d love to run her hands down that wet chest to the waistband of his jeans. Unsnapping, unzipping until she could shove them down to release him into her waiting hands. Wrapping her fingers around his ridged cock, she’d take him in her mouth, taste him and give him the same exquisite pleasure he’d give her earlier.

Oh my God, stop! Darcy gave herself a mental shake. She was sitting in the kitchen with her parents, for crying out loud. And he hadn’t given her anything earlier. It had been nothing but a dream. An incredibly hot and delightful dream, yes, but still a dream. He had no knowledge of it and she sat here licking her lips, thinking of ways to get it on with him.

She forced her gaze from his chest and found herself staring into his warm gray eyes. Heat flowed into her cheeks and she sent up thanks that he couldn't read thoughts. Though he had to be wondering why her face was aflame.

Mac smiled at her and leaned in. "Hey, you."

Breathe. "Hey."

"How've you been? Mom said you weren't due to arrive for a couple days."

With a shrug, she replied, "My schedule opened up, so I came early. Figured I could help setting things up, though your mom's taken care of most of it."

"Oh, Sue has done so much. She is such a sweetie," Darcy's mom exclaimed.

"She enjoys it," Mac insisted before turning back to Darcy. "So, was Richard able to come early, too?"

Fiddling with the gold chain around her neck, Darcy didn't meet his eyes as she answered, "Nope, he was busy. Actually, he probably won't be able to make it at all. Sorry, Mom and Dad."

"Oh, I'm sure he would be here if he could. Did he have something come up at work?" her mother questioned.

Well, he had *something* come up. "Yup, that's it. So you're stuck with just me." She sent a grin toward her dad.

Winking back at her, he pretended to sound burdened. "Oh, I suppose we can deal with it, can't we, Marie?"

Her mother laughed. "I think we can. Thomas, are you going to be playing cards? The game is at your parents' tonight."

"Nah, you guys are too good for me. I lose my money every time I play. Probably just gonna watch a little TV before hitting the hay."

"That's what Darcy's planning to do, too. You should come over here and then you won't be lonely. That's a good idea, isn't it, hon?" Her mother looked at her expectantly.

Her eyes darted between her parents and Mac, and she tried to come up with something intelligent to say.

"I don't want to impose on Darc. She probably wants some quiet time to sit and relax." Mac smiled at her.

"Don't be silly, Thomas. Darcy could still have her peace and quiet with you sitting next to her on the couch. You aren't some rowdy child, after all." Her mother nodded. "That settles it. I'll leave a cold supper in the fridge for you two."

"That okay with you?" Mac leaned over as her mother bustled out of the room. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's no prob," she conceded with a sigh. "Do you want to rent something or find something on TV?"

"I'm sure we can find something we like without having to go out."

Oh, she was fairly sure of that, too. Too bad he was only talking movies.

After excusing herself, Darcy went downstairs to her bedroom and flopped on the bed with a sigh. Why hadn't she just said no, she didn't want company?

'Cause you're a wimp who can't say no, that's why. Now live with it.

Those thoughts echoed in her mind several hours later as she stood staring at her reflection in the mirror after changing three times in five minutes. It was just a movie at home, not a night on the town.

You look just fine. She assessed the dress she wore with a critical eye. It was a simple floral sundress that flowed down below her knees. She wore no bra. No need for one, she thought with a snort. Her lack of breasts had been a sore point all her life. Even more so in the last couple years with Richard. He couldn't understand why she didn't get a boob job since she could afford it. It wasn't like she didn't have them, for crying out loud. There was enough that you could tell she was a woman, anyway.

Comforted with the thought that her boobs would still be perky years from now, she focused again on her appearance. She would wear this if she were alone for the night. With simplicity in mind, she'd done nothing

more than pull her long auburn hair into a ponytail. There, she looked like a gal staying in for the night with no expectations of any kind.

Choosing to forgo shoes, Darcy padded barefoot out of her room down the hall into the family room. Her parents had left an hour before and the house was cloaked in silence. No Mac yet. Maybe he'd decided not to come. Which would be fine with her. It was not disappointment curling sourly in her stomach. It was hunger, that was all. With that thought, she headed up to the kitchen to see what her mother had left behind.

Quickly finding a plate piled with sandwiches, fruit and cheese, she pulled it and the bottle of red wine beside it out. She poured herself a glass and just began to sip when the doorbell sounded. It was him. Her stomach clenched with anticipation as she headed for the door.

* * *

Mac stood on the doorstep and pressed the doorbell again. He felt like an idiot. Normally, he'd just walk in. Why did he feel compelled to ring the bell now? *Because of how she looked at you.* Desire had shone in her eyes earlier at her parents' table. Her green eyes had been hazy with it. Lips slightly parted and her little pink tongue darting out to moisten them. He felt his cock harden at the memory. She'd never looked at him like that before, like something other than a friend. Or he hadn't seen it anyway.

It was ironic, really. His parents and hers had always pushed the two of them together. He and Darcy had thought it hilarious. Why would they ruin a great friendship with things like dating and sex?

But then he began to think about dating and sex with Darcy. He hid it because he knew she'd be horrified. Besides, by the time he had been ready to act on it, she was involved with the creep, Richard, which led to their engagement. There wasn't much he could do then. He wasn't going to break up a happy relationship.

But she hadn't seemed too happy when asked about Richard. He frowned. She looked miserable and angry. What was happening there? Did he dare probe that subject?

Where was she? He put his hand up to depress the doorbell again when the door opened.

"Hi," Darcy said, breathlessly. "Come on in. How're you doing?"

"Good. I stopped by my parents' before heading here. Took a little while to get away." He rolled his eyes with a quick smile.

"I can imagine. My mom's wanted to do nothing but talk since I got home. I finally did escape a bit this afternoon. Come in the kitchen and we'll get food and drinks before heading downstairs."

As he followed her, his gaze traveled down her body. He groaned inwardly as he watched her hips swaying beneath her dress. He continued downward over her firm ass to her bare calves and feet. He imagined running a hand down the length of one creamy calf and back up to her thighs. What kind of panties did she have on? Was she wearing any? He wanted to cup her ass and pull her against him. He shook his head in an attempt to dislodge the images. If he kept this up he'd be walking funny and have to explain to her why he had a hard-on.

Her voice pulled him from his thoughts. He dragged his gaze back up and focused on her swinging ponytail.

"Where are you living now?"

"Same apartment downtown."

"The little one bedroom?" She grinned back at him. "I thought for sure you'd have moved into some place bigger by now. Maybe buy a house."

"No need." He shrugged. "It suits me."

"What do you want to drink? A beer?"

"Glass of wine's just fine." He gestured to the open bottle and full glass sitting beside it. "In fact, why don't we just bring the whole bottle down?"

Darcy chewed her bottom lip and tilted her head as she studied him for a moment. “Are you going to be okay to drive after drinking half a bottle of wine?”

He chuckled. She was worried about him. How like Darcy. “I’m sure I’ll be fine but I’ll tell ya what, if I’m too shit faced, you can take my keys and I’ll bunk at Mom and Dad’s. Deal?”

“Deal. You grab the bottle and a glass and I’ll grab my glass and the munchies.”

It took them a little over an hour to work their way to the bottom of the bottle. They sat side by side on the couch, cradling their near empty glasses. A movie they had both seen before flickered on the screen in front of them. Darcy’s gaze was on the set, but Mac’s was focused on her.

With her legs curled up on the sofa, her skirt had crept up above her knees, revealing several inches of smooth thigh. The soft, creamy skin begged to be touched, tasted. He licked his dry lips. He sat close enough to be enveloped in her scent—vanilla and strawberries? He leaned a little closer and sniffed, careful not to be too loud. Yep, her hair smelled like strawberries. Now, he’d never be able to eat the fruit without getting hard. Wouldn’t that be a shock for his mother when she served her famous strawberry shortcake?

Pulling his gaze away from her legs, he found himself looking at her breasts. She wasn’t wearing a bra. He could see the outline of her nipples against the thin fabric, thanks to the chilly atmosphere dispensed by the central air. One of her arms wrapped around her middle just below, lifting the breasts even more. The small pert orbs would fit perfectly in the palms of his hands. He flexed his fingers at the thought. He’d caress, tease and taste the milky skin and the dusky rose tips with his hands, his mouth, his tongue.

His hard-on had him shifting slightly. Part of him wanted to leave now before he made a fool of himself, but he couldn’t bring himself to. He was glutton for punishment and discomfort apparently.

She turned toward him with a smile. “I don’t think the movie you wanted to watch starts for another half hour.”

"That's okay. We can always use the time to catch up. It's been a while." He returned her smile. "So whatcha been doing?"

"Working. What've you been doing?" she replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Working. Well, that covered a lot. What's new in your life? Had any showings?"

"Nope, not since last winter."

"I'm sure Richard is probably cooking something up for the end of summer here."

"And I'm sure that's the last thing on his mind right now."

Okay. Something was going on there, a little trouble in paradise. Mac's gaze traveled down her arm to the hand holding her wine glass. Aha, no ring. Unsure of where to start, he put an arm around Darcy's shoulders. "What's going on, Darc? You know you can talk to me. What'd the creep do?"

A chuckle quickly transformed to soft sobs that lasted a few minutes. Mac turned her in his arms and wrapped her in his embrace.

"Oh, for God's sake, why I am I crying over him? He *is* a creep," she agreed, pulling away and looking up at him.

Tears trailed down from stormy green eyes over her cheeks. Her lips parted slightly and her breath was a bit labored from crying. He pulled his arms from around her and cupped her face with his hands. Using his thumbs to whisk the wetness from her face, he leaned over and kissed her mouth gently. It lasted only a short minute, but the soft lips and her light indrawn gasp made his cock respond quickly. He shifted slightly and drew back.

"What'd he do to you, baby?"

With a sigh, she answered, "You'll find out anyway. If not from me, from your mother, who'll get the scoop from mine." She inhaled deeply. "He cheated on me."

Anger surged up as Mac saw the misery etched on her face. Keeping a rein on it, he managed to ask, “Do you just suspect? Or did he admit it?”

“He didn’t have to admit it!” Suddenly she stood, walked around the coffee table and paced the floor in front of the TV. “I caught him. With them!”

Holy Hanna. “Them?”

She stopped and stared at him, wide-eyed. “Yes, he was in bed with two women. Apparently cheating on me wasn’t enough. He had to go the extra mile. I shouldn’t be surprised, really. He always talked about wanting to try a...a threesome.” The word came out in a weak whisper before her voice rose again. “Of course, he would try anything to spice up my lackluster performance.”

“What are you talking about?” Mac rose off the sofa and went to stand next to her, to take her hands.

“Richard was all too happy to lay the blame at my feet. I’m not exciting enough in bed for him, so he had to get it elsewhere. There. Now, you know what’s new in my life. My humiliations. Everything.” She tried to pull away from him, but he held fast.

“Stop it, Darc. His cheating is on him. Not you. Don’t listen or believe his lies. He’s trying to justify what he was doing. He’s scum, and you’re better than that.” He pulled her into his arms and smoothed a hand down her ponytail.

A sniff and a small chuckle escaped her as she laid her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. “You never did like him.”

“Damn right I didn’t, and turns out for good reason.”

He closed his eyes and began to sway, moving them in a slow, music-less dance. He ran his hands down from the soft bare skin of her shoulders and upper back to the fabric clad hollow of her lower back, resting just above the slight curve of her ass. He felt her breathe deeply before pressing closer to him, tightening her grip on his waist. How far

did he push her? God, he wanted her, but did she feel the same or was it just comfort she wanted? From a friend?

"He called me frigid. Cold." Her voice was a whisper dancing across his neck. She leaned back, her belly pressed firmer against his hardening cock as she arched her back to see in his eyes. "I don't feel frigid or cold with you, Mac."

"Shhhh," he murmured. "Forget what he said. He's an idiot."

"Will you kiss me?"

Oh God. How the hell would a friend answer? "Darc, make sure you really want something before asking."

"Please, Mac, I really want you to kiss me. Just a kiss."

"That's the thing. It wouldn't be just a kiss. It'd go further, and if you don't want that, you better back up."

"You want more?" Her eyes widened and her voice was breathless.

He groaned. "Honey, proof of that is digging in your belly right now."

The surprise on her face disappointed him. Now it'd be awkward. He'd have to pretend this never happened. Pretend he didn't want her and that he was just good ol' pal Mac, just like always.

She pulled her arms away from his waist. He began to step back when she reached up and touched his neck. "I want more, too. Please."

"You got it, baby," he murmured as he cupped her ass, lifted and nestled her against his erection. His mouth found hers. He coaxed her lips open and delved his tongue inside the wet heat. She tasted so sweet and intoxicating, his head spun. A moan escaped her as he stopped the kiss. "Wrap your legs around me."

Heat coiled as she shifted her hips, cradling him in the apex of her thighs. No woman had ever gotten him this hard, this fast. He scanned the room and eyed the couch before raising an eyebrow at her.

Shaking her head, she motioned toward the hallway. "My room."

He couldn't believe this was actually happening. Finally. At least they were assured privacy. Her parents would be gone for a while yet and hers was the only bedroom on this floor.

He strode down the hall until he came to her bedroom door. He stopped and looked at Darcy questioningly. "Last chance. Once we go in, too late, there's no turning back."

She played with the curls at the nape of his neck. "Already too late. Go in."

Mac turned the knob and carried her into her bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

He set her on her feet next to the bed and reached for the bedside lamp. Light flooded through the room.

Darcy couldn't breathe as her gaze met Mac's, his intense gray eyes clouded with desire. No one had ever looked at her like that. Even in her past relationships, she couldn't remember anyone wanting her so passionately or returning that longing herself.

He grasped her shoulders and turned her around. She heard the rasp of the dress's zipper as he lowered it. His lips caressed her shoulders and his fingers slipped the thin dress straps down. The material whispered over her body and pooled at her feet.

Only her panties covered her, and the thin wisp of lace didn't provide much to hide behind. The thought caused Darcy's eyes to drift closed. It was the moment of truth. When she was in front of him, vulnerable, would he still want her? And so desperately?

Mac slipped his hands around her sides to cup her bare breasts. Her nipples immediately hardened to tight crowns. He rolled the sensitive nubs between his thumbs and forefingers, causing her breath to hitch and her knees to lock. Liquid fire pooled in her pussy and she leaned back against him, as much for support as to allow him easier access. He nuzzled her neck and nipped lightly at the sensitive skin. His breath was harsh as he licked along her ear lobe.

"I want you, Darc." He turned her toward him and cupped her face. Holding her gaze, he ran a thumb along her bottom lip. "I've wanted you for so long."

"I want you, too," she whispered, putting her hands on his waist.

She would go mad if he didn't make love to her soon. Sending up a quick prayer that he wouldn't stop, she ran her hands along his waistband to the button of his jeans. A quick flick of her wrist released the button. His eyes drifted shut and his hands slid into her hair, pulling the elastic band out. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders. He buried his hands in it and pulled her closer until his face was obscured by the silky mass.

"God, baby, you smell good," he murmured.

With her thighs quivering, she grasped his zipper and pulled it down slowly.

Muttering an oath, he pulled back slightly and leaned down. Hot and firm, his lips captured and assailed hers. His tongue coaxed its way in the warm depths of her mouth, dancing seductively. Hesitantly, she moved her tongue to mate with his, to taste him. It was like sipping strong, full-bodied liquor. Her head swam and her thoughts scattered. She grasped his shirt and pulled it out of his waistband. He sucked air quickly through clenched teeth as her hands slid over his chest. She loved the feel of the coarse hair tickling her palms, the tight flat nipples hard beneath her fingers.

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth as her fingers brushed over him. Releasing her hair, he pulled away from her long enough to yank the shirt over his head and send it sailing. Immediately, he embraced her again and pulled her against him.

Darcy found herself suddenly on her back against the mattress, Mac's mouth on her neck. His hands cupped her breasts, teasing the nipples. Each small tug sent lances of heat straight through her. She opened her thighs to allow his knee to rest between. He captured a rose-tipped nipple in his mouth, gently suckling until she arched against him and grabbed fistfuls of his hair. He laved the shallow valley between her breasts before taking the other tight nub in his mouth. God, she didn't want him to stop.

Every thought fled her mind. Only the sensations Mac brought to life within her existed. Faint tingles alighted as he ran a palm across her

belly, lower and lower until the heel of his hand pressed against the front of her panties. She moaned and circled her hips, pushing against his hand frantically.

“Lift your hips,” he whispered against her damp flesh.

He pulled off her panties and threw them over his shoulder, drawing a small giggle from her. He straightened and simply looked at her—all of her.

Why was he stopping? Why was he staring? Something had to be wrong. Darcy moved to cover her breasts and her sex, but Mac grabbed her wrists and shook his head.

“Don’t.” His voice was hoarse. “Don’t cover yourself. You’re beautiful, Darc.”

He shifted and pressed a kiss against her belly. Using his lips, his tongue and his teeth, he had her writhing beneath him again, a prisoner to the onslaught of sensation. Shafts of hot desire speared into her pussy as his fingers slid through the soft curls between her legs. One finger slipped between the sleek folds of her sex.

Lifting his head, Mac watched, entranced, as her little pink tongue wet her parted lips and her eyes slid shut. She lifted her hips off the bed, silently begging him to stroke her more. He slid another finger inside. The cries from her aroused him almost as much as her tight pussy contracting around his fingers. He squeezed his eyes shut as he imagined his cock sliding home into that hot wetness. God, if he got any harder, he’d pass out.

“Please, Mac.”

He opened his eyes to find Darcy’s green ones on him. Increasing the rhythm of his thrusting fingers, he questioned, “Please what, baby? What do you want?”

“You. I want you in me. Now.” Her hips rose, punctuating each syllable.

He withdrew his finger and circled her swollen clit several times before standing to quickly shuck his jeans and boxers. Darcy only had a moment to admire his cock, hard and jutting, before he covered her body

with his. Positioning the head of his cock at the opening of her pussy, he kept his gaze locked with hers.

“Look at me, Darc. Look at me when I make you mine.” He slid slowly into her.

“Ohhhh.” She let out a long breath as her body accepted him.

When he was deeply nestled in her heat, he captured her mouth again and began to move inside her. Soon her hips lifted to meet his strokes as they became harder and faster. Her fingernails raked over his shoulders, his back, before she splayed her hands on the taut muscles. Their mouths parted, and he ran his mouth along her neck, over her ear, her face.

More. More. The word repeated over and over in his head. He couldn’t get enough. A low moan reverberated in his throat, deep and primal. Her pussy began to spasm around his hard shaft. He lifted his head, his hips still thrusting over hers. Just watching her nearly pushed him over the edge.

Her teeth bit into her lower lip, her breath came out in small gasps. Sweat glistened all over her. Her eyes were closed, her head thrown back, exposing the creamy column of her throat. He dipped his head, trailed his lips along the silky expanse. His tongue darted out to taste her sweet essence blended with the saltiness of her passion.

Traveling along her throat, he stopped with his mouth against her ear. “Come, Darcy. Come with me,” he growled.

Mac reached down, grasped her thigh and pulled until her leg was wrapped around his moving hips. He plunged deeper, deeper, until her muscles tightened, milking his hardened cock, each heated contraction bringing him closer to coming.

She was falling, spiraling deeper into ecstasy. His hands grasped her hips as he thrust, harder, deeper, touching a part of her she hadn’t known existed. Desire. Craving. Yearning. All of it at an intensity foreign to her. Though unsure, she continued to meet him thrust for thrust. The orgasm overwhelmed her, its sweet torture eliciting a cry of surrender as she came, again and again. His muscles tensed beneath her hands. He

continued, wet flesh slapping against wet flesh, until his hot seed poured into her. She gasped as the force pushed her up again. She tightened her thighs around his hips as her pussy clamped around his pulsing cock.

He collapsed on top of her, his breath ragged and muscles trembling. The sound of their harsh breathing filled the room.

She ran her hand down his sweat-covered back, loving the hard quivering muscles. "Thank you."

Bracing his weight on his forearms, he grinned down at her. "Oh, it was my pleasure." With a chuckle, he shifted to lie beside her and pulled her into the curve of his arm. Her head tucked beneath his chin, she watched his chest rise and fall for several minutes.

"Hmmmm, next time we need to go to my place," he murmured.

Next time? "Why?"

"Your parents'll be coming home soon, and I've got to go. Next time," he paused to kiss on her forehead, "we'll spend the whole night together. If you want, that is."

She lifted her head. "Are you kidding me? Of course I do."

A quick glance at the clock had him groaning. "The cards won't keep them gone much longer. I better go."

Darcy wrapped her arms around his neck and covered his mouth with hers. His tongue lazily traced her lips before delving in to dance with hers. With reluctance, they parted. She watched him dress quickly and reached for her own clothes.

"Hey, no need to get up. Relax, baby. I'll turn everything off and lock up." He laughed at her blank look. "I have the spare key, remember? Your mom always has me take care of things when they're gone." Leaning over to kiss her lips again, he whispered, "I'll call you."

Reaching over, he turned off the lamp, bathing the room in darkness.

Chapter Four

Darcy felt like turning cartwheels. She strode across the small community college campus toward her car. They hadn't even waited to offer her the job—they laid it on the table right away. She would start teaching in a couple weeks for fall semester. Finally, her life was coming together. The desire to teach again had simmered in her mind for some time. Richard had always discouraged it, saying there was no need since her work was in demand. He couldn't understand that she wanted to teach, that she enjoyed it.

Now she needed to start apartment hunting, because living with her parents indefinitely was not an option. As much as she adored them, she didn't need the constant questions. Avoiding the subject of Richard and her engagement worked so far, but it was bound to come up. Her mother had to know what was happening at all times. Darcy wondered what the older woman would say if she knew that her daughter was involved in an affair with Mac, the man she always wanted Darcy to date.

Climbing into her car, she pulled her cell phone out of her purse and checked the messages. Damn Richard. Out of ten messages, eight were from him and two were hang-ups. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Apologies, attempted explanations and rationalizations met her ears. Anger surged and she struggled to push it away. She was not going to let him ruin this day for her.

Determined not to think of him, she headed to her parents' house. She would call Mac to see if he wanted to celebrate her new job with dinner and a little time spent at his place after. A warm, delicious ache settled between her legs at the thought.

He was always in her thoughts since that night. It'd only been two days, and she missed him. Not just the sex, either. He'd been working—his advertising firm had a big account that was winding down. It needed his attention now, so he'd have free time for the big anniversary shindig the next weekend. He took the week after that off, which worked out great, because Darcy's parents would be on their cruise. That left her open to enjoy Mac.

She arrived home to find her mother and Mac's in the kitchen. The two friends greeted her warmly when she entered the room.

"Hello, honey. I was wondering where you were." Her mother raised her eyebrows in question.

"Just out and about."

She walked to the fridge to hunt up something to eat. Early in the day, she'd been too nervous and worked up about the interview to even think of food. Now hunger rumbled in her belly. Pulling some cheese and ham out, she began to assemble a sandwich and turned an ear to the older women's conversation.

"Well, he did take her on the date, but afterward called me up and told me not to set him up anymore." Aunt Sue shook her head. "I just don't understand. A man his age should be thinking of beginning a family. He's focused on his career until now. Not that I think he shouldn't work hard and do his best, but there is more to life than work."

"Yes, you're absolutely right."

Darcy rolled her eyes at her mother's quick agreement. Were they talking about Mac? They had to be. So, his mother was still trying to foist women on him. Her mother surely encouraged her friend's actions and probably helped her set things up. This was exactly why she put off telling her parents about her and Richard, though she had to sooner or later.

"Then he told me that he didn't want to be involved in a serious relationship right now." She sounded absolutely scandalized. "He wants to concentrate on his work. I don't know what to do, Marie."

Darcy couldn't hold back. "Why do you have to do anything, Aunt Sue? If Mac isn't interested, isn't that his decision?"

"Of course it is, but he doesn't even make an effort. I think the last real relationship he had was over a year ago." She sighed and rested her chin on her hand. "I really thought she was the one. That he'd marry her and start a family. He hasn't been involved with anyone lately."

He was certainly involved with someone. Darcy bit her lip and turned to search for a soda in the fridge before joining them at the table.

"He's thirty-one, Auntie. I think he can figure out what he wants. Maybe you should just let him do that."

"Oh, honey," her mother cooed and patted her arm. "A mother can't just stand back and watch her child let life slip him or her by. You'll understand when you and Richard have children. You want what is best for them and will try to help them along the way."

The chance of her and Richard producing offspring was about the same as her running naked through Mall of America singing "Yankee Doodle Dandy". She nibbled her sandwich and half listened as the mothers went on and on about poor woman-less Mac. What would they say if she informed them that she and the poor man in question had torn up the sheets downstairs a couple of nights ago?

The thought of Mac not wanting a serious relationship danced in her head. Did it matter to her? Was he interested in just sex? She threw that idea aside. They were friends, first and foremost. And she wasn't looking for a serious relationship, so why would the fact that he wasn't bother her? It shouldn't, and she wasn't going to let it.

"I'll talk to you later." She stood and brought her dish to the sink before heading downstairs.

"Oh, Darcy, a package came for you. I left it on your bed," her mother called after her.

A package? Who would be sending her a package? She walked into her room. A large padded FedEx envelope lay on the comforter. The return address was a Minneapolis post office box. Confused, she tore it open and pulled out two pieces of cardboard. Separating them, a plastic

wrapped sheet of thick paper fell into her lap. She tossed the cardboard aside and picked up the sheet. It was a sketch. She gasped at the signature in the corner. It was a Cynthia Borton, one of her favorite artists. Darcy had a considerable collection of her paintings, but didn't own any sketches. Fairly sure Borton didn't put her sketches on the market, Darcy wondered who had sent it and how they'd gotten ahold of it.

She carefully laid the piece on the bedside table and picked up the cardboard and envelope, searching for a note. Nothing. Then it dawned on her. Richard. He had the connections to obtain such a rare item. He also had friends and associates in the Twin Cities area, so that would explain the Minneapolis return address. He had someone else mail it to her. Smart of him, because if his address had been on envelope, she'd have been tempted to burn the thing without even opening it. Then the beautiful sketch would have been lost. She picked it up and studied it. Obviously this gift combined with the phone calls was an attempt to get her back. Ha, fat chance. Again, running naked through Mall of America held more appeal, but that wouldn't stop her from enjoying the sketch.

After admiring it for a moment, she carefully inserted the drawing back in the envelope and placed it on her dresser. She still had a lot to do. Getting the teaching position was a great start to her new life. Now she needed to find a place to live.

Grabbing the cordless phone and a pen, she strolled into the family room where the paper lay on the coffee table. Sitting cross-legged on the sofa, she grabbed it and opened to the rental ads. A two-bedroom would be best, one to sleep in, the other for a studio. Circling those that looked promising, Darcy started calling to make appointments. She had just hung up with the last one when her parents came downstairs.

"*Goldfinger* is on in five minutes, Darc. Hope you weren't watching anything," her father, the ultimate Bond fan, warned.

"Nope, not a thing. Did Aunt Sue go home?"

"Yes. Honey, what are you reading?" Her mother peered over her shoulder.

Darcy rolled her eyes and sighed when her mother gasped in her ear. *Let the questions begin.*

"Why are you looking at apartments? What's going on? Fred, Darcy is looking at apartment rental ads," she informed her husband.

"What's this, Darcy?" he asked, settling into the overstuffed armchair next to the sofa.

"Well, you might as well know. Things..." She glanced sharply at her mother who still hovered behind her, hand fluttering near her chest. "Mom, please, would you sit down?"

When her mother sat next to her, she tried again. "Things didn't work out with Richard and me. We split up."

"Oh my goodness!" her mother exclaimed. "Why? What happened? You two seemed so happy together."

Her father leaned over and patted her knee.

"We were happy for awhile, I guess. But it became clear we weren't going to be happy in the long run." That was true enough. It had been abundantly clear to Darcy when she saw Richard in bed with two big-boobed bimbos that she would not be happy with the jerk.

"Oh, that's too bad. I suppose it's good that you figured this out now and not after you walked down that aisle," her mother commented.

"So to make a long story short, I decided to come back to Minnesota. Nothing's holding me in Chicago." Darcy hoped that would be the end of the subject.

The puzzled look on her mother's face told her she was foolishly hoping.

"But why are you looking for an apartment? You'll stay here, of course."

Tread carefully. "Mom, as much as I love to be here, I need my own space. I'm looking at two-bedroom places, so I'll have the extra studio space. And," she rushed to say when her mother's mouth opened in protest, "I want to be close to the community college. I had an interview today and was offered the position. I'll be teaching again this fall."

“Well, I guess that makes sense, but honey, why rent? You could buy. A nice townhouse, perhaps,” her mother suggested.

“Maybe sometime in the future, but for right now, I’m going to rent. I’m looking at a couple apartments this afternoon, actually.” She hoped her tone was firm. This had to be the end of the subject.

A quick glance at the couple had her folding the paper and standing. Her mother looked stunned. Her mouth kept opening and shutting. Darcy knew from experience that meant the older woman was ready to burst. She needed to get out now.

“I’m going to go change. Don’t have to be dressed up to look at apartments. I’ll keep ya posted.” She darted out of the room.

Her mother’s voice trailed behind her. “Well, I am just shocked, Fred. I’m going to call Sue.”

Safely behind her bedroom door, Darcy heaved a sigh of relief. Her mother would call Mac’s mother and have a field day with the breakup. They probably start throwing her and Mac together again.

Though, this time around, not much protesting would happen.

After exchanging her dress pants and blouse for shorts and a tank, she flopped back on the bed and dialed Mac’s apartment. When the voicemail picked up, she said, “Hey, you. Didn’t want to bug you at work. If you aren’t too late tonight, give me call. We have some celebrating to do. I got the job. Woo hoo! If you’re late, I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Bye.”

She hit the end button and stared at the phone. Who could she look up? A number of her friends were still in the area—most were married, some with kids. Guilt swept over Darcy for not keeping in touch. Pushing it aside, she reached down next to bed and found her shoulder bag. She scanned the names and numbers in her day planner before dialing.

“Hi, Colleen. It’s Darcy.”

“Darcy! Oh my gosh, I haven’t heard from you in ages. Are you in town? Visiting?” The bubbly voice surged from the phone and had her grinning.

“I’m in town, but not visiting. I’m back for good now.” She fiddled with the tabs in the planner on her lap.

“Really? That is great! Does that mean you and Richard...” Colleen trailed off.

“Yeah, pretty much. Are you busy today? Maybe we could get together. I’m looking at some apartments later, but we could meet for coffee?” Boy, she sounded desperate.

“How about I go with you? We’ll stop for lunch and find you an apartment. Catch up while we’re at it.”

Relief swept over Darcy. “That sounds great. Should I pick you up? Give me directions to your place.”

* * *

“You slept with Mac?”

“Shhhhh, you don’t have to announce it to everyone.” Darcy glanced around the small café before grinning at Colleen Dilanger. “And we didn’t sleep.”

“This is unbelievable.” The tiny brunette stared at her friend. “After all these years. Wow. And?” she prompted.

“And it was incredible. I don’t know what came over us. We’ve been friends forever. I don’t understand it, but I’m enjoying it.”

“So are you guys a couple? Or just dating? Or is it just sex?” The questions spilled out.

Darcy bit her lip. Those were the very questions that plagued her. “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it. I mean, the sex is great and all, but we’re still friends. I know I can go to him for anything. Does that make us a couple?”

Colleen studied her intently. “I don’t know. You guys have to figure that out. But, hey, nothing wrong with a single man and woman enjoying sex with no strings attached. This is a new millennium, and we are modern women, are we not?”

“Oh, please, you have so many strings attached to you, Mrs. Dilanger.” Darcy chuckled and pointed to her friend’s rounded stomach. “I about fell over when you came to the door.”

“Well, I just started showing and we haven’t been telling people until recently.”

“And I haven’t kept in touch with you,” Darcy said quietly.

“Stop it. You’re in touch now, and you’re moving back. Doesn’t get any better than that. Now, are you done eating? Ready to go apartment hunting?”

“Yeah, let’s go find me a place to live.”

* * *

Darkness was settling when Darcy returned to her parents’. Both her mother and father were downstairs watching the news. She rounded the couch and sat down.

“Well I have good news. I found an apartment. It’s perfect. Within walking distance of the college, so on nice days, I’ll get a bit of exercise. It has two huge bedrooms with great lighting. And the rent is just right.”

“That’s good, honey. When do you move in?” queried her mother.

“I’ll go sign the lease in a few days and I can move my stuff in about two weeks. Now I just have to arrange for all my things to be moved.” She gave a playful groan.

“I’ll ask around about reputable movers,” her father chimed in.

“Thanks, Dad. I think I’m going to read for a bit.” She stood and, hoping to sound causal, asked, “Did anyone call for me?”

“Not this evening. Were you expecting a call?” Her mother glanced at up at her.

“Um, not really. Just wondering. G’night.”

“Oh, Darcy.”

Darcy paused at her doorway. “Yeah, Mom?”

“Do you have dinner plans tomorrow?”

Unfortunately, she didn't have any plans yet. "Nope."

"Good, you can come with us to the club. I'll call and reserve us a table. Night, honey."

In her room, Darcy grabbed her pajamas and ducked into the adjoining bath. She made quick work of changing and washing up and was soon curled up on her bed, novel in hand. Several pages later, the phone shrilled next to her.

She pounced on it, hitting the talk button. "Hello?"

"Hey, beautiful." His voice floated from the phone and caressed her. Warmed by it, she tossed the book aside and snuggled beneath the sheet.

"Hey, you. Did you just get home?"

"Yeah. Thankfully only another day or two of this. I'm beat. I almost didn't listen to my messages. Congratulations on the job, professor."

She chuckled. "Thanks. You need your rest. Go on to sleep. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sorry, you didn't get a celebration."

"Another time," she whispered with a smile. "I do wish you were here though."

"Hmmmm, are you in bed?" The question came out low and rough.

Darcy's eyes widened. "Um, yeah. I was reading."

"What are you wearing?"

Oh my. "Nothing spectacular. Just a pair of cotton shorts and a tank top. I don't have any sexy nighties," she said, apologetically.

His chuckle aroused her. "You'd make a paper bag look sexy. Do you know what I'd do if I were there?"

She wet her lips and struggled to control her breathing. His voice caused a surge of heat to rush through her. "What?"

"I'd lift up the tank top and take your breasts in my hands. They fit perfectly, Darc, right in the palm of my hand. I'd touch your rosy nipples and they'd pucker right up under my fingers. Are they hard now, Darc?"

With a groan, she answered, "Yeah."

“Put your hands up your shirt and cup your breasts. Close your eyes and feel my hands, baby. Can you feel them?”

Darcy pulled the thin tank up and cupped her breasts, heavy with desire. Her nipples ached as they hardened to tight nubs. She felt the jolt of longing and need course straight between her legs to her already soaked pussy. Her eyes slid shut as her fingers caressed. “Yeah, I feel them, Mac.”

“Good, ‘cause I’d spend a lot of time there. I love your breasts. I’d use my fingers, my lips, my tongue, even my teeth, until you were squirming beneath me.”

Her fingers kneaded her breasts and gently tugged on their peaks as he whispered in her ear. “Then I’d move down, over that flat, sexy belly of yours. Move your hand down, Darc. I’d run my fingers through the soft curls nestled between your thighs. I’d take my time, knowing you were hot and wet, ready for me. Then I’d run a finger over your clit and into you. Are you wet, right now, Darcy? Are you hot and ready for me?”

She ran her hand down into her shorts to rest between her legs. She ached for him, felt the pulsating need grow more intense, more insistent. Her finger slid over her sensitive, swollen clitoris, pulling a ragged gasp from deep within.

“Yeah,” she gasped unable to say another word.

“I’d put my mouth on you then. Can you feel my lips? My tongue?”

Her pussy was hot and wet as she glided a finger into its depths, in and out, in and out. She concentrated on his voice—thought of him, of his hands and mouth on her, of his cock inside her. Her breaths came out in short bursts, echoing in the telephone cradled against her ear.

“Soon I’d have to stop though, ‘cause I’d be so damn hard. Just thinking of you makes me hard. Feeling you and tasting you is a sweet torture. This is when I’d put my cock right up to your pussy. I’d let you glide it right in. And you’d feel so tight and hot.”

Darcy slid another finger insider her pussy and thought of Mac. Her muscles contracted around her fingers as she drew them out and thrust them back in, over and over. Turning her head, she anchored the phone

between her ear and the pillow to free her other hand. Rubbing furious circles around her throbbing clit, she continued to drive her fingers deep inside. The pressure, the ache grew stronger and more intense.

“Oh, Mac,” she cried as the orgasm began to climb, higher and higher.

“I can almost feel you tightening around my cock right now, Darc. You feel so good. Are you coming, baby?” he murmured.

“Yes,” she gasped.

The release surged through her, a lovely tightening traveling through her body, rushing to cloud her mind until nothing but the sensations pounding her from the inside out existed. Slowly they subsided and she lay there trembling, trying to capture a coherent thought. She grasped the phone and struggled to catch her breath. “Mac?”

“I’m here, baby. You okay?”

“Well, I’d say so. But what about you?”

That chuckle again. “I hardly sat here twiddling my thumbs while I listened to you come.”

Duh. “Oh, well, that’s good then.” She paused. “I still wish you were here.”

“Me too, Darc, me too.”

“You need to get some sleep.” A yawn escaped her.

“Yep. I’ll call you tomorrow. Think of me.”

“You can count on it. G’night.”

“Night. Thanks in advance for the good dreams.”

The receiver clicked in her ear. Unable to stop grinning, she hung up. She turned off the light, snuggled back under the sheet and dreamed of Mac.

Chapter Five

The August sun beat down with relentless fervor, reflected off the still surface of the pool. Darcy stretched out in the lounge chair and welcomed the heat, hiding from the glare behind large sunglasses. This was a rare occurrence for her. Relaxation. She'd done more of it since arriving home than in the last several years. There'd always been new pieces to finish, a show coming up, or some function or other Richard wanted to attend.

Upon awakening, she decided today was for her. Her parents were gone—her mother off to the day spa with Mac's mother, and her father was hitting the golf green, enjoying semi-retirement. Yes, today would be solely about her. She was going to get some sun, go for a swim and work some more on her next piece. Tonight she had to go to the club with her parents for dinner, but hoped to squeeze a bit of time to see Mac. She wanted to be with him, wanted to savor this newfound aspect of their relationship. While the little bit of phone sex had been exciting, it was hardly as satisfying as Mac in person. She wanted his hands on her, his mouth, his tongue. Her fingers in the wet folds of her sex were a poor substitute for his hard, swollen shaft buried inside her.

She groaned and shifted her hips. An insistent throbbing heat began to spread from her belly down into her pussy, pooling in sweet wetness. Aching for Mac, she pressed her legs together. Her breasts tingled, nipples pebbling beneath her swimsuit top.

Shaking her head, she glanced around the yard. She couldn't very well masturbate in broad daylight. Either she had to go in or wait 'til tonight. Tonight, she decided, knowing that pleasuring herself would only take the edge off, it wouldn't satisfy her completely. It would be even

more amazing tonight with Mac. At least she hoped so. There was no guarantee he wouldn't be working. Darcy sighed. She hasn't seen him since the night they'd made love. Sure, she'd talked to him every night on the phone, but she wanted to see and touch him as well as hear his voice.

A jump in the cool water was just what she need right now. Pulling off her sunglasses, she laid them on the patio table and stood. The phone she had placed on the table rang. A thrill ran through her. It had to be Mac. Maybe he was thinking of her as well. She snatched it up.

"Hello?" Her voice was husky, breathless.

"Darcy! You aren't answering your cell. I've been trying for days to get ahold of you, sweetheart."

Darcy's good mood and sweet arousal vanished. It was the pig. "I wasn't answering because I didn't want to talk to you. Don't call here again, Richard."

"Don't hang up," he pleaded. "Please, Darcy darling, give me a chance to explain."

With a frustrated sigh, she sat on the edge of the lounge. "Explain what? Why you were screwing two women while you were engaged to me? Hmm, I'd love to here this. Go on."

Silence.

"Really, Richard, you need to speak up." Sarcasm dripped from inside her.

"I have needs, Darcy. Needs that you can't fulfill. It meant nothing. I love you, that whole thing was just physical. Don't tell me you never got yourself off, fingered yourself?" His voice pleaded.

Stunned, it took her moment to collect her thoughts. "We're not talking about masturbating, for crying out loud. If I'd walked in on you jacking off, it'd have been different. How would you feel if it'd been the other way around? What if you had come in and two men were screwing me? You would blow it off, like I was just playing with myself?"

"That's different—"

“How?” she practically screamed into the receiver.

“I know I satisfied you, Darcy. You had no complaints in the bedroom.”

“You’re right. I had none until you brought other people into it. Of course, I didn’t have much to compare you to. At least not then.” She couldn’t resist the vindictive little jab.

“What do you mean? Are you screwing someone else? What the hell! What, you’re away a week, and you’re—”

“Oh my God! You are unbelievable. You sleep with women while we’re together, and I’m supposed to forgive and forget. I possibly find someone after we split, and you’re pissed? I don’t know why I’m wasting my time. Don’t call here again.” She pulled the phone away, hit the off button and dropped it next to her.

The nerve of him! She had nothing to be ashamed of. She’d been faithful to him the entire time they were together. *Forget it. He’s not here, not part of your life anymore.* With that thought, she stood, strode to the pool and dove smoothly beneath the still surface of the water.

Mac stood at the gate and watched Darcy dive into the pool. He’d heard her conversation with the creep she’d been engaged to. The son of a bitch had no right to harass her. Man, she had looked so disturbed and upset at whatever was said on the other end. Did she still have feelings for the jerk? No. He pushed that thought away. Darcy would never go back to a man who cheated. Why would the idiot stray when he had her?

He remembered what she told him. Richard found her lacking in the bedroom. More likely he was the one lacking. Mac had firsthand knowledge now, and Darcy lacked nothing.

Somehow he had to show her. Telling her wouldn’t be enough. She’d blow it off. Since their relationship had shifted, he hadn’t had a real opportunity to show her just how much he wanted—no, needed—her. One night together and several late night phone calls... Not enough. He looked forward to his vacation and being able to devote some serious

time to showing her just how he felt. Today, though, could be a little preview.

His pants felt mighty snug as he watched Darcy swim lap after lap using strong, smooth strokes. Her body cut through the clear water, her long dark hair streaming behind her, accenting the toned, svelte muscles of her back and shoulders.

It wouldn't be a hardship to take her mind off the phone call from her ex. It'd be his pleasure and, if he did it right, hers too.

Toeing off his shoes, he unfastened his khakis and shucked them off. He continued removing his clothes until he stood in his cotton boxers. Several long strides carried him to the edge of the pool. She still hadn't noticed him and continued her laps. He dove in smoothly and matched her strokes until he was upon her.

He snaked his arm out, encircled her waist, causing her to gasp and sputter. Just as she recovered her breath, he set out to steal it with his lips. Hers slid cool and wet on his before their tongues darted out to mate, to taste.

Her arms wrapped around his neck tightly, pulling her body close to him. Their legs tangled as Mac used his to push her against the side of the pool, bracing his hands on the ledge behind her. She moved her hands up and buried them in his hair. Tightening her fingers in the dripping curls, she pulled slightly to part their lips.

"What are you doing here?" Her breath, hot and steamy, caressed his cheek.

"Lunch break. And, Darc, I'm starving." To prove this, he began nibbling on her neck, laving it with his tongue.

Her head fell back, allowing him easier access to the sleek, creamy column of her neck. He sank his teeth into her skin, pulling a startled gasp from her, then a moan as his tongue smoothed over the tender spot.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and nestled her soft heat against his growing cock. The thin wet cotton hid nothing; his hard length jutted forward against the mound between her legs. A cry caught in her throat and she pressed her mouth to his again, now the aggressor.

Her hand slid between their bodies, past the waistband, and grasped his erection. The sensations of her caressing fingers and the cool swirling water caused him to grow even harder. He pulsed beneath her touch, ached to bury himself in her slick heat.

He pulled the tie at the back of her neck, allowing her bathing suit top to fall and expose her breasts. Wasting no time, he released her mouth and bent to suck a pert nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the tight crown.

“Let’s go inside,” Darcy gasped, arching against his mouth.

“Let’s not.” Mac used his free hand to tug her bathing suit bottoms aside to cup the soft apex of her thighs. He slid his middle finger across her swollen clit.

“Oh my God,” she cried. “Mac, stop. We can’t do it here. What if my parents came home?”

He leaned away from her. “Your mom’s at the spa with mine, and your dad’s golfing with my dad and four other buddies. You know as well as I do they won’t be home for hours.” He turned his attention to her breasts again.

“But...” Her voice trailed off and her hand continued to caress his aching cock.

“No one is coming home, I locked the gate when I came in, and there’s a privacy fence, hon. Haven’t you always wondered what it’d be like to make love in here?”

Yeah, she’d always wondered.

Darcy ran her fingers over smooth skin of his solid length, so warm in the coolness of the water. She wanted him inside of her, to pull his hardness into her own simmering heat. Knowing he’d make her explode caused her to squeeze him tighter, and he groaned low in the back of his throat.

The water swirled around them, a sensuous caress. Mac’s finger slid in lazy circles around the sensitive skin surrounding her clitoris, enough to tease and frustrate deliciously.

She shifted her legs from his hips. He seized the opportunity to pull her suit down and off her legs. Returning his hand to her pussy, he thrust two fingers into her wetness. Her muscles tightened and convulsed—an immediate orgasm that stole her breath and robbed her of her thoughts. Shock waves coursed relentlessly through her body, one after another, until her body shook from the onslaught. She released his cock to grasp his shorts at the waist and yank them down past his hips.

He withdrew his hand and slid it around to grasp her ass. With his coaxing, Darcy tilted her hips and wrapped her legs around his waist again. The bulbous tip of his cock rested at the opening of her pussy. She wrapped her fingers around it again and rubbed it against her clitoris with slow, deliberate strokes. Their moans mingled. Unable to wait any longer and sensing he shared her impatience, she positioned him once again at her opening and withdrew her hand to rest on his shoulder. She met his gaze as he thrust into her.

He wasn't slow or gentle, and she didn't want him to be. Desperate, they met each other, thrust for thrust, over and over. Mac's lips found her neck again. His breath danced along her wet skin in short bursts. She dropped her head back against the hand he kept braced on the edge of the pool. Water splashed around them with each movement, doing nothing to cool them or their intentions.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as the liquid heat flowed within her body, threatening to erupt like molten lava. Higher and higher, she climbed until she began to fall, to plummet through the hot, honeyed release.

"Oh yeah, baby." Mac's voice sounded muffled against her neck.

She felt his cock grow thicker and twitch. She increased her movements, knowing he would join her in her descent and make it more intense, more gratifying. Her muscles clamped around him, pulling the orgasm from his body. With a shudder, he emptied into her, the force sending her crashing again.

Coming down from the high, she clung to him—arms around his neck, legs around his waist. Their breaths came out in short, harsh

gasps, echoing in their ears. He nuzzled her neck, lips caressing, as he lifted his hand to cup her cheek. Something about the actions brought tears to Darcy's eyes. It was a sweet gesture, a loving gesture. She could seriously fall in love with this man.

No, this wasn't what was supposed to happen. Her mind struggled to grasp the reality of the situation. Mac was a friend, a wonderful friend. They had sex because they trusted each other. Nothing more. It was friendship and sex. Romance didn't factor in here. After the conversation with Mac's mother, it was clear Mac didn't want commitment, and, really, did she? Part of her, her heart, screamed yes as she tried to tell herself no. She would not put herself in the position to have her feelings used against her, to be vulnerable. Things had to stay the way they were. Two friends could have a mutually satisfying sexual relationship without getting their hearts involved. Mac was managing with it, damn it, and so could she!

"Mmm, can I have lunch with you everyday? Dinner too?" Mac pulled back to meet her gaze.

"Absolutely, but you'd lose weight from lack of food." Darcy forced a laugh she hoped sounded carefree.

"You'd be worth it."

She felt her eyes prickle again. Time to step back. "We should get out of here. Do you have to go back to work?"

Mac let his fingers trail down her cheek before withdrawing his hand. "Yeah, unfortunately, it's going to be another long night. The project goes out tomorrow. The good thing about that is after four tomorrow, no more late nights. And next week, I have the whole week off to savor you. You can be breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hmmm, the Darcy diet—so good you want to get off." He grinned wickedly.

"Hardy, har, har." She rolled her eyes. "Do you want to take a shower before you go back?"

"Join me. I'll wash yours if you wash mine."

"Lead the way."

Minutes later, hot water coursed over their bodies as they took turns soaping each other. Darcy reveled in the feeling of Mac's firm muscles beneath her hands. Was it any wonder she wanted this man? He was sweet, caring, a wonderful lover, totally confident. Everything she ever wanted in a lover, everything she ever dreamed of in a—

"So how are things going?" His voice poked through her thoughts, catching her attention.

"Um, they're good. I started sketching a new piece. That's going well. I'm heading to dinner with Mom and Dad tonight. Oh, I forgot to tell you last night as I got a bit distracted." She gave him a saucy grin. "I told them that Richard and I were history."

"You told them what happened?"

"I didn't tell them specifics. They don't need to know that."

"Did they start giving you the unwanted advice yet?"

Darcy chuckled. He knew her parents so well. "Well, Mom did mention I should buy a townhouse instead of renting, but nothing else that I can think of. Not too bad yet."

"No input on your love life?"

"No, why would..." Darcy stopped and stared at him for a moment then burst out laughing. "Oh, my God, couldn't you just see it? They're bound to start foisting us off on each other like they've always done. They stopped the matchmaking while Richard and I were engaged, but now it'll start up I'm sure."

"Only now, I guess, we won't have to fight them so much. We're kinda a step ahead of them." Mac wrapped his slippery arms around her.

"Well, do you think we should tell them about this? It's not something I normally share with my parents." She stared at the dripping tiles and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

He stiffened a bit and asked, "What exactly is this, Darcy?"

She squeezed her eyes shut against the pain that burst in her middle. God, she never expected to fall for him. "It's us having sex. If our parents

found out, they'd start expecting things. Heck, they'd be planning a wedding within a week."

"So you don't think we should tell them anything?"

"I don't see the point. Why don't we just enjoy this without their interference?"

"If that's what you want," he said slowly.

It wasn't, but she couldn't say that. He'd feel guilty if he discovered her feelings for him, feelings beyond friendship and lust. She knew the last thing he wanted was to hurt her, and also, she didn't want him feeling awkward if either of their parents got the wrong idea.

"I think it'd be best, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right. We wouldn't want them meddling." He ran his hands down her back to settle on the curve of her ass. "I need to get back to work. I'll call you tonight if it isn't too late, or tomorrow."

Chapter Six

After Mac left, Darcy sat on the edge of her bed with just a towel wrapped around her, wet hair dripping down her back. She barely felt it. Her mind was reeling.

She wasn't supposed to fall in love. This could ruin their friendship, the one thing, besides her parents, that remained constant in her life. Mac didn't want a relationship right now. That much was clear enough after what he'd told his mother. Focusing on his career didn't include her. They were friends who ended up having sex. Could she leave well enough alone? Let things stay as they were?

She'd seen too many friendships go bad when one person wanted more than the other. Sex made it even more complicated. Demanding something more than what they had could break their friendship.

No, that wasn't even an option. She had to be satisfied with what they had. Who wouldn't be happy with that? They hung out, got along, made each other laugh, knew each other inside out and had sex. Nothing wrong with that. Like Colleen said, this was a new millennium. Sex with no strings wasn't a bad thing and happened all the time. That was the way it was, and she needed to deal with it.

She grabbed the phone from the table and dialed Colleen's number.

"Hey, girl. You busy? You wanna go shopping?"

An hour later she stood next to her friend, flipping through clothing racks.

"You just had to go clothes shopping, didn't you?" Colleen joked. "When I'm in the fat lady clothes, you decide it's time to buy sexy clothes."

"You're very sexy. I'm sure Paul can't keep his hands off you even with the little belly." Darcy held a silky black dress in front of herself.

Colleen snorted. "Oh please, if you had this poking out from your body and sitting on your bladder, you wouldn't be calling it a *little* anything. You just wait 'til it's your turn."

"Don't think that day will ever come." Darcy moved on to the next rack.

"Whoa, whoa, chicky. What does that mean? You're young, you're in a relationship, what's the problem?"

"Nothing, just drop it." Darcy waved her hand, trying to push the subject away. "So have you thought of names yet? Do you think it's a boy or a girl?"

"No, and I have no clue. Now talk. What is wrong with you? You seemed so happy last time we talked, so what happened since then? Was Mac an ass? You know that's a man thing, right? It comes and goes, really."

Darcy chuckled. "He's fine, and I know about guys being asses. Don't worry about me. I'm fine. We are doing just fine. I just don't see me having kids. Obviously, it isn't meant to be with Richard, and there aren't a whole lot of prospects of it happening any time soon. I figure I get to spoil your kids." She forced a grin.

"I'm sure you will, but, honey, aren't you and Mac—"

"We're friends," Darcy interrupted in a harsh whisper. "We have sex occasionally. Nothing more. He doesn't want a relationship and neither do I. Look at the mess I made of the last one."

"First of all, you did not make a mess of anything. What is wrong with you? A man cheats on you then he is the one in the wrong. And Mac doesn't want a relationship? Did he tell you that?"

"He told his mother he wants to focus on his career. I hardly think that includes getting involved in a long-term, complex relationship."

"Well, I think you should discuss this with Mac. What a man tells his mother isn't necessarily what is going through his mind." Colleen laid a hand on Darcy's arm.

“It’s plain he doesn’t want this to go further. When we discussed the parents, he agreed that it would be a good idea not to tell them. If he wanted to get serious, he would have insisted we tell them. It’s okay, really, Col, I’m fine with it. I’m ready to be a single woman with no one to answer to.”

Her friend raised an eyebrow and studied her before nodding. “Okay, if you say so, but I still think you should talk to him, not your mothers.”

“I know Mac. His work is very important to him. He has worked hard to get where he is and is aiming even higher. I’m not going to mess that up for him.”

“But, Darcy, what about you? What do you want?”

“Hon, I have good friends, a great job and fabulous sex. I’m not lacking. Now I’m going to try this on. I feel like dressing up tonight.” With a wave, she strode to the dressing room with black silk trailing behind her.

* * *

Darcy flew into the house several hours later. If the gods smiled upon her, her mom would still be getting ready and she’d have time to throw herself together for dinner. She ran into her father at the top of the stairs.

“Hi, Dad, I’ll be ready in a jiffy.”

“No hurry, sweetie, your mom’s still deciding what to wear. She bought a few dresses while she was out today.” He did so well holding back the eye roll she knew was lurking within him.

“Well, I’ll hurry anyway and keep you company while she finishes up.”

Feet flying, she entered her room and tore her new dress from her shopping bag. She then noticed the package on the bed, a flower box. Her heart jumped. Mac had gotten her flowers. What did that mean? Maybe he could be interested in a relationship. She groaned inwardly—they were just flowers, not a freaking ring!

A note from her mother lay next to the box. *Darcy, these were delivered for you. You must have an admirer. Do tell.*

She rolled her eyes. Her love life, or sex life as the case may be, would never be conversation material with her mother. Shaking her head, she made quick work of the bow and pulled the top off.

Large gorgeous yellow roses filled the box, their soft fragrance drifting to Darcy's nose as she did a little dance. He remembered yellow roses were her favorite. What a sweetheart. Pulling the card out of the envelope, she teared up at the message inside. *Sometimes I know you better than you know yourself. Thought you could use these. You are in my thoughts and heart.*

There was no signature, but it had to be Mac. Who else would send her flowers?

The phone shrilled once, followed seconds later by her dad's yell.

"Darcy, hon, phone call."

Her heart leapt. Maybe Mac got off early. She could drive over after dinner tonight. They could share a bottle of wine and if it ended up in the bedroom, she certainly wouldn't object. A proper thank you for the flowers could lead to something interesting. With a grin, she picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Don't hang up. Darcy, you have to listen to me." Richard's voice grated its way into her ear.

"Look, I don't have time for this. Do not call here. It's over," she ground out.

"Don't say that. We were happy. I know I made a mistake. I'm sorry. I said the wrong things earlier. I was just so upset because I love you and I need you here with me. Please come home."

Oh good God, he was begging. That didn't happen every day, a girl having a man beg her to come back.

"I am home, Richard. I'm not coming back. Ever. Understand that. Quit calling me." She ended in a near shout.

“Darcy, you won’t find anyone who loves you the way I do. I know you so well. I know what you need.”

Red lights flashed inside Darcy’s head. The flowers. They weren’t from Mac—they were from Richard. Disappointment needled her. Of course, the sleazy ex would be the one to send her the beautiful blooms. It wouldn’t fit for the man she cared for to do that.

With a curse, she slammed the phone into its cradle. “Damn him! Why does he have to ruin everything?”

A knock sounded. “Darcy, are you okay?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Her movements mechanical, she dressed and got ready for dinner. On her way out, a small zing of satisfaction filled her as she dumped the flowers into the trash.

She listened with half an ear to her parents on the drive to the club. The whole situation with Richard ran through her head. What was she going to do about him? What could be done really? Begging, for crying out loud!

They were led to their table immediately, and Darcy’s radar started going haywire at the sight of a man sitting there.

“Darren, good to see you, good to see you!” Her dad stepped forward to shake the man’s hand.

Her mother introduced them. “Darcy, this is Darren Sinclair. Darren, Darcy.”

“Nice to meet you,” Darcy forced out, shaking his hand. He held on way too long, making it necessary to pull away from his grip. She resisted the urge to wipe her hand on the skirt of her dress.

Barely.

They sat and ordered drinks. This was definitely a night for wine, she decided. It was going to be a long night.

“Darcy, I’ve heard such wonderful things about you from your father.”

At Darren's statement, her mother leaned over to inform her, "Darren works for Daddy's firm. He's bound to make partner soon. He is such a fine worker, a good provider."

She felt her mother's knee nudge hers under the table, and it dawned on her completely. They were matchmaking. Anger burned in her, more at herself than her mother. She should have expected this.

Her gaze darted between her parents and Darren. The men talked about work, though once in a while, Darren would turn and toss a smile her way. Darcy nearly gagged when she glanced at her mother. The woman was practically drooling over the guy. She looked at Darcy and raised her eyebrows.

What the hell? What was so special about Darren What's His Name? Maybe he was perfectly nice, she certainly didn't know, but he wasn't all that. Darcy gave him the once over. Black hair slicked back from a receding hairline to swirl around the beginning of a bald spot. It reminded her of a burned cinnamon roll. He did have nice eyes, a pale translucent blue. But they wandered to her chest a bit too often for her liking. What was the man looking at? It wasn't like she had anything significant.

"Excuse me, I need to use the ladies room."

Darren gave her a thumbs up, winked and clicked his tongue twice before saying, "Gotcha, babe."

Babe? She'd just met the man and he was calling her babe? She had to get away from this table. Practically sprinting across the dining room, she ducked into the ladies room

Not having to really go, she sat on the settee near the entrance. She'd barely caught her breath when the door pushed open, and her mother bustled in. The older woman quickly sat next to her and patted her hand.

"Isn't Darren a sweetheart?"

Uh no. "Mom, I'm not interested in Darren, and this is really uncomfortable. You know I hate when you matchmake. You did this to Mac and me all through school. I didn't like it then, and I sure as hell don't like it now."

"Darcy, there's no need to cuss. I'm not matchmaking. Your dad just mentioned that Darren was alone. He has no family in the area, so I thought it'd be a good gesture to invite him."

Not sure whether to believe her or not, Darcy shrugged and stood. "Let's get this over with. I want to go to bed."

She'd had enough crap.

Apparently the powers that be disagreed and thought she needed more.

Dinner had been fine, except for the leers toward her chest. She shouldn't have worn her new dress. The silk clung and dipped low. It was revealing, yes, but most men wouldn't ogle, or at least they wouldn't be so blatant in doing so. She made it through coffee and dessert without saying anything and felt a medal was in order for her patience and self-control.

When her father's credit card was returned, she almost burst into dance. This evening was finally over. She could go home, curl up with a book for a bit, and go to sleep.

"...Darcy would love to." She caught the tail end of her mother's comment.

"What would I love to do?" she demanded, her voice sharp.

"Darren is taking some of Dad's cases since he's not working as much, so he needs to come to our house to pick up some files," her mother explained.

"And this affects me, how?"

"You're going to ride home with Darren, so that if we get separated while he's following us, you can get him there. Shall we go?"

Darcy groaned inwardly. There wasn't much way out unless she wanted to look like a complete ass. Oh well, she could handle a ten-minute drive with Mr. Wide Eyes.

They went out to the cars. Darren held the door open for her to get in his huge truck. It wasn't easy work getting into the front seat in her little black dress, and Darcy suspected he got quite a nice glimpse of ass as

she struggled up. He put a hand on the small of her back, gave her a little boost. She was grateful until that hand slid down and patted her on the rump. Her head whipped around, but he was already turned toward her parents. She narrowed her eyes at the ring of slick hair twirling his bald spot before sighing heavily and slamming the door shut. Whatever he'd said to her parents had her mother grinning. Suspicion filled her mind. What was going on?

They didn't speak as he pulled out of the lot and followed her parents' car for several miles. She was beginning to relax when he turned a corner.

"Darren, you just lost my parents. They went straight. Go around the block and we can catch up."

"I thought we'd go somewhere a little more private." He put his hand on her knee and ran his hand up her thigh, almost to her crotch, pushing her dress up as he went.

She slapped his hand off her. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The slime had the nerve to look surprised and confused. "Well, I thought..." His voice trailed off.

"No, please go on. What were you doing putting your hands on me? We don't know each other, you jerk."

"Darcy, I'm sorry, really. I just thought after talking to your parents that was what you wanted."

"Whoa, whoa, pull over. Pull the damn truck over!" Her voice rose to a screech. When he put the car in park, she pulled the seat belt off and twisted to look at him. "You need to explain now."

His face was molted red and he reached up to loosen his tie before beginning. "Well, your dad had mentioned you were in town. He knew, too, that I was alone here. No family or anything, so he invited me to come tonight. He mentioned several times how lonely you were. I thought it was a hint. When your mother called today to tell me what time to be here, she specifically told me that you had broken off your engagement and that you were looking for a man. I took that to mean..."

“What? That I had my parents out trolling for my sexual partners?” Darcy was horrified, not only by Darren’s interpretations, but at the very fact her parents said those things, painted her as some lonely, sex starved woman.

“God, Darcy, I am so sorry. Really.”

The guy did look genuinely horrified. She shrugged her shoulders, though a talk with the parents was high on her to do list. “No harm done, I guess, but you can just bring me home.”

With a nod, he put the truck in drive and brought her the rest of the way. The house was dark as they pulled up.

“Uh, just tell your dad I’ll get those files later.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Darcy was already wrenching the door of the truck open to jump to the ground.

“I really am sorry.”

She slammed the truck door and strode to the house. Only a small lamp lit the front entrance. A stack of files sat within the circle of light beneath. Ah, they were chickening out. They didn’t want to have her blow up at them obviously. Well, she would corner them at breakfast. Right now all she wanted was a shower and a wave of amnesia to wipe out any memory of the night’s events.

Chapter Seven

Darcy woke slowly as the light slashed through a crack in the curtains. She glanced at the clock. Good, her parents should still be at the breakfast table. A little talk was in order.

Rolling off the bed, she strode to the dresser and grabbed some clothes from the drawer. Pulling them on, she sent up thanks that sleep had come easily the night before. She'd been so angry, but the shower had made her drowsy enough to drift off shortly after her head hit the pillow. A rare thing. She had a tendency to think things to death, which often cut into her sleep time.

She grabbed her large canvas bag, stuffed it with her sketchbook and supplies. After her talk with her parents, she'd head out to her favorite beach to relax and get a bit of work done in the process. She needed some alone time—some time to think about the direction her life would be taking.

She walked into the bathroom, got a towel and sunscreen and tucked them into the second compartment of her bag. She made quick work of cleaning up and headed upstairs. Voices traveled to her as she climbed the stairs and walked into the kitchen.

Both her parents sat at the table, but they were not alone.

A man chatted with them. Darcy's eyes about popped out of her head when she saw him. Was this guy for real? From the waist up he looked semi-normal, not bad really. Light brown hair, green eyes that crinkled when he smiled. But she couldn't even concentrate on that. Her focus centered on his crossed legs. He had on golf shoes, whatever the hell they were called. But instead of normal pants, he had on long socks tucked

into plaid pants that stopped just below at the knees. What did they call them, knickers? Well, whatever, they looked damned ridiculous.

“Good morning, honey.”

Darcy cringed at her mother’s sunshiny voice. What was she up to now? As if that wasn’t obvious. Her mother was doing exactly what she predicted, except not with Mac. The one time in her life when she wanted to be with Mac and her mother started pulling eligible men out of the woodwork.

And though this wasn’t her father’s doing, he certainly wasn’t stopping it. He’d go along with it, convinced by Mom that this would make Darcy happy.

Yep, this was going to stop. As soon as Golf Man was gone, her mother was going to be set straight. This would not fly.

“Morning.” She grabbed a mug and filled it with steaming coffee.

“Darcy, this is Stuart Davis. He and Dad are going golfing this morning.”

She narrowed her eyes at her mother for a moment. Maybe Mom would get the hint and back off. Who was she kidding? This was her mother. The woman never backed off when it came to her daughter. Giving up the older woman for now, she turned to Stuart.

“It’s a beautiful day for it. Hope you have a good time. Mom, I need to talk to you.”

“Okay, hon, sit down.”

“In private.” Another forced smile toward the trio.

“Now, Darcy, don’t be rude. We have company. Sit down and I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Gritting her teeth, she sat down across from Stuart. What was she, a child? Her mother scolded her for being rude, told her sit, and she listened. She was thirty, not thirteen. But, no. To avoid looking like an idiot in front of a man, she would sit and make small talk until he left. Then Mom would get it.

"I just want coffee. No breakfast. Where are you golfing today?" she asked her father.

"Oh, just out at the club. Nothing fancy."

"Are you doing eighteen holes?" There. That was the extent of her knowledge of golf.

"Yep," Stuart spoke up. His voice was quiet, kind of shy sounding.

"Darcy's an artist." Her mother voice echoed through the room.

Oh God. Poor Stuart just looked stunned at the loud outburst, then he looked at her and smiled. "Really? What sort of artist? Painting?"

"Mostly. I do sculpt when the urge hits and I also love photography, though I'd never make any money on it." She laughed.

"What kind of things do you paint?"

Okay, he was nice and kind of cute in spite of the goofy golf clothes.

"A little of everything. I love painting people. Not portraits, but people in everyday situations. On the street, on the beach, walking, you know?"

He nodded. "I'd love to see your work. If that's okay?"

"Sure, I'm having my pieces shipped here and I'm working on some new ones. I'm sure since you're a golf buddy of Dad's I'll see you again. I'll let you know when there's something to see."

"Darcy just moved back from Chicago. She's going to teach at one of the community colleges and just rented a little apartment near there." Her mother continued selling her like a doll or something.

"Have you taught before? Do you like it?" Stuart leaned toward her.

The man did seem interested in her. Too bad he didn't do anything for her. She knew then how serious it was with Mac. Damn it all, she had fallen in love with him! Here was a perfectly nice man who seemed to be genuinely interested, and she didn't feel a damned thing, not even one tiny spark. Well, shit.

"I taught in grad school and for a while afterwards 'til I started selling my stuff. I'm really excited about going back to it. It was something I enjoyed, something I missed."

"I'm glad. And you found a place near the school?"

Darcy glanced at her mother who was practically clapping her hands at the conversation. Another narrow look was sent that way before she answered, "Yeah, within walking distance. I just signed the lease and move in the beginning next month."

"She's staying here until then. I am worried about her though." Mom heaved a big sigh. "When Fred and I are on our cruise next week, Darcy's going to be here all alone. Poor thing. I wish someone were around to look in on her."

"Mom!" Darcy jumped up. Enough was enough! God, the woman made it out as though she was some puppy that needed feeding and pottying, for crying out loud. "Will you cool it?"

Her mother's hand fluttered at her chest, her mouth a surprised "O". Like she wondered why Darcy would be upset. She probably thought her daughter should be grateful to have Mommy looking out for her.

She turned to her father and Stuart—both looked at her with wide eyes. Darcy took a deep breath before speaking. "I'm sorry, Stuart. You seem to have caught us in a little family battle. Mom, here, thinks I'm a child who needs looking after. This certainly isn't the case, and she needs to get that through her head, so I apologize again. Have fun golfing. Hope to see you soon." She stalked out of the room, grabbed her bag from the top of the stairs and headed out the door.

She just made it to her car when Stuart called her name. Turning she watched him jog toward her. Okay, he made the dorky pants look almost cute.

"Darcy, I don't know exactly what happened in there. I'm thinking I was the cause of some tension with you and your mother." His full lips turned into a frown.

With a sigh, she reached over and patted his arm. "It has nothing to do with you, at least not directly. I'm afraid that you got swept up into Mom's little matchmaking schemes. I'm really sorry."

"Well, I don't know what your mom was up to, but I really like you, Darcy. I'd like to see you again. Would you be interested in dinner sometime?"

Her heart ached. Here was this nice guy, and she couldn't go out with him. Well, she could, but that went against her grain. She wouldn't lead him on and have him thinking there was a possibility of something when there wasn't.

"Stuart, I like you, too. Really, but I'm kind of involved with someone, and it wouldn't be fair to you. I'm sorry."

"Your mother said... Ah, she doesn't know about this man. That explains a lot." He heaved a sigh. "I can't say I'm not disappointed, but I understand. Thanks for being honest."

Darcy didn't know what to say. Urgh, she was going to kill her mother! Damn her for putting her in this position. "It's really nice to meet you. I hope it isn't awkward for you to come around here again. I'd love to see you again."

"Oh, I'll be around. Your dad and I golf once a week or so, and I still need to see your paintings."

God, he had a nice smile. Damn. Oh well, he'd be a pal to say hi to every now and again. "You bet. I'll let you know when they make it here. It was really nice to meet you, and I feel like I should apologize again for all this."

Stuart waved a hand, brushing it away. "Don't give it another thought. Your dad has my number. I'll talk to you soon." He ran a hand down her arm and jogged back to the house.

Darcy watched him duck inside, and her anger intensified. Her mother needed a talking to, that was for sure. Shaking it off, she got in her car and headed for the beach.

* * *

Mac walked into his apartment and threw the keys on the table. The project was finally done. It felt good, definitely a cause for celebration. This had occupied his time for months.

He'd taken the next week off. Darcy's parents would be out of town on their cruise, so he would have Darcy all to himself. It may take that

long or longer to woo her into more of a commitment. Damn her for wanting to keep things secret with their relationship. This teenage crap didn't do anything for him. He was sick of being set up by his parents, by his aunts, by friends.

It'd always been Darcy for him. It had taken her getting engaged to the creep for Mac to realize the extent of his feelings, and then he couldn't do anything. She had looked and sounded happy. So interfering, though he wanted to, had not been an option. He loved her too damn much.

Not that he was a saint or martyr. Those years hadn't been without women and sex. Hell, he had both and enjoyed it. His thought was he would marry and have a family and just forget her. After all, she lived in Chicago, rarely came home. Ha, what a joke. He compared everyone to her. Once, he'd found a woman he enjoyed and felt comfortable with, but she'd known his whole heart wasn't into it and wouldn't accept that. Good for her. He hoped she found someone else.

Now he just had to make Darcy see they were meant for each other. He knew her better than anyone, could read her moods and gestures. The same was true for her. She knew his every mood.

He grabbed the phone and dialed her at home. After several rings, her mother answered.

"Hi, Aunt Marie, is Darcy around?" He wandered into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge.

"Oh, she's at the beach. I think she planned to sketch a bit, so she'll be gone for a while. I'm sorry, hon, I don't remember which beach it was."

"That's okay. I'll see ya tomorrow, Auntie." He hung up quickly before she could start questioning him on one thing or another.

He knew the beach she'd be at if she was sketching. They'd gone there often to people watch. He'd check it out.

A quick change of clothes and short drive later, he stood on the edge of the sand and searched for her. Not a huge crowd milled the beach, given it was a Thursday morning. Moms with kids ran and waded.

Teenagers either worshipped the sun or pushed each other off the platform anchored in deeper water.

He found her on the shady grass that skirted the beach. She sat on a large towel and leaned against a tree, sketchbook and pencil in hand.

Long strides ate up the distance between them until he stood beside her. Oblivious to anything but the page in front of her, she continued drawing. He tilted his head to see and almost chuckled. She was drawing him—drawing him *nude* as a matter of fact. He narrowed his eyes critically at the page.

She had him sleeping, sprawled on a large bed. It was a pretty good likeness, all in all. Though the sight of all his assets in plain view was a tad disconcerting.

Darcy relaxed her arms and rolled her shoulders. Tilting her neck in a stretch, she let out a startled cry when she saw him.

“Damn it, Mac, what are you doing here?” She set the pad and pencil on the towel beside her.

“I’m off until the week after next.” His heart and groin expanded when her eyes lit up. He nudged her hip with his foot. “Skooch up.”

She wiggled forward, allowing him to place a foot on either side of her. He lowered himself until he sat behind her against the tree.

“Now skooch on back.”

She moved until her ass pressed against his fly, her back against his chest. He bit back a groan and wrapped an arm around her waist. “Go on. Keep drawing.”

Turning her head, she shot him a puzzled look. “Are you sure?”

“Yep, I like to watch you work.”

“Okay.”

He watched her hands, small and slender, add little details to the drawing. Her slim fingers held the thin pencil, welding it quickly over the paper. The motion stopped only when she used the pads of her fingers to blend and blur lines on the page.

The movement was strangely erotic, a caress on the page. He could feel those fingers on him, on his cock, caressing the smooth skin until he nearly came. He shifted, inadvertently grinding his rock hard cock against the soft flesh of her ass. Her head whipped around, wide eyes seeking his. He smiled apologetically and nodded back to her pad. A confused look marred her face before she turned back.

God, he wanted her. He wanted to take her now.

He cleared his throat and trailed his fingers down the smooth side of her neck. "I think you were a bit generous with certain parts of my anatomy there."

"I disagree." She pushed her ass back against him and shot a saucy look over her shoulder. "I made a point to keep this true to life."

Oh, she'd pay for that one. He ran a hand up under her shirt, over her smooth belly to cup her breast. Her gasp pressed the soft mound into his hand. He leaned forward, kissed the tender spot just below her ear.

He ran his thumb over her nipple, feeling the hardened crown beneath the silk of her bra. Desperate to touch it without a barrier, he ran his fingers along the edge. He nearly said a prayer of thanks when he found the clasp nestled between her sweet breasts. After a moment of fumbling, he succeeded in unhooking it.

She glanced over her shoulder again, her green eyes hazy with emotion. The tip of her pink tongue darting out to moisten her lips was all the encouragement he needed to continue. He trailed his other hand up her shirt, so he could cup both breasts. Rolling the tight tips between his fingers, he delighted in the feel of her.

"So," he drawled, "why am I alone in this drawing? Where are you?"

With a ragged sigh, she leaned back into him, curling her knees up and positioning the sketch pad to effectively shield his actions from any passers-by. He rubbed his cheek against her silky hair, surrounding himself in the soft strawberry scent.

"Uh," she stammered, arching her back, pressing her breasts further into his touch. "I don't like drawing myself. Not too sexy. Rather draw

others.” A small moan shuddered through her as he tugged slightly on her rigid nipples.

“Not sexy?” He ran one hand down her quivering belly to cup her mound between her legs. “A drawing of us together, Darc, I can’t think of anything sexier.”

She shifted her hips, simultaneously rubbing her sweet ass against his cock and her pussy against his hand. “Mac,” she sighed. “Let’s go to your place.”

He ignored her suggestion and kept talking and caressing her through her shorts. “I think you should be riding my cock. My hands would be on your breasts as your pussy squeezes me. God, if you could capture the look on your face when you come, baby. That would be sexy as hell. I dream of that look, Darc. Every fucking night.”

“Oh God.”

Her breaths came out in soft gasps. Mac smiled into her soft tresses. She was close to coming. Just a bit more. He added more pressure to his caress. His cock throbbed against her as the heat from her arousal bathed his hand. He closed his eyes and focused on her pleasure.

“Or maybe you should be laying on the bed. My head between your thighs, tasting you. You’re so sweet and delectable. I love the taste of you. Your hands would be in my hair. Mine would be on your ass, lifting you. I think that would show how much I want you, don’t you? Will you draw that for me, Darc? Draw my desire, my wants.”

Her body tightened, every muscle tensed. Her thighs clamped hard around his hand and her head fell back against his shoulder. Her teeth bit into her bottom lip as she moaned soft and low, the orgasm riding through her body. She shook with it. Gradually, her body relaxed and sagged back against him.

His hands trembled with need as he refastened her bra between her breasts.

“My place?” The fact his voice came out in a growl didn’t shock him. If he got any harder, he’d throw her on the blanket and take her like an animal, to hell with who was around.

She nodded.

“Hurry. I need you, Darc.”

Chapter Eight

She needed him so much.

Darcy could only hold on to that thought. She ached with need. Good lord, he'd brought her to orgasm with a few caresses and words. Oh God, the words. She never thought talking could turn her on so much. But, damn, he knew just what to say. Neither of them had spoken during the short ride to Mac's apartment, but the air between them had vibrated with desire, with need. Her pussy, already soaked and throbbing, ached for him again. And those looks. His darkened gray eyes had sought hers often. The storm of want clouding them had nearly set her off again.

Now they were at his apartment. She struggled not to fidget as Mac unlocked the door. He pushed it open and offered his hand. With a smile, she took it and allowed him to lead her into the small apartment.

He shut the door and shoved her back against it, his mouth claiming hers immediately. Her bag slipped from her fingers and landed with a thud. He released her hand and ran his down to grip her hips. Tilting them, he ground his erection against her pussy. Spears of heat ignited, shooting into her belly.

She gasped and clutched at his shoulders as she returned the kiss. His tongue invaded the warm confines of her mouth to duel with hers—a fierce, heated dance. His hand moved from her hip down her outer thigh. He slid it around to the sensitive inner thigh and up to cup her between her legs, to capture her desire.

“God, I can feel how hot you are through your clothes.” His words caressed her lips, her cheeks as he trailed his mouth across her face down to her neck.

Her hands fisted in his hair, and she hooked a leg around his, opening her up more for his hand.

“For you, Mac. Hot for you.” She couldn’t even form a coherent sentence, for crying out loud.

Mac didn’t seem to care, though. He growled low in his throat and nipped her gently along her collarbone. His tongue followed, gliding over the delicate skin. He pressed his palm against her drenched sex, rubbing small, mind-blowing circles.

Her head fell back, banging against the door. She barely noticed. His hands and mouth caused her body to shiver with need, to vibrate with longing. She needed him now. Letting go of his hair, she ran her hands down to tug off his shirt, only to get it tangled and bunched under his arms. With a groan, he pulled away to help her in the task and took the time to free her from her shirt as well.

She sighed with pleasure as her hands smoothed over the warm skin of his back. He felt so good, so right. Stroking the taut muscles, she leaned forward and ran her tongue around a flat brown nipple. Encouraged by his quick intake of breath, she did the same to the other, ending the caress with a light scrape of her teeth.

“Bedroom.”

Darcy glanced up at him through her lashes at the curt order. *Oh my*, she thought at the sight of his tousled hair, full lips and desire-laden eyes. “Yes, sir.”

An eyebrow lifted, a response to her cheekiness she assumed. With a wink, she pulled away from him and began to walk toward the bedroom. Smack. She jumped as his hand connected with her ass and she whirled around in surprise. A grin kissed his lips, and he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Move it, Darc.”

“Oooh, you gonna get rough with me, big boy?” She fluttered her eyes at him and started for the bedroom again, making sure to add an extra sway to her hips. Anticipation and excitement curled in her belly. What would he do?

His hand encircled her elbow and he yanked her back against him. Her back slammed against his chest. His mouth nuzzled her neck, teeth sinking in deliciously.

“Now—” The phone rang. “Damn.”

Darcy couldn't hold back her giggles. He bit her neck again, following it with a kiss, a swirl of tongue.

“Go on into the bedroom. I'll get rid of whoever it is.” He strode to grab the phone off the counter. “Hello? Oh, hi, Mom.”

Knowing he could be a while, Darcy went into the bedroom, crawled onto the bed and rested her head on the pillow. His spicy scent surrounded her. She inhaled deeply and stretched her arms over her head with a sigh. Hearing Mac's low voice in the other room soothed her. She'd been edgy all day, angry with her mother for her matchmaking. The beach and sketching had smoothed some of it over, but most had lingered until Mac came. God, he had such a hold over her. What's worse was she liked it. She looked forward to being with him, talking to him, loving him.

Her eyes slid shut and she allowed herself to float in hazy sleepiness. Mac would be with her in a moment, she was sure, and they'd pick up where they left off. Or, heck, starting all over again would be just fine.

Next thing she knew blues music filled the room. She dragged her eyes open. Had she fallen asleep? Trying to pull her hand down to rub her eyes, she filled with panic when her arms failed to move. Twisting her head, she looked up and gasped. Her hands, bound together with a silk tie, were secured to the center slat of Mac's headboard. What was going on here? Where was Mac?

As if her thoughts conjured him, he walked into the bedroom. Her eyes devoured him from his muscular legs beneath his shorts, his bare chest, up to his smug grin.

“Untie me, Mac.” She nearly cringed at the breathlessness of her voice.

He took a sip from the wineglass he held and tilted his head to study her. “Hmmm, no.”

“No? What the hell do you mean, no?”

He stepped across the room to stand beside the bed. Setting the glass on the bedside table, he lowered himself to sit next to her. He slipped a hand under her head and ran his fingers through her hair, spreading it over the pillow. “Do you trust me, Darc?”

“That has nothing to do with this. You have—”

“Do you trust me?”

She stared into his eyes, drowned in them. “Yes, I trust you.”

His fingers trailed lightly over her cheekbones, along her neck and shoulders. “Then you know I’ll never hurt you. Trust me to make you feel good, baby.”

She couldn’t deny the excitement simmering inside her. At the same time, the proportions of her feelings frightened her. She tried to lighten the mood by joking, “Is this one of your teenaged fantasies? Always wanted a girl tied to your bed?”

He leaned forward until his lips hovered over hers. “Only you.”

His tongue darted out, outlined her bottom lip. She used her tongue to moisten her upper lip, to taste him. He leaned further in to kiss her fully, to invade her mouth, her senses. She pulled at her restraint, wanting to hold him, to touch and caress him. A cry of frustration bubbled from her.

He withdrew from her and opened the bedside table drawer. He reached in and pulled out a long paintbrush. His gaze never left hers.

Confused, she continued to joke, “Oh, a present for me? Want me to paint you a pretty picture? Untie me and I will, darling.”

His mouth curled up. “Oh it’s a present alright, but I’ll be doing the painting today.”

He ran the soft bristles along her jawbone, down her neck, between her breasts. Using his other hand, he unfastened her bra and pushed it aside. She arched her back, desperate for his touch, but he withdrew his hand. The brush ran along the soft skin of her breasts, first one then the

other. She moaned as it tickled around her nipples. Each touch sent arrows of desire burrowing deep inside her.

He pulled the brush away. Darcy bit her lips against her objections and watched as he dipped it in his wine glass. He brought the wet bristles to her lips, painted them with the cool, sweet smelling wine. Before she could lick the moisture away, he did. His tongue left a hot wetness after the chilled dampness of the wine. The contrast caused her to tremble with desire and anticipation.

She ran her tongue along her lips, tasting wine and him. Heat pooled in her stomach, flowed between her legs, dampening the folds of her sex. He dipped the brush again and applied it to her nipples, one at a time. The rosy crowns tightened under the attention. Mac licked and sucked the nubs until Darcy nearly bent into two arching into him.

The brush and Mac's tongue continued downward across her stomach, around her navel. He laid the slim instrument on her trembling belly as he undid her shorts.

"Lift your hips." He slid both shorts and panties down over her hips and legs before dropping them beside the bed. Placing his hands on her ankles, he ran his palms up the outsides of her legs until he gripped her hips. He caressed as he leaned forward and kissed her lower stomach, directly above the soft patch of curls. His breath ruffled the triangle of hair and teased her swollen, pulsating clit.

She knew she was dripping for him, could feel the dampness collecting. All she wanted in that moment was his smooth, hard cock inside her, moving within her.

He picked up the brush, rewet it and trailed it along one of her inner thighs. She moaned as he licked the wine from her. She pulled her arms again, wanting to grab his head and guide his mouth to her sex.

Grasping her knees, he pulled her legs further apart. He settled between them and stared for a moment at her exposed pussy. Under such scrutiny, Darcy moved to try to close her legs, but he held fast. He traced the outer lip of her labia with the dripping brush. Her hips jerked up off the bed. Again and again, he dipped the brush and applied wine to

the already slick folds of her pussy. She waited impatiently for him to follow with his mouth, with his tongue, but he didn't. Stroke after stroke, he continued until she nearly wept with frustration. Desire pushed her to the edge. She hovered at the brink, an orgasm just within reach. Her breath came out in harsh sobs.

"Ah, there we go," Mac said softly. He leaned forward and flicked his tongue over her clit, laving teasing circles around it. He closed his mouth over it and sucked hard. That did it. Darcy fell and fell fast. She spiraled down into the hot swirling chasm of pleasure. Lifting her hips, she pressed harder against his mouth, mindlessly setting an erotic rhythm against his lips. Tremor after tremor overwhelmed her. Her pussy contracted again and again, her juices dripping along the soft curve of her ass with each tightening. Mac pulled away and ran his tongue lower to catch the wetness.

He straightened onto his knees and she got a good look at his erection. Good God, he was huge.

The hard length of him jutted forward, the tip glistening as drops of pre-come escaped the small opening. She licked her lips as he leaned forward and covered her body with his. His cock slid between her thighs and nestled against her swollen, still throbbing clit. Another burst of heat and desire exploded through her.

"Untie me, Mac, I need to touch you. My arms are getting sore."

He reached up and undid the knot to free her hands. Immediately she buried them in his hair and pulled him forward. She kissed him, pouring all of her feelings, her longing into it. She could taste her essence in his mouth and savored it. Savored the delicious feeling of being desired so desperately.

He shifted and ran a hand between them. His fingers found her sensitive nub and traced slow circles around it. She moved until his cock slid across her pussy again. Taking the hint, Mac grasped his erection and ran the tip along the length of her sex, from her pulsating clit down to the responsive tissue surrounding her anus and back. He didn't give

her a minute to think before surging forward inside of her. His hands came up to cup her face.

She arched against him, taking the entire length of him. Her muscles stretched gloriously to accept the size of him. She felt his cock pulsating inside her, the feeling delectable, and stroked his back with both hands. And then he moved, each stroke an agonizing pleasure. Already Darcy felt the sensations build once again. Hmm, this multiple orgasm thing wasn't so bad.

He kissed her, his tongue loving her mouth as his cock loved her body. She lifted her hips to meet his thrusts. His erection grew harder inside her and his muscles grew taut beneath her roaming hands. She knew he wasn't far from coming and increased her efforts. If she could make him feel half of what she felt, he'd be blown away.

His fingers tangled in her hair as he threw his head back. Darcy cried out, not in pain, but in response to the orgasm overwhelming her. Her pussy tightened around his cock, gripping the rigid erection. Over and over, she squeezed around him, nearly sobbing as heated sensation assaulted her.

Waves of extreme pleasure swept through her in time with Mac's lovemaking.

With a roar he came, the force of his orgasm intensifying hers to a maddening degree. He thrust a final time before dropping his forehead to hers. Their harsh breaths mingled as they tried to recover. Darcy continued to stroke his back, and Mac rubbed her scalp with his fingertips. They caressed each other for a while before either spoke.

"Will you stay tonight?" His voice was rough, strained.

"If you want."

He lifted his head. "Oh, I want. I want to make love to you again. I want to sleep with you beside me and wake up with you. God, Darc, what are you doing to me?"

She patted his cheek. "Driving you crazy. Just like you're doing to me."

With a chuckle, he shifted off her and stood. Darcy watched in pleasure as he stretched, arms overhead. He brought to mind a large, sleek cat, a cat that just got the cream.

“Should we go to lunch? Where to?”

“Hmm.” She stretched her own muscles and sat up. “I don’t care. How about that Italian place, the one we used to go to all the time?”

“Sounds good. We can order extra and bring it back for later, ‘cause once we get back, we aren’t leaving all night.” He sealed his promise with a kiss before heading to the bathroom.

Darcy listened to the water running for a moment before following him, dropping the bra that dangled from her arms on the floor on the way. She let out a hum of appreciation at the sight of his ass as he bent to turn the shower on.

“You wash mine and I’ll wash yours,” she teased.

He tossed a grin over his shoulder. “Deal.”

As soon as they were under the spray, she grabbed a washcloth and soap and began washing his back. He sighed as she kneaded the muscles in his shoulders. Continuing the massage until every inch of his body had been washed, she wasn’t too surprised to see his cock springing to attention again.

He took the cloth and soap from her and began to lather up her body. She groaned slightly when he washed the soft folds between her legs. He frowned as she rinsed off.

“Are you sore?”

“Not really. Just a bit sensitive.” She chuckled at the deepening concern in his eyes. “Really. Don’t worry. I’ll be up for round two in a little while.”

“That’s not what I was worried about,” he protested.

“I know.” She reached around him and turned the water off. “It was a joke, Mac.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let’s go eat.”

She laughed and grabbed a towel off the rack beside the shower. After quickly drying off, she went into the bedroom and began pulling her clothes on. “So, what did your mom want?” she called out.

“Huh?”

“You know, before when she called? What did she want?”

“Oh, nothing much. I just had to avoid her matchmaking again. Same old, same old.”

Darcy chuckled, though the thought of Mac on a date with another woman made her stomach turn. At least his mother wasn’t as persistent as hers. At least she didn’t think so.

“How far has your mom gone with this?”

Mac came out of the bathroom and went to the dresser to grab clothes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, has she set you up without your knowing it? A little surprise?”

“No, why?” He turned to her, clad in only a pair of boxers. “Has your mother been on your case, setting you up?”

Boy, he looked a bit unnerved—his face red, mouth turned down in a frown. “Yeah. It’s no big deal though.”

“Have you told her that you’re not interested?”

“I thought I’d made it clear, but after last night and this morning, I think I’m going to have to make it more obvious.” She rolled her eyes.

“Last night and this morning?” he repeated. “What happened?”

“Well, we went to dinner at the club last night and a guy from Dad’s firm was there. It was obvious Mom hoped we’d hit it off. As if. He was horrible. All eyes and hands...” She trailed off when she saw the murderous expression on Mac’s face.

“He touched you?” The question came out in a shout.

“Just once on my leg, and I stopped it,” she rushed to reassure him. “I made it clear my mom was mistaken in her thinking I was looking for a guy. So he dropped me off and—”

“You were in his car?” Again, a big old shout.

“Uh, yeah. He needed to pick up some files from my dad so Mom suggested I ride with him to show him the way. It wasn’t a big deal.”

She felt ridiculous having this conversation, standing in her panties and bra. She grabbed her shorts and pulled them on.

“Not a big deal? Darcy, what if he hadn’t taken no for an answer? God, what was your mother thinking? And your father?”

“Mac, Dad knows him. He works with the man. Really, I don’t think the guy would have tried anything if my mom hadn’t gone overboard. I know, I need to talk to her, and I will. I meant to this morning but when Stuart was there, it made it impossible.”

“Stuart?”

Uh oh, she knew that tone. It was the “watch out Mac is going to blow” tone. She had to tread real carefully here.

“Yeah, one of Dad’s golfing buddies. He was really harmless, a really nice guy. I made it clear to him I was involved with someone else and wasn’t interested.”

Mac crossed his arms over his chest. “And did you tell your parents that you were involved with someone?”

“No, we agreed not to tell them, right?”

“Wrong!” He threw his hands up. “You suggested it. I just went along with it. Dammit, Darcy, don’t you think we should tell them that we have a relationship?”

“Is that what we have?” She threw back at him. This was stupid. He was getting all territorial because her mother had set her up with some guys.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? What else would you call it?”

“Sex, Mac, I’d call it sex.” She knew it was petty, but couldn’t hold back. “It was the understanding from the beginning that this wasn’t a long-term thing. We both have our careers to focus on. We are friends who have sex. We don’t have a commitment of any sort.”

He just stared at her. "So why did you tell the guy this morning that you were involved with me? If we don't have a commitment, you're free to date him, right?"

"Right, but I didn't feel comfortable with it. That's a personal choice, Mac, having nothing to do with you."

"Oh, I see, so if I'm comfortable with it, I could go date other woman and it wouldn't be an offense against you, my friend I'm having sex with?"

The jerk. How dare he twist her logic around? "Sure, date whoever the hell you want. Makes no difference to me." *Liar.*

"Good, good. Just trying to get the rules straight here, Darc. So, do I get to sleep with these other women, too?"

"Go ahead. Fuck yourself silly." She practically ran out of the room.

Scooping her shirt off the living room floor, she pulled it over her head. Mac was right behind her.

"What are you getting so pissed about? You're the one who wanted no commitment, Darc. I thought we had the beginning of a relationship here."

"Bullshit," she snapped. "Sex isn't the beginning of a relationship. And sex is all we've had. No dates, no silly notes or presents. It wasn't just you. I'm guilty of it too, but don't play it up like we've been having a romance, when it's obviously not the case."

She grabbed her bag and wrenched the door open. Unable to bring herself to look at him and unwilling to let him see the tears in her eyes, she slammed the door shut and started down the hall in a near run.

The door jerked open and she heard Mac yell after her. "If a lifetime of friendship doesn't count as a basis for a relationship, I don't know what does, Darcy!"

She choked back a sob, ran down the stairs and out of the building. Keeping her pace swift, she headed away from the apartment building.

Chapter Nine

Damn, her car was still at the stinking beach.

Darcy slowed down. She'd made it several blocks from Mac's place and it was obvious he wasn't following. Not that she wanted him to. Taking a detour into a small coffee shop, she ordered an iced mocha, sank into an overstuffed chair and contemplated what to do. She would have to call a cab to drive her back to the beach.

Or maybe she could call Colleen. Calling her parents was completely out of the question. And she sure as hell wasn't going back to Mac's. How dare he get pissed off at her? He was the one who didn't want a relationship, who wanted to focus on his career. He had no right to be angry with her mother setting her up. Or at least not at her. It wasn't her doing; she hadn't been trolling for men. He made it seem like she was encouraging the whole thing. And then to ask if he could see other woman and screw around... Jerk!

Continuing to sip her coffee, she tried to fight the tears burning her eyes. She'd lost not only her lover, but her best friend as well. If only she could go back... Well that was impossible. Time to suck it up and go on.

She reached into her bag, pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

"Hello? Hey, sorry to bother you. Are ya busy?" She cringed when her voice broke. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just need a ride. Can you come get me? You're an angel." She wheeled off the name of the café and its location. "See ya in a few."

Darcy almost lost it when Colleen swept through the door several minutes later. Her friend spotted her immediately and rushed over.

“Okay, spill it. If you think I believe this hokey about nothing being wrong, you must think I’m stupid.” She sank into the chair next to Darcy.

“Oh, Colleen, really. I’m fine, or at least I will be when I get over the idiot.”

“By idiot I assume you mean Mac.” She waited for the Darcy’s nod. “Okay, so what’d he do?”

With a sigh, Darcy told of the days events. “So we have the most amazing sex, and everything seems great until we get on the topic of our matchmaking mothers. He had a fit when he heard about the two guys mom had dragged home for me. I don’t get it. He’s the one who didn’t want a relationship.”

“According to his mother. Darc, you need to talk to him about it. Sounds to me like he’s jealous and wants to let it be known that you two are a couple.”

“Why are you taking his side?” The petulant tone of her voice horrified her.

Colleen leaned forward as much as her tummy would allow and patted Darcy’s hand. “I’m not taking sides. I think he was a jerk for the way he reacted. He could’ve had much more tact and if he wanted to let people know you were a couple, he could have told you instead of making an argument. On the other hand, he really seems to care. Do you want to throw away a long friendship and more because of some miscommunication?”

“Oh sure, you’re married with a baby coming and suddenly you’re the expert on communication?” Darcy teased her friend with a sniff.

“I’m always an expert on other people’s problems. When Paul and I have a fight, you can be the expert then, okay?”

“Okay.” She sighed. “You’re right though. I don’t want to give him up. Shit, I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, my advice is to wait it out. Let him cool off and think about things a bit. No use going into the fire again. Either he’ll call you or you

can call him tomorrow. Maybe the next day. Or worse case, you'll see him at your parents' party."

Darcy nodded. "Makes sense. Thanks, Col, you're the best."

Her friend huffed on her nails and polished them against her shirt. "I know. Now help me up so we can go."

She pulled the other woman to standing and together they headed out of the café. "Yeah, I need to go home and have a little talk with my mother."

* * *

She was going to kill her!

Darcy had every intention of giving her mother a piece of her mind. The matchmaking had to stop, especially if she wanted to get back with Mac. After getting her car from the beach, she'd followed Colleen home and spent some time with her friend. The short visit had calmed her down quite a bit and put her in the perfect state of mind to have a quiet discussion with her parents about how things needed to be.

All her good intentions fled when she saw her mother and father in the living room with yet another man. She knew immediately it was another set up. Where did her mother find all these men? Surely they weren't in the habit of entertaining men in Darcy's age range.

"Oh, hi, honey. Did you have a nice time sketching?" Her mother jumped up and rushed over to grasp her elbow, pulling her farther into the room.

"Yeah, I had a great time." She ground her teeth and forced a smile. "And who is this, Mom?"

"This is Harris, my friend Helen's son. He's been in Milwaukee the last couple of years and is moving back to the Cities. Dad has set up an interview with him at the firm. He's a lawyer."

"What a coincidence. Harris, nice to meet you. Hope you get the job and maybe I'll see ya around." She headed toward the stairs.

“Darcy, wait. Come visit.”

“No, Mom, I’m not going to visit. I’m going to go downstairs and work a bit.”

“Your mother tells me you’re an artist,” Harris volunteered.

“I’m not surprised. It’s usually one of the first things she mentions.” Darcy struggled to keep her tone light.

“It must be wonderful to be able to make your living doing something you love.”

Darcy studied him. “It is, but don’t you love law?”

“I do. That’s part of the reason I’m coming home. I’ve been working in a very large firm, easy to get lost under it all, if you know what I mean. I want to work somewhere smaller, more personal. This opening at your father’s firm is a dream come true.”

“Good, I hope you get it. Now I really need to get some work done myself. It was nice to meet you.”

She turned and headed downstairs, ignoring her mother’s sputtering. In her room, she sat heavily on the bed. Nothing was going right. How the hell was she going to get a chance to talk to her mother if the woman had men around all the time? Did she think Darcy was desperate?

When she came home to Minnesota, she’d been perfectly content to be alone for a while. It was exactly what she wanted after the disastrous scene with the jerk. That was before the situation with Mac. She wanted to be with him, but knew she could make it alone if that didn’t work out. She didn’t need a man to make her happy. Sure, they were nice to have around. Sex wasn’t the same with a vibrator to be sure, but she was a modern woman and could make it on her own.

She couldn’t focus on work with everything spinning through her mind. She needed to get out of here. Get her mind off Mac and the mess they were tangled in. Maybe she’d go to the Walker, take in the new exhibits, plan a trip for her classes there. Her mind made up, she changed and headed upstairs. She bumped into Harris on his way out.

“Whoops, sorry. You headed out?” he asked, opening the door for her.

“Yeah, I’m going to the Walker.”

“I haven’t been there in years. Fancy some company?”

“Uh sure.” Free country.

“Great. Should we drive separately or together?” He took her elbow.

“I’d rather drive myself, if you don’t mind.” No way was she getting stranded without a car again.

“Sounds good. How about I follow you?”

“Fine with me.”

Darcy cringed when she heard footsteps behind them. Just as the door shut behind them, her mother’s voice followed them. “Have fun, kids.”

Perfect, just freaking perfect.

Mac paced the living room floor. Darcy hadn’t come back like he expected. How had she gotten back to her car? She must have called a cab.

He felt like an ass. Why hadn’t he just told her he wanted to tell their parents they were involved instead of blowing up? Because he had pictured her with other guys, that’s why.

He’d felt simple annoyance with Darcy’s mom when he heard about the matchmaking, just like he felt with his mother, but when Darcy’d brought up the man who touched her, he saw red. The thought of another man touching her just plain pissed him off. And she had the nerve to look shocked. Then again she hadn’t taken it so calmly when he brought up dating and sleeping with other women. Nope, she’d acted just as pissed as he felt.

That meant something, didn’t it? She cared, that much was obvious. He wasn’t ready to give up on them just because of a stupid argument. He should go talk to her, explain why he overreacted.

He grabbed his keys and headed down to his car. The whole way to her parents’ house he thought of what he’d say. An apology for overreacting was in order but he also needed to explain why. Dammit, he

was in love with her, had been for years. He didn't expect her to fall over and say she loved him too, but he needed her to know his feelings.

It didn't occur to him to knock on the door he'd run through millions of time before. He followed the voices into the kitchen. Darcy's parents sat at the table, sipping coffee.

"Hi, Aunt Marie, Uncle Fred, is Darcy downstairs?"

"Hello, Thomas. Darcy isn't home. Can I get you some coffee, something to eat?"

"No, thanks. Do you know how long she'll be?" He'd wait for her to come back.

"Oh I don't know. She went to the Walker with Harris."

"Harris?" Who the hell was Harris?

"Yes, my friend Helen's son. It's so nice to see Darcy dating again. I'm glad she didn't mope around long after the break up with Richard."

"Yeah, wouldn't want her to waste any time." He turned on his heel and headed for the door. "I'll catch her later. Night."

"Good night, Thomas. I'll tell Darcy you came by."

Yeah, you do that.

"I had a really good time. Thanks for letting me tag along."

"No problem. I'm glad you came." Darcy was glad Harris had gone to the art exhibit with her. She'd been able to talk and forget her problems even for a short time.

He hadn't tried anything fresh and had been nothing but pleasant. Knowledgeable in art, he'd kept her entertained with his thoughts and interpretations.

They walked to where they had parked in the ramp.

"Darcy, I don't quite know how to bring this up, so I'm just going to say it. I'm not really in the market for a relationship right now."

She burst out laughing. "And you think I am? Let me guess my mother went on and on about her poor loveless daughter?"

“Well, she wasn’t so dramatic, but pretty much. I think she and my mother cooked up some matchmaking scheme, and I wanted you to know that, though I enjoyed your company and would love to see you again, it would only be in a friendly way.” He glanced at her quickly as he leaned against her car. “The truth is that I’m involved with someone in Milwaukee, and I hope I can convince her to move out here. I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

“Congratulations. I hope she says yes.” Darcy laid a hand on his arm. “Harris, I’m not looking for a relationship either. I’m kinda patching one together right now myself. Obviously, we have some issues to bring up with our parents, don’t we?”

He chuckled. “Yes, we do. If your mother is anything like mine, and I’m sure she is, good luck.”

“You, too. And when you and your fiancée are settled, give me a call. I’d love to meet her.”

“That’s assuming she’ll say yes. And we will. Hopefully, you will have things patched with your other half and we can all get together.”

“Let’s hope so.” She opened her car door and got in. “Thanks for a great time. Good night.”

“Good night, Darcy.” He pushed the door shut for her and gave a little wave before heading to his vehicle.

Her thoughts centered on Mac during the drive home. She felt ridiculous for thinking one argument would end a lifetime of friendship and more. Of course they’d work through this. Once home, she headed downstairs and found both parents watching the news.

“Hi, Mom, Dad.”

“Honey, how was your date?” Her mother patted the couch in an invitation to sit.

Darcy walked over to the armchair and sat. “Mom, it was not a date.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Wink.

“Listen, we need to talk. You have to quit setting me up with these guys. I am not interested, Mom.”

“Honey, you can’t pine after Richard. You need to move on, and seeing other nice men is the ticket to doing that.”

“I’m not pining after Richard, believe me, and I don’t need a man to make me happy or to help me move on. I’m thirty years old, Mom, and don’t need you in charge of my social calendar. Please do not bring any more guys around.”

Her mother had the nerve to look crushed. “I was only trying to help. I want you to be happy, but if you want to be alone and want me to stop, I will.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m going to bed now. It’s been a long day.”

“You might want to give Thomas a call,” her dad commented.

“Why?” She stopped in her tracks.

“He came by while you were out, asking for you.”

“Oh, thanks, Dad.”

She casually walked into her room and shut the door before dashing across the room to grab the phone. Mac had come by! That had to be a good sign. He wanted to make up. Oh God, she hoped he wanted to make up. Her hands trembled as she dialed his number.

“Hello?” His voice caressed her ear.

“Mac, it’s Darcy.”

“Oh.”

Oh? That was it? He didn’t seem too enthused.

“Um, Dad said you dropped by looking for me?” *Please, please, please ask me to come over.*

“Yeah, that was a mistake.”

“A mistake? You mean, you didn’t come over? Or you weren’t looking for me?”

“No, I did come by and I was looking for you. That was the mistake—my mistake.”

“Okay, Mac, you’re losing me here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

What was up his ass? He was still pissed. Then why did he come looking for her?

“Will you just tell me why you came by?”

“I made a mistake. Simple as that.”

“Apparently it’s not so simple, ‘cause I don’t get it. Mac, can’t we talk here? I don’t want to lose our friendship. Can’t we get past this argument?”

“Sure, Darc, whatever you want. Oh, here’s a friendly question. How was your fucking date with Harris?” Click.

He hung up. She pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it while his question sank in. Date? Harris?

“Mom!” She slammed the phone into its cradle and rushed into the family room. “Mom, did you tell Mac that I was out on date with Harris?”

Her mother glanced up, startled. “I might have mentioned it. Why?”

Deep breath. “No reason. I just wondered. G’night.”

“Good night, honey. Sleep well.”

That was very unlikely.

Chapter Ten

Channel after channel flickered in front of her. Hundreds of them and not one interested her. Darcy threw the remote on the couch cushion next to her. She'd barely slept the past few nights and was exhausted. But every time her head hit the pillow or her eyes closed, Mac invaded her thoughts.

He had sounded so hurt, so pissed off. How could he believe that she'd gone on date after being with him earlier that day? *Because your mother told him so, idiot.* She was at a loss of what to do. Should she call him back? He'd probably just hang up on her again. Go to his apartment? It was unlikely he'd let her in, if he even answered the door. The only thing she could do was wait. Let him cool off and then approach him.

"Darcy, you need to get ready for supper." Her mother's voice drifted down the stairs.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Don't tell me you forgot?"

"Forgot what?"

"We're going out tonight. I told you about this days ago. We're meeting Sue and David in a little over an hour."

Dinner with Mac's parents. How perfectly awkward. Wiggling out of it would only cause a downpour of questions. Sighing, Darcy stood. Oh well, she needed to double-check some of the arrangements for the party with Aunt Sue anyway.

She dressed quickly, choosing a black sleeveless sheath dress. It was simple and elegant. Paired with a French twist, she thought she looked

halfway decent. Knowing her parents and Mac's, they'd sit and talk for hours, so Darcy opted to drive herself. She wanted to be able to leave as soon as possible.

Her heart jumped into her throat as the maître d' lead her to the table. Dammit, she hadn't even thought to ask her mom if Mac would be there. And there he was, looking hot as ever in a hunky suit.

He stood as the maître d' held her chair out for her to sit. Right next to him, of course. As he took his seat again, he stared into her eyes. "Hello, Darc."

"Mac." She shifted under his intense gaze "I didn't realize you'd be here."

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked softly.

"No! That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"I don't know." She glanced at their parents and breathed a sigh of relief. They were too busy chatting to notice the words and tension exchanged by the younger couple.

"You look good, Darc." He ran a finger along her bare arm, shoulder to wrist.

Goose bumps rose on her skin. He felt warm against her chilled flesh

"Thanks. You look great yourself." She shot him a smile, unsure of the mood.

His white teeth flashed. "Thanks."

"Thomas, what have you been up to?" Darcy's mother leaned forward.

"Nothing much. Working. Just finished up a big project."

She shook a finger at him. "I hope you aren't spending all of your time working. A young man like you needs to go out, have some fun. Not be cooped up in an office all day."

"Exactly what I tell him," his mother chimed in.

"Oh, don't worry, Auntie, I find plenty of time to play." His thigh pressed against Darcy's.

She shot a glance at him, but he sipped wine and listened to her mother lecture on the importance of a social life. If not for the warm pressure of his leg against hers, she'd have thought him oblivious to her.

"Now Darcy here is doing great. Getting back into the swing of things after the sudden break up with Richard." Her mother's voice grated into her thoughts.

"Mom," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"No, really, honey, you are jumping back on the dating wagon and taking hold of the reins."

Darcy glanced at Mac. He fiddled with his fork as he studied her mother.

"Mom," she began sternly. "Cool it with the horrible clichés, and please get it through your head that I'm not dating right now."

"What was your little trip to the Walker with Harris the other night then?"

Her teeth would turn to dust if she didn't unclench her jaw. Taking a moment to breathe, she laid both hands on the table. "Harris and I are not dating. We went to the art exhibits, had some nice conversation and that was the end of it. It was not a date. The man is asking another woman to marry him, for crying out loud."

"Well, Helen never mentioned that!" Her mother put her hand to her chest as she stared at Darcy.

"Maybe he didn't tell her. Or maybe she didn't listen when he tried to tell her."

"Well, things obviously didn't work out with Harris, but what about Stuart or—"

"Mom! I'm not interested in them, period. End of story. Please stop setting me up. It's embarrassing to me and to the poor guys."

"I only want you to be happy." Her mother sniffed and straightened in her chair.

Oh God, she knew that look and posture, the poor injured and embarrassed mother. Well, tough. She had to get it through her head to stop this crap.

"I know that, but I'm a big girl. I can make myself happy." She reached over to touch her mother's hand. "Really."

"If you say so." She sounded doubtful.

Darcy was grateful when the waiter came to take their orders. Luckily, after he left conversation centered on other topics. She had trouble following it due to Mac's leg—his hard, warm leg—rubbing against hers. And, damn him, every time she glanced his way he seemed enthralled by the current course of conversation.

Then, after their food arrived, his hand came to rest on her thigh just above her knee. She tried to ignore it, to be oblivious to it. She convinced herself she was succeeding until he inched the hem of her dress up higher and higher until his fingers caressed bare skin. She dropped her fork then and swung her gaze toward him. He returned her stare, the corners of his lips upturned.

"You okay?" he questioned.

She looked around the table at their parents. All eyes were on her. With a small laugh, she picked up the utensil.

"I'm fine. Butterfingers." She speared a bite of chicken and tried to move her leg out of his reach.

His grip tightened on her thigh, the exquisite pressure sending shivers up her leg. He loosened his fingers to trail them up her thigh until they teased the edge of her panties.

"Mac," she protested in a harsh whisper.

"Darcy."

"Stop it."

"No."

"Yes. I can't think when you do that."

"Good. Okay, okay," he conceded when she glared at him. "On one condition."

“What?”

“Come home with me tonight.”

Oh God. The husky tone of his voice told her exactly why he wanted her at his place. But was it just for the sex? Or something more? Well, she was going to find out.

“Yes.”

He grinned at her. She nearly whimpered when he pulled her dress back to her knees and removed his hand.

Dinner passed with excruciating slowness. Both sets of parents ordered dessert and coffee. Darcy and Mac declined, made excuses to leave and practically ran from the restaurant.

Outside on the sidewalk, Mac grabbed her around the waist and crushed his mouth to hers. His tongue delved in immediately. She wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to get closer.

Her pussy dampened and her clit began to pulsate, a tiny rapid beat against her drenched panties. He shifted and ground his hard-on against her mound. She gasped into his mouth as heat burst through her.

Pulling away, he demanded, “My car or yours?”

“Yours. And, Mac, drive fast.”

He snagged her hand and, pulling her behind him, strode to his vehicle. They quickly buckled up and he sped toward downtown, toward his apartment, his bed.

His hand slipped under her dress to caress bare leg again as he steered with one hand. Darcy shifted her hips, the throbbing between her legs becoming unbearable. Her sensitive nub rubbed against the dampened silk of her panties. Fingers of pleasure tickled inside her and squeezed deliciously. She bit her lip, but didn’t succeed in stopping the groan low in her throat.

Mac glanced at her, eyebrow quirked. His hand traveled up her thigh to cup her sex. His long fingers stroked her through her panties. A harsh sigh burst from his mouth.

“God, Darc, you’re hot. All wet and ready. I can feel your clit, all swollen and pounding against my fingers.”

Her head fell back against the leather seat as he continued to fondle her, to circle her clit with agonizing sweetness, increasing the pressure periodically. He slid the edge of her panties aside. Her hips jerked when his wonderful, rough skin rubbed her, causing the tip of his finger to enter her pussy slightly. She cried out. Her muscles tightened and she clapped a hand down over his to stop his caresses.

“Wait,” she gasped. “I don’t want to come here. Just get home. Fast.”

With a nod, he continued driving, but kept his palm cupped against her pussy, her hand holding his tight. Ragged breaths filled the small confines of the car.

Darcy felt relieved it wasn’t just her. Obviously the situation affected him as much as her. She almost wept in relief when he pulled into the parking garage beneath his building.

He yanked his hand from her, parked and bolted from the car. Her door was yanked open and he pulled her out. He practically dragged her to the elevator. As the door slid shut, she jumped at him. He stumbled back until he was against the wall. His hands cupped her ass and pulled her against his hardness. She circled her hips again and again, moaning as his erection pulsed against her. She couldn’t get enough of him. To think, she almost lost this. Damned if she’d make that mistake again.

“You’re so hot, Darc. So hot,” he whispered against her mouth.

“For you.” She nipped gently at his bottom lip.

With a groan, he straightened and lifted her. Wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck, she leaned down to kiss him again. The elevator bell dinged as the doors opened to his floor. Keeping an arm tight around her waist, Mac strode out and down the hall.

“Excuse us.”

His voice was hoarse as he skirted around a couple walking down the hall. Darcy buried her face in his neck and bit the salty skin below his

ear as laughter bubbled from her. It took him a moment to fumble with the lock, but he managed without dropping her.

Once inside, she found herself slammed against the door. His mouth devoured her, tongue swirling intoxicatingly around hers. His scent, his taste enveloped her. Shoving her hands in his hair, she fisted her fingers and held him fast against her.

He grabbed her dress, yanked it up to her waist and, with both hands, gripped and tore her panties off her. She pulled his head back to stare into his eyes.

Oh my. Blurred with desire, his gaze bore into hers before he leaned in to capture her mouth again.

“Wait,” she whispered against his lips and unwrapped her legs from his waist to stand. He gave an impatient grunt and darted his tongue out across her bottom lip.

Using the element of surprise, she grasped his arms and spun him around until his back rested against the door. She slid her hands over his chest to push his suit jacket over his shoulders. He aided by shrugging the garment off and tossing it aside. Pulling the shirttails from his pants, she set to work on the buttons lining the front of his shirt. Once open, she ran her palms up his chest, teasing the flat, rigid nipples.

She leaned forward to kiss the warm, smooth skin. Swirling her tongue around each nipple, she closed her eyes to enjoy his response—the harsh breaths, the tightening of his fingers on her shoulders, the hard length of his restrained cock pressed against her belly. She trailed her hands and mouth downward, over his stomach. His muscles quivered under her lips. Kneeling down before him, she unbuttoned his pants and raised her head to meet his gaze as she lowered the zipper.

He reached down and cupped her cheek, rubbed his thumb over her mouth. She moved her head to draw the digit into her mouth, sucking it hard before turning her attention back to the task at hand. Slipping her hands into his waistband, she shoved his slacks and shorts over his

hips. His cock sprang out and jutted upward, nestled against Mac's lower abs.

She inhaled with anticipation, then wrapped one hand around the hard length and cupped his balls with the other. Squeezing gently, she watched a couple drops glisten on the swollen head and leaned forward to lick the salty moisture away. Mac's groan echoed loudly in the quiet room. His hands delved into her hair, scattering pins everywhere. She inhaled deeply and drank in the clean, musky scent of his sex. Her pussy contracted in reaction and her sleek folds swelled and moistened even more.

She ran her hand up and down his cock, gently playing a fingernail along the bluish vein running its length. Her tongue followed its path. She licked him from base to tip and back and planted a firm kiss to the sac she cradled. It tightened beneath her lips, drawing closer to his body. He shifted, braced his legs further apart. Encouraged by the movement and his heavy breathing, she leaned forward and took the large, purplish-red tip into her mouth.

"Oh God, Darc." His fingers fisted in her hair.

She took more of him in, shifting slightly until her mouth encircled the base of his shaft. Tightening her lips around him, she withdrew. She rolled his balls in her hand and continued to work up and down the length of him with her mouth, her lips, her tongue.

Suddenly he gripped her hair more tightly and pulled her away. He guided her up his body and turned until she found her back pressed against the door again.

"I want to be inside you when I come," he growled against her mouth before kissing her deeply, tongue probing.

He let go of her hair and slid his hands down to yank her dress back up around her waist. Cupping her ass, he lifted her. She wrapped her legs around his hips. He slid his cock into her with one swift motion. Her pussy muscles screamed in exquisite pleasure and tightened around him. He plunged roughly into her, over and over.

Relentlessly he drove her to the edge. With each thrust, explosions of heat erupted in her pussy and coursed through her body. Her nipples rubbed against his chest through the silk of her dress, sending fissions of delight from her breasts straight down between her legs to swirl around his pulsing hardness.

His cock thickened inside her, pushing her further. Each stroke pushed hard against her swollen clit, causing her to tighten even more around him.

“Come with me, Darc. I want to feel your pussy squeeze me when I come.”

Her breath came out in sobs as the orgasm swept over her. Heat burst in her clit, then spread through her pussy as it contracted over and over. The warmth spread into her belly, her womb and beyond like hot oil spilling through her body. She felt the force of his orgasm, his seed shooting into her. He plunged into her once more, his still hard cock embedded within her as far as she could take it.

His muscles trembled under her hands as he buried his face in her neck. He kissed the sweat-dampened skin. Darcy squeezed her eyes tighter against the torrent of emotions. She didn't want to leave, to lose this.

He lifted his head to look at her face. “I don't want you to leave.”

“Good, 'cause I plan to stay.” She pressed a kiss to his chin.

“It's going to be a long night. Let's go to bed.”

* * *

She woke in the dark, disoriented.

Sitting up with a start, Darcy tried to make out her surroundings. An arm snaked around her and pulled her back down against a hard, warm body. Mac. She was with Mac. Muscle by muscle, she relaxed and listened until his breathing became deep and even with sleep again.

She squinted at the clock. Three thirty-four a.m. No wonder he was out. They'd made it to bed early all right but sleep hadn't crossed either of their minds until well after one. And here she was, wide-awake without even a sketchbook or anything with her to deal with her insomnia.

Mac's arm tightened around her middle, a kind of sleepy hug. She reveled in the heavy weight of his arm around her, the light caress of his breath on her neck, the press of his cock against her ass. Yep, she was where she wanted to be. She loved the feel of Mac next to her, though accustomed to sleeping alone. Sure she and Richard had shared a bed, a huge king-sized affair. They often went the entire night without touching. She might as well have been in the cot she kept in her loft. Richard wasn't the cuddling, holding type.

Darcy shook her head. She did not want to think of her ex right now. Mac lay next to her, that was what was important. Though they did need to discuss their relationship—if that's what they had. She wanted it to be and hoped his reaction to the possibility of her dating meant he felt the same.

Her eyes fluttered shut and sleepiness settled over her.

Light washed through the room when she opened her eyes again. She felt rested and ready to go. From the hard-on nestled between her ass cheeks, someone else apparently was too. She wiggled back against him and sighed as his smooth cock slid over the sensitive skin of her ass.

"Good morning." She looked over her shoulder.

He moved his head for a kiss, his stubble rasping against her cheek. His hand slid over her belly and cupped the mound between her legs. "Yes, it is a good morning."

Desire ignited instantly, amazing her. Obviously last night's activities hadn't dried up her sex drive. The folds of her pussy were wet and sleek when he delved his fingers within.

His erection jerked against her ass. She shifted until it slid between her thighs, its large tip teasing her already swollen clit. His hand guided

the shaft into her heat, and he pressed his hips hard against her ass, pushing farther up into her pussy. Then he held still.

She tried to move her hips, to start making love to him, but he held her still by cupping her pelvis.

“Darcy?” His voice was hoarse and low.

“What?” *Nothing like desperation dripping from your words.*

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Overreacting. I couldn’t stand the thought of you with someone else.” A quick withdraw and thrust.

Oh God. “It’s okay. I understand. Really.” Now they’d concentrate on this.

“I want to tell our parents we’re a couple.” Withdraw. Thrust.

“Ohhhh. You...you do?”

“Yeah. That okay?” He pressed her clit with two fingers in a circular pattern.

She moaned low in her throat. “I’d like that if... if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I want us to be a couple.”

“Me too.”

Then he began to move and drive her crazy. Something was different. The fast desperation was gone. He moved within her slowly, caressing her inside and out. His hand cupped her sex and stroked her clitoris gently, then moved to caress her breasts, tease her nipples. His lips played along her neck as he murmured softly in her ear, his words and breath whispering over her, “So beautiful...make me so hot...want to make love all day...drives me crazy.”

Most of what he said didn’t make sense, but she didn’t care. The sound of his voice and the feel of his cock inside her, caressing her, was enough.

She squirmed, trying to increase the maddening pace, but he grasped her hips and kept tormenting her, stroke after slow stroke. She could feel every vein, every ridge of his penis as he lazily moved within her. His

tortured gasps against her neck and his thickening cock told her he was close to losing it, but still he continued the unhurried mating.

His hand slid down to her pussy again to tease her hard little nub. He rubbed the sensitive skin surrounding her clit, making it peek out from the outer hood. He kept the slow pace, but began to thrust harder, deeper with each stroke. Her pussy contracted around his growing length. Both groaned.

Mac rolled the tiny nub between his thumb and forefinger. Wet fire swept through her pussy, drenched his cock. He rammed into her, again and again until his semen propelled into her with such force she cried out. Sweet spasms racked her pussy and continued to creep up into her belly. She pushed her ass back against his hips to keep his cock buried inside her.

He wrapped his arm tightly around her waist and held her.

“Can we wake up like this every morning?” he whispered.

Darcy burst out laughing. “Yes, please.”

* * *

Mac unlocked the door and walked quietly into the dark house. He needed to see her, be with her. The damn hold Darcy had on his body, on his being unnerved him to no end, but he couldn't shake it.

She'd decided to stay at her parents' as it was the night before the party and she wanted to be there if she was needed. But that didn't mean he couldn't pay her a little visit. It sure was awfully handy he had the key to her parents' house.

He crept silently downstairs to her room. A sliver of light shone under her closed door. Maybe she hadn't gone to bed yet. Turning the knob, he pushed into the room. His breath left him. God, she was beautiful.

She slept, sheet pulled to her waist. Her hand lay next to her face, curled in a loose fist. Hair haloed around her, curls floating over the pillow, over her shoulders. One curl encircled her breast, highlighting the

dusky nipple shadowed through the thin white chemise. Up the smooth column of her throat, he drank in her features.

He reached behind him, shut and locked the bedroom door before striding to the bedside. With the back of his fingers, he stroked her cheek. Bending at the waist, he pressed his lips along the path his fingers had traveled. Her eyes flew open, and she met his gaze.

“What are you doing?” Her whisper danced over his face, a warm fleeting caress.

“I need you, Darc.”

And he did. Immense need flooded through his veins, heating his body to an excruciating degree. His cock swelled as her eyes clouded with knowledge and desire. He groaned when she shifted, pulled the sheet back and opened her arms. He kicked his shoes off, and shrugged out of his clothes and tumbled into bed.

His mouth tasted, nibbled on her sweetness. Her head fell back and her hands tightened on his shoulders. He pressed her back into the mattress and pulled her panties off. His fingers combed through the curls at the apex of her thighs. With a sigh, she allowed her knees to fall open, baring her pussy to his touch.

He plunged his fingers into her, finding her hot and wet for him. She pushed against him until his fingers were lost within her. Her juices surrounded and soaked his hand with warmth. He knelt between her thighs and positioned his penis to take the place of his hand. Pulling his fingers from her heat, he prepared to thrust into her. The swollen tip of his cock danced in the entrance of her pussy.

“Wait.” She pushed against his shoulders.

“What?” he bit out. He wanted to sink into her, feel her heat, her wetness surround his hard shaft.

“Can I be on top this time?”

Her voice was so soft he barely heard her. But he did, and his cock jumped in agreement with her request, so he had no choice but to listen.

“Sure, baby, if you want.”

He shifted away and lay down on his back. She quickly scrambled to straddle his hips. Her damp curls and pussy lips nuzzled against the hardness of his cock. A groan burst from his mouth. She was going to kill him. But what a great way to go.

She leaned forward and reached between them to grasp him. Her hair fell in waves around his head, tickling his shoulders. He inhaled deeply. Ah yes, strawberries. He reached up and ran his hand through the silky tresses. She glanced at him with a frown.

“Tell me if I do anything wrong, okay?”

Mac laughed, then groaned as the movement caused the head of his cock to slip just inside her heat. Sweet fire licking him, teasing him.

“Oh, baby, I don’t think there’s much you could do wrong at this point.”

A smile kissed her lips and she pressed down, her pussy pulling him inside its tightness. Their moans mingled as his cock impaled her. She straightened, her ass cheeks pressing against his upper thighs, and threw her hair over her shoulders to trail down her back. Instead of closing his eyes as pleasure swept over and through him, Mac watched as Darcy began to move. Using her legs, she rode him. Her pussy squeezed him relentlessly as she moved up and down on his erection.

Knowing he wouldn’t last long, he cupped the mound between her legs and stroked her clit with his thumb. Her pussy clenched his cock tightly.

“God, you’re so damned responsive, Darc.”

He ran his other hand up her belly to cup her breast. Rolling the pert nipple between his thumb and forefinger, he watched as it tightened further. She arched her back and pushed into his hand as she continued to pleasure him.

His sac tightened and pulled close to his body. God, he wouldn’t last much longer. What this woman did to him! He was like a damned teenager with her. How appropriate. He’d had wet dreams about her since he was one.

Increasing the pressure and spread of his caresses on her clit, he listened to her moans and small cries. She wasn't far from coming herself. He tensed the muscles of his ass and pushed his hips up to meet her thrusts. A sob caught in her throat. His hand left her breast to dive into her hair. Fisting it, he pulled her forward to capture her lips, to slide his tongue in to mate with hers. He reached both hands around her and grasped her ass, helping her keep up with his pistoning hips.

He continued to pump his cock into her hot pussy with hard, measured strokes. Her pussy convulsed around his cock, pulling his orgasm out with its own. His erection lengthened, thickened in pained ecstasy. He thrust hard, shooting his seed into her. He drove into her hard once, twice, then stilled.

She collapsed against his chest, her hair floating around both of them. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight.

"I'm glad you came," she whispered with a giggle.

Running a hand up and down her spine, he answered, "So am I, baby. So am I."

He wasn't going to let her go. Ever.

Chapter Eleven

The doorbell rang, catching Darcy as she exited the bathroom after her shower. She didn't have time to dawdle. She had to be ready to bring her parents to the hall for their anniversary party. Her hair, makeup and nails still needed to be done. Then she had to dress. She tightened the belt of her robe and sprinted upstairs to the door.

"Darcy, could you get that? I'm not dressed." Her mother popped her head out of her bedroom.

"Yeah, I got it."

She yanked the door open to find a man with a clipboard and small package.

"I'm looking for a Ms. Darcy Philips."

"That would be me."

"Could you sign by the X, ma'am?" He held out the clipboard.

She took the pen clipped to it and scrawled her name.

"Here you go." He handed her the package and turned to walk away.

"Thank you," she called after him before closing the door.

She ambled downstairs, toying with the packaging paper. Once in her room, she sat at the edge of her bed and tore into it. Her breath hissed out when she saw the name of her favorite jewelers embossed on the velvet box.

Slowly, she opened the box and sighed in pleasure. A copper choker rested on the silk. Made from a series of thin square pieces, it swirled with color. From fire enameling, she guessed. Each square had a sunburst etched into the surface. She ran her fingers along the smooth surface of one.

Who sent it? No card was enclosed. She held back hope Mac sent it. He could have, she supposed, but every other mysterious gift that had shown up could be attributed to Richard. Why would the choker be any different? It was beautiful, just the sort of piece she'd choose for herself. It could be from Mac. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility. She'd wear it tonight, a nice contrast to her gown. Surely if Mac had sent it, he'd say something.

She laid the box on the bedside table and stood. Now, it was time to get ready.

The next hour or so, she did her makeup and fiddled with her hair, finally deciding to leave it down. She quickly did her nails and sat back down on her bed, blowing on them periodically. She checked. Yep, they were dry. Now she just had to dress.

"How do I look?"

Darcy glanced up at her mother's voice. The older woman stood in the doorway to her daughter's room, patting her carefully styled hair. She was all decked out for the party. A silk ivory dress draped her body and fell to her ankles. A beaded jacket rounded out the ensemble.

"Mom, you look great. Absolutely beautiful. Dad's going to pass out when he gets a load of you. Where's your corsage?"

"In the refrigerator. I didn't want it to wilt in the heat. Do you think I'll be too warm in this jacket?"

"No, the hall's air conditioned. I'm even bringing a wrap. Remember the time we went to that wedding reception there? We froze while it was nearly a hundred outside."

"That's right. I remember now. Shouldn't you be getting dressed?" Her mother nodded toward the robe she wore.

"I have time. I wanted my nails to dry first. Are you excited? Antsy for the second honeymoon?" She wiggled her eyebrows and laughed. "Why, Mom, you're blushing. Don't worry, I figured out a long time ago that you and Dad had sex. At least once anyway."

"Yes, well, it isn't something I care to discuss with my daughter."

“Okay, okay. Have a good time though. The cruise sounds heavenly.” She crossed the room and drew her mother into a tight hug, careful not to smudge the light dress with her makeup.

“It does, doesn’t it? I was so surprised when your father bought the tickets. He never wants to go anywhere!”

“He knew how much you would love it. Nice to know a man knows what you want after forty years, isn’t it?”

Darcy pulled away, strode to the closet and withdrew a garment bag.

“Yes, dear, he definitely knows me well.” She heaved a hefty sigh. “I just wish you had someone, honey. It’s a shame things didn’t work out between you and Richard. There’s no hope for a reconciliation at all?”

“Nope.” Temptation to tell her mother about her and Mac swelled, but she bit it back. They’d agreed to tell both sets of parents together. It’d save them the trouble of figuring out who to tell first and having to repeat it over and over. And knowing their mothers, the two women would be running to tell the other anyway, so this eliminated the need.

“Oh well, I suppose it’s for the best if you weren’t happy, but I do worry about you, dear.” A frown flirted across her mother’s mouth.

“I know. You don’t need to. I’m perfectly happy right now.” *You will be, too, when you hear later.*

“I’ll leave you to get ready. I need to prod your dad along. The man honestly takes forever.”

Darcy chuckled. Her father had likely been ready and waiting long before her mother even started. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Slipping her robe off, she stood in only panties, garter and stockings, and strapless bra. She’d chosen the black lace lingerie with Mac in mind. An enormous amount had been charged to her credit card for merely underwear, but it’d be worth it. She wanted to knock his socks off.

With a smile, she opened the garment bag and pulled the long, deep emerald green gown out. She removed it from the hanger and lowered its zipper. Carefully sliding it over her head and into place, Darcy reached behind her to zip it up. Damn, she couldn’t reach it. Twisting a different way, she wiggled her fingers trying to catch the zipper. Unsuccessfully.

“Can I help you with that, sexy woman?”

She spun around to face a grinning Mac. *Oh my*. Dressed in a tux, he stole her breath. She drank in the sight of him, head to his shiny shoes. She licked her lips and recovered her voice. “What are you doing here? I thought you were riding with your parents.”

“I am. It’s just next door, Darc. I snuck in to see how you were doing.” He walked to her and slid his arms around her waist. His lips found her neck and he murmured against her skin, “How are ya?”

“Hmmm.” She ran her palms along his back. “I’m good, but will be even better when this is over, and we go to your place.”

She almost groaned in disappointment when he pulled her zipper up. He stepped back and let his gaze caress her. “Damn, you look hot, baby.” He leaned over and captured her mouth, sweeping his tongue in and around hers.

Heat coiled in Darcy’s stomach and slithered down between her legs. She gripped his shoulders and deepened the kiss.

“Hmmm.” He broke away and turned her around to look at the mirror. “Look at you. Good enough to eat.” Arms around her waist, he bent his head to nibble on her neck. Her knees buckled as his tongue darted across her heated skin. Lifting his head, he grinned at her image in the mirror.

“That’s it, Darc, that’s the look I was talking about. Haunts my dreams.”

She studied her reflection. Her kiss-swollen lips were parted. Her face flushed and eyes peering out from under heavy lids. She actually looked sexy, she realized with a start.

“Aha, you finally see it, don’t you?” He grasped her chin and turned her head to plant a hard kiss on her mouth. “I’d better go. Mom and Dad’ll be wondering where I am. See ya there, gorgeous.”

He winked and strode out.

She stared after him for a moment before shaking herself out of her stupor. Turning back toward the mirror, she checked herself out again. Not half bad. The dress clung in all the right places, curving along her

hips and falling to her ankles. The bodice was fitted, and for once, she looked like she had some breasts. Thank you, Wonderbra. Her hair flowed over her shoulders in a mass of waves. She took the copper etched choker and clasped it around her neck. Walking to where her heels lay next to the door, she slipped into them. There, she was ready.

Rounding up her mother and father took a bit of time, but soon they arrived at the banquet hall.

"Oh, look at the flowers, Darcy!" her mother exclaimed when they walked in. "Oh my, look at all the beautiful decorations. Did you and Sue do all this?"

"Well, we had a bit of help from Mac and Uncle Dave." She smiled and gave her a big hug. "Happy Anniversary, Mom. Dad." She moved over to embrace her father.

"Thank you, sweetheart."

She watched them bustle off to see their best friends.

"Hey, you."

Mac grabbed her around the waist and yanked her against him, her back against his front. She hugged her arms over his to hold him closer.

"Hey back. Gosh, a lot of people have shown up already. We still have to get the parents alone to tell them... you know, about us."

"We have time. You nervous?" He nudged her hair aside and kissed her behind her ear.

"No, just wondering how they'll react."

"Darcy!"

Mac released her at the sound of her name being called out. Both turned toward the voice.

Oh, this was peachy. "Harris, what a surprise." She darted a glance up at Mac.

"Harris?" He narrowed his eyes as he observed the man approaching them.

"Mac," she murmured and took his hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Darcy, I just wanted to say hello before we went to give our congratulations to your parents.”

“It’s good to see you. Harris, this is Thomas MacAllister. Mac, this is Harris... I’m sorry, I don’t even know your last name.” She shot him an embarrassed smile.

“Johnson.” He offered Mac his hand. “So this is your other half? Glad to see you patched things up. Speaking of, this is Katrina, my fiancée.”

Darcy gaze swung to the right and took in the small brunette who stepped forward.

“Nice to meet you.” She had a quiet voice and shook hands with both Mac and Darcy.

The two couples chatted a bit and parted ways.

“So that was the date, huh?” Mac held her hand, rubbed his thumb along the back.

“I told you it wasn’t a date. Really, the man had his fiancée with him, for crying out loud.”

He burst out laughing. “I was kidding, Darc. They looked real happy, didn’t they?”

She shoved his arm. “Yeah, they did. It’ll break my mom’s heart. Until we tell her about us, that is.”

Then she saw them. “Oh God, no.”

“What?”

“Damn it. She must have invited all of them. What is wrong with the woman?”

“All of who?” Mac’s head whipped around, trying to figure out who she was talking about.

“The guys she set me up with.” She gestured to where her mother chatted with both her would be suitors. “God, I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t invite them.”

“I know, but still, it’s awkward.”

“For them.” He shrugged. “I don’t feel awkward at all. I got you, after all.”

She chuckled. "Well, be nice."

Stuart approached them first. He did more justice to the suit than the goofy golf clothes. She knew he realized Mac was the man she had referred to when she refused his invitation to dinner. It went surprisingly well. Both men chatted, discussed of all things, golf. Her attention wandered when they began talking par this and birdie that.

"Darcy. Good to see you again."

Oh, damn. Did she have to deal with all her mother's son-in-law candidates one after another?

She plastered on a smile, determined not to be rude to the guests no matter why they were invited.

"Hello, Darren."

Maybe if she didn't say anything more he'd go away. She glanced around the room, taking in the decorations and the people visiting and greeting the happy couple. She shifted her gaze in his direction. Nope, saying nothing didn't appear to be working. He'd actually scooted closer to her, and, good God, he was staring at her boobs again!

Ready to blurt out something nasty, she bit her tongue as Mac's arms slid around her waist.

"Who is this, sweetheart?"

Darcy smiled at the subtle edge of his voice. "Mac, meet Darren Sinclair. Darren, this is Thomas MacAllister."

At least he stopped ogling her chest. Instead, his gaze bounced between her and Mac. His mouth opened and shut several times, giving the impression of a large fish, before he found his voice.

"I don't understand, Darcy. Your mother said you weren't involved with anyone. Just now, she..."

"She was mistaken."

Darren jumped at the steely voice. He nodded at Mac and, without another word, scurried away.

"Was he the one who put his hands on you?"

“Does it matter? You scared the piss out of him, you territorial bugger.”

“And does that bother you?” He raised an eyebrow as he stared down at her.

“Absolutely not. Kinda turns me on actually.” She stepped out of his embrace and sauntered away, feeling his gaze on her swinging hips and ass the whole way across the room.

Unable to resist, she snuck a peek over her shoulder. He stood where she had left him, legs braced in a wide stance, hands in pockets. He simply watched her, not caring who noticed.

Goose bumps erupted over her body, and a tiny pulse fluttered between her legs. He cared enough about her to be possessive. Not obsessively so, but enough to show she meant something to him.

The next while, she spent kissing cheeks and returning hugs. Her parents’ friends and relatives had come en masse to celebrate the couple’s marriage. Darcy didn’t think she knew half of them, but they kept coming to exclaim at how much she’d changed and on and on.

She searched for Mac in the crowd often enough. He wandered the room, visiting here and there. Each time she found him, within moments his gaze collided with hers. Almost as if he felt it. She wanted to go to him, but found herself waylaid every time she tried. He managed to sneak a brush of the hand, a whisper in her ear, a kiss on the neck in passing now and again. But she wanted more. She wanted to be with him. Needed to be.

Withdrawing from the small group gathered around, she sought Mac throughout the room. There he was. He sat watching couples dance on the small floor set up for it. She started in his direction.

As if on cue, he turned his head toward her. Never breaking eye contact, he stood and walked her way. Once in front of each other, he reached for her hand. Shocks shot up her arms as he squeezed her fingers.

“Hey, you.”

Oh my. His husky voice jumpstarted the tiny pulse between her legs. Would she always be like a randy teenager around him? Did she care?

"Hey back."

"Wanna dance?"

"Oh yeah."

He led her to the dance floor and ran his hands along her waist to rest on the soft upper curve of her ass. She wrapped her arms around his neck, sighing as her fingers slipped through the curls teasing his collar. This was where she wanted to be, with him. Only him.

She tightened her hold and pulled in close to him. Her heels put her at just the right height to press her face in his neck and inhale his scent, mingled with that of his crisp, fresh cologne. It surrounded her, invaded her senses and intoxicated her.

Heat rushed over her pussy; the soft folds swelled and softened, became slick. His hands ran up and down her back, fingers caressing the smooth skin. She closed her eyes and imagined those fingers stroking between her legs, teasing her clit, dipping inside her. With a groan, she wet her dry lips.

"What's the matter, baby?" he whispered.

"Hmm, nothing. Just wishing we could leave."

"Soon. Crowd's starting to thin out."

"Good. I want you, Mac." Her voice broke.

"I want you, too, Darc. So much."

He tightened his hold on her. His erection pushed against her lower belly. He had quite an impressive hard-on. It wasn't just her! Her pussy contracted, anticipation curling up into her abdomen.

"Uh oh." Amusement coated Mac's voice.

Darcy opened her eyes and lifted her head. "Uh oh what?"

What was the man grinning at?

"Prepare yourself, love. Our mothers have spotted us."

He called her love. She stared at him. What did that mean? Anything? Did she dare read anything into it? It was just one word after all. She should— “Our mothers?”

“Yep, right behind you. They’re whispering and pointing at us as we speak.”

She unwound her arms from his neck and twisted around to look. Accidentally, she ground against his cock. He grunted and grabbed her hips.

“Whoops, sorry.”

Still peering over her shoulder, she spied the older women. Sure enough, their heads were together and they were gaping at the dancing couple. With a grimace, she turned back around and placed her hands on Mac’s shoulders.

“Geez, you’d think they’d never seen people dance before.” She rolled her eyes.

“Well, they’ve never seen us dancing like this. Like a couple.”

Oh. “That’s true.”

“We were going to tell them anyway. They’re getting the picture, and now all we have to do is confirm it.”

“Makes it easy, doesn’t it?”

“Yep. Wanna go do it now? Put them out of their misery?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Okay, but let them sweat a few more minutes. I have to go the ladies’ room.”

Leaning up, she pressed her lips to his. He sucked in a startled breath, but recovered quickly enough to return the kiss properly. His tongue traced her lips before delving into her mouth. A quick dance of the tongues and he pulled away.

“I’ll be right back,” she promised before dashing off.

Once in the hall, she slowed down. She didn’t really have to go, but she wanted just a moment to collect her thoughts. They swirled a bit too much around sex to go talk to her mother right at that moment. Patting

her hands against her warm cheeks, she walked toward the bathrooms. A makeup check was probably in order.

“Darcy!”

She froze. No, no, no. It couldn’t be. Not him.

“Darcy, honey, I’m so glad I found you. This place is so crowded.”

Oh God, it was him. She slowly turned toward the voice as her heart stuttered.

“What in hell are you doing here?”

Richard Norton rushed forward to grasp her hands. She yanked them away and backed up a step.

“Answer me! What do you think you’re doing? You cannot be here. Leave.”

“Honey, you have to listen to me. How many times to I have to say I’m sorry? I made a mistake. It’ll never happen again. Come home.”

She would not cry. Dammit, he would not make her break down. Not again.

“You couldn’t say sorry enough times to make me come back. We’re finished. Done. Over.” She controlled herself enough not to shout, barely.

“Please give it another shot. You don’t know what hell it’s been since you left. I’m lost without you, honey.”

“You should have thought about that before you put your dick into other women, Richard,” she hissed.

She thought she saw anger flash in his brown eyes before it was swept away by earnestness.

“There’s been no one else since you left. I’ve changed, really. I need you, Darcy. I love you. Please, it’ll be better, I promise. We’ll get married, and I’ll make you full partner at the gallery. We’ll reopen with a special showing for you. It’ll—”

“Reopen?” she repeated weakly.

He waved the question away. “I’ve had to close temporarily. Some minor problems with sales, but once you’re home, I’ll take care of that.”

"You son of a bitch." Anger surged up within her. Hands fisted at her sides, she stepped forward. "It's not me you want. It's my money and my work."

He shook his head. "That's not true."

"Shut up! Do you think I'm stupid?" She didn't hold back the shout this time. Her voice rang through the hallway. She reached to her neck and yanked the choker off, breaking the clasp. It hit him in the chest. "Don't call me. Don't send me gifts. I'm not going to tie myself or my work to a lying, cheating—"

He grabbed her by the arms and shook hard. "Now listen, you cold bitch, you owe me! I made your fucking career. Without me, you're nothing. I'll ruin you."

Fear spread through her. He wouldn't hurt her, would he? She'd never considered the fact he might physically harm her. Her hands shook as she tried to push him away.

"Just leave, Richard. Go away. It's over." She struggled to keep her voice steady. And failed miserably.

"It's not over. It can't be—"

"Get your hands off her."

Mac's voice, low and furious, had instant results. Richard released her and spun around.

"Mac, go back in. Richard was just leaving. It's over," she repeated to Richard as she stepped between the two men.

"The hell it is," Mac hissed.

"Go away, MacAllister, this is between me and my fiancée."

"Doesn't look like she wants to be with you, Norton. So leave." Mac stepped forward.

A crowd gathered around, curiosity written on every face. Darcy's stomach clenched. The last thing she wanted right now was a big scene.

"What if I don't? You gonna make me, tough man?"

“Stop, both of you. Richard, I think I made it clear it’s over. Leave.” She turned toward Mac and lowered her voice. “Please, just drop this. He’s not worth it. Come back inside with me. Please.”

She looked around and saw her mother standing on the edge of the group, eyes wide, mouth gaping. Desperate to put an end to the little scene, Darcy took a step towards the banquet room and looked around the group of people. “Come on, everyone. Party’s in here.”

Richard seized the opportunity to move closer to Mac. “You don’t have the balls. You didn’t have the balls to get Darcy all these years, and you sure as hell don’t have them now to keep us apart.”

Darcy froze, her gaze on Mac’s face. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed.

“Screw you.”

Mac lunged forward. His fist shot forward, connected with his rival’s nose. Blood spurted profusely on both men’s shirts. Darcy tried to rush to them, but a hand held her back. She spun around. Her father gripped her arm, but his eyes were on the two men now grappling on the floor. Why wasn’t he trying to stop them?

With little effort, Mac flipped Richard on his back, straddled his chest and pounded his fists into his face. The other man didn’t even have a chance to return any of the hits.

“Mac, please!” Darcy cried out, pulling against her father’s grip.

He stopped and glanced at her. She met his gaze for a moment, silently begging him stop. She held her breath as he grabbed Richard by the front of the shirt and pulled until their faces were inches apart.

“Get out and stay the fuck away from her. She’s mine.”

Darcy’s eyes widened at Mac’s claim. Two men, she thought they were cousins, yanked Richard up by the arms and dragged him from the building. Mac watched, bleeding and breathing heavy.

Her father released her arm, stepped forward and addressed the crowd, “Well, that was entertaining! Let’s all go have a drink.”

Darcy observed, open mouthed, as he walked up to Mac, patted him on the arm and said, “Way to go, son.”

With that, the older man took his wife’s hand and walked back into the banquet hall.

Way to go? That was it? Darcy glanced around at the lingering group. She felt her cheeks heat under all the stares. More than a few people spoke in hushed tones and gestured toward her.

Mac turned toward her, hand held out.

She crossed her arms over her chest. More than happy to focus on the anger, rather than the fear Richard had caused and the embarrassment as people continued to watch. “What the hell was that?”

Confusion mingled with the pain clouding his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I asked you to let it go. To walk away. Why couldn’t you just do that? I was handling it.”

“Oh yeah, it sure looked that way to me.”

“There wasn’t a need to make a big scene, Mac. I *was* handling it. I’m not a little girl who needs a man to claim her. I can take care of myself. I don’t need you.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I can see that.”

Darcy spun around and walked the length of the corridor. She stopped abruptly. God, what was she doing? Why was she letting Richard get to her like this? She wasn’t mad at *Mac*. He wasn’t the one who had caused a scene. Richard was. And she did need Mac. Not to take care of her, but to be with her. She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Look, I’m sor—”

Her words died in her throat as she turned back.

He was gone.

Chapter Twelve

“Why didn’t you tell me you and Thomas were seeing each other?”

Darcy looked up from her coffee as her mother entered the kitchen and commandeered the seat next to her.

“We planned to last night, but... Well, you know. Now we’re not.”

She battled the tears back. Since Mac had walked out of the party, she hadn’t seen or talked to him. She just couldn’t work up the nerve to call him, and she didn’t expect him to call anytime soon.

How could he just walk away? *Because you treated him like shit when he just trying to protect you.* She couldn’t even blame him for leaving. She overreacted and lashed out at him. But damn, it hurt. Worse than when she had found Richard with the bimbos.

“Did you call him?” her mother inquired.

“No. It’s over, Mom.” She shrugged.

“Are you trying to see where he was coming from?”

“Yes. I understand his side. It doesn’t change anything, though.”

“Really, Darcy. How would you feel if you walked in on one of his exes all over him, being pushy?” she persisted.

“I said I get it, okay? But if he had asked me to step back, I would have.”

Her mother arched a brow. “You would, huh?”

Probably not, but that hardly mattered now. “I’m not calling him. At least not yet. Heck, I don’t know if ever. I’ve been thinking about it. Maybe it isn’t meant to be. And it isn’t just about last night, Mom. I explained earlier, we fight all the time.”

“From what you told me, Thomas was upset about the young men I brought home. Imagine what you would have felt like if you thought he was out on a date.”

“Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but it’s over. I messed things up, and he walked away... And I don’t blame him,” she added when her mother opened her mouth. “But it doesn’t bode well for the whole working things out. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go work on my lesson plans, and if I’m not mistaken, you need to get ready to head to the airport.” She stood, kissed her mother’s cheek and headed for the door. “Have a wonderful time on your cruise. Don’t worry, I’ll hold down the fort.”

Several hours later, after hugs and kisses goodbye, Darcy strode into her room. Her easel was set up in the corner holding a nearly finished painting. She approached it and studied it for a moment before preparing her palette and brushes. She was glutton for punishment, that much was clear. It was of her and Mac. She couldn’t get the images Mac had described that day on the beach out of her head, so here she was obsessing over a painting she had no intention of ever seeing the light of day.

Her bare toes curled into the tarp that protected the carpet and she began to attack the canvas. Mac lay on the bed with her straddling his hips. His hands on her breasts, hers covering them. She captured the look of pleasure on his face, but she was unsure about hers. She went from the memory of her reflection the night before. The kiss-swollen lips, heavy eyes, flushed cheeks. Her head tilted back and her hair trailing down her body, brushing the tops of Mac’s thighs.

She fussed with the painting for over an hour before being satisfied with it. Tears trailed down her face as she stared at the finished image. Dammit all, why’d she have to be such a bitch to him? Why did she have to fall in love with him? Trying to drive him out of her mind, she cleaned up her supplies and took a hot shower. After dressing, she sat on her bed and focused her gaze on the passionate picture.

She didn’t even know what she was going to do with it.

“Idiot,” she whispered, unsure whether she referred to Mac or herself.

Curling into a ball, she pulled the covers up to her chin. Losing the man she loved and her best friend gutted her. She felt so damned empty. Even in those years they hadn’t seen each other, she’d always felt safe and comforted by the fact that she could turn to him if she needed to. Now she didn’t even have that. Squeezing her eyes shut, she finally allowed the good cry she’d been denying herself to consume her.

* * *

The next day, Darcy walked around in a daze. She’d barely slept the night before, plagued with questions of what to do. After hours of soul searching, she didn’t have any more answers than when she’d started.

She wandered into the kitchen and grabbed a soda before heading downstairs. Sitting on the sofa, she stared at the table in front of her. Her lesson plans and tentative syllabus cluttered the surface, still to be worked on. She couldn’t seem to concentrate. Exhaustion swept over her. Maybe she was tired enough to sleep now. A nap might revive her enough to actually get some work done.

She settled back into the couch cushions and closed her eyes. Pushing thoughts of Mac away, she forced herself to relax. Floating in the hazy calm between sleep and awake, she thought she might actually fall asleep. Suddenly a roar filled her ears.

What was that? She sat up and had to rub her eyes to make sure she wasn’t seeing things. It was the lawnmower—more specifically it was Mac pushing the lawnmower.

Damn it, that’s what started this whole mess to begin with, him pushing that stinking thing, getting all hot and sweating.

She jumped up and walked outside. Standing in the path of the mower, she forced him to stop. He just stared at her.

“Turn it off,” she yelled over the noise.

“What?”

He cupped a hand around his ear. Like he didn't hear her. Right.

"Turn the thing off!" She motioned to the handle he held with one hand. "Off!"

Silence surrounded them until they both spoke.

"What is—"

"What are—"

"Go ahead," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"Taking care of the lawn like I do every week. Got a problem with that?"

"Yeah. I'm here, so I'll do it. Go away, Mac." Her voice cracked.

"Go inside, Darc. I'm going to finish what I started."

"Well, that'd be a first," she muttered and spun on her heel. *Turn around and talk to him, you idiot.* Tears blurred her vision

She was halfway to the house when he grabbed her arm. Turning her to face him, he leaned down until his nose almost touched hers. "Explain that remark, please."

With a shrug, she stated, "Well, you started a relationship with me. Or at least I thought we decided to start one."

"I'm not done with you, Darc. Or our relationship."

She didn't dare give in to the spark of hope. "Oh, really? Well, *you* walked away."

With a jerk, he released her arm. He strode a couple steps away before turning back towards her, eyes blazing. "Damn it, I'm not going to grovel. Not even for you."

"I never asked you to."

"Not in words. What was I supposed to do, Darc? He was getting physically aggressive. Who's to say what he would have done if I hadn't come in."

Her eyes stung. "Mac, I..." Her throat tightened, cutting off her words. She could only stare at him.

"I won't apologize for going after him. If I had to do it again, I'd do the same thing. I love you. I'd beat the shit out of any man who hurt you. Though I won't deny it felt good to kick the snuff out of that creep."

She couldn't breathe. Her head spun. He hadn't really said that, had he? "What did you say?"

He looked puzzled. "I'd do it again?"

"No, after that. You...you said you loved me." It felt like the bottom of her stomach had fallen out. "D-d-did you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. How could you doubt that?"

She couldn't form a complete thought, let alone a sentence. He stepped directly in front of her, cupped her face.

"I never told you, did I? God, baby, I'm sorry. I love you." He leaned forward and kissed her gently, a whisper over her lips, teasing her senses.

"You love me? Then why did you leave like that?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "That was stupid, but I just needed some time. I should have stayed. I'm sorry. I was going to call today, then your mom called about the lawn." He shrugged. "I figured it'd be easier to persuade you in person."

"Persuade me to what?"

"To not give up on us."

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against him. His mouth covered hers as his hands roamed her back. His tongue slid inside, silkily caressing.

She curled her hands in his hair and pulled his head away from her. She waited until his gaze met hers before saying, "I love you, and I'm sorry."

Emotion clouded his eyes. "Sorry for what?"

"Overreacting. I was pissed at Richard and embarrassed. I shouldn't've taken it out on you. Though I can take care of myself, ya know?" she teased.

He laughed. "Yeah, but I like doing it. As for overreacting, we're even, I guess."

"Guess so. Now kiss me again, Mac."

"Yes, ma'am."

He scooped her up in his arms. His pace quick, he walked inside the house to her bedroom. He released her onto the bed, letting her bounce on the mattress. Darcy watched as he yanked his T-shirt over his head. He froze as he stared across the room. The shirt slid from his fingers onto the floor.

"God, would you look at that."

He strode around the bed and stood directly in front of the painting of the two of them. Darcy bit her lip and got off of the bed. Coming up behind him, she touched him on the shoulder.

"Do you like it?"

He turned to her, a wide grin on his face. "Like it? Darc, I love it. It's perfect. Just as I imagined it. You have such a gift. It amazes me every time I see your work."

"I had a wonderful source of inspiration."

"Even when you were pissed at me?" he teased.

"Even then," she quipped. "Didn't mean I stopped loving you."

Her grabbed and pulled her into his arms. "I'll never get tired of hearing you say that."

"Good." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "I don't plan on stopping anytime soon."

"Now," he reached between them for the button of her shorts, "I believe you requested a kiss. Where do you want me to kiss you, love?"

She laughed. "I have to pick? Everywhere."

"Done."

He backed her up until her knees hit the mattress and she fell back with a laugh. He lifted her shirt and lowered his mouth to her stomach, caressing with his lips and tongue as he slid the shorts then her panties down her legs. He paused in his assault to pull her shirt up and over her

head. When she lay naked before him, he grinned wickedly and ran his hands up from her ankles to her thighs. Fire ignited inside her, sparking between her legs and spreading rapidly. Consumed, she undid his jeans and pushed them and his shorts down. He shifted and kicked them off.

She rose to her knees and patted the bed beside her. "Lie down."

He stretched out and she straddled one of his hard legs. The coarse hair tickled the soft, silky folds of her pussy. Slivers of pleasure embedded themselves within her, pushing deeper and deeper.

Grasping his stiff cock, she ran her tongue around the smooth tip before taking it into her mouth. His gasp caressed her senses, pushed her to continue taking the length of him into her mouth. Pulling up slowly, she licked along the ridged underside of his penis and savored the feel of him, the taste and smell of him. Her pussy contracted deliciously each time she stroked Mac's cock with her mouth. Rocking back and forth, her clit rubbed against his leg over and over, the coarse hair teasing her aroused flesh. He pressed his leg up against her, increasing the pressure, the intensity.

"Stop, baby, stop. C'mere." Mac pulled her up the length of his body until she was sprawled on top of him, then flipped her onto her back.

He settled between her thighs and kissed the inside of one. Combing his fingers through the curls sheltering her sex, he dipped one in her pussy and brought it to his mouth. Her belly tightened with a clenching heat as he licked her juices off and slid the finger deep inside her again. Leaning forward, he flicked his tongue over her clit. Waves of pleasure rolled over her, threatened to pull her under. Muscles tightened as he slid another finger into her pussy. He used his thumb to stroke the sensitive, responsive skin of her perineum and over the puckered opening of her anus.

She cried out. Her pussy convulsed around his fingers, her juices flooding over them. He straightened until he was kneeling. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he turned her onto her knees before him. Nudging her legs open with his, he positioned his cock at her opening. She wiggled and pushed back against him.

He surged forward, his cock sliding home in one rough stroke. Leaning forward slightly, he reached around to cup her breasts. His fingers worked her nipples, pinching and gently tugging the tight crowns. Each tug, each nip of his fingers sent flames of ecstasy coursing through her to center in the tiny nub nestled within the folds of her pussy.

His cock swelled and lengthened within her. She frantically pressed back to take him deeper. He ran his hands down her body to grasp her hips and pulled her harder onto his shaft, thrust after thrust. His cock jerked and he cried out. He reached around her and tweaked her clit between his thumb and index finger.

“I love you, baby.”

His voice was harsh as her pussy tightened and convulsed around him. She grasped the headboard, cheek flattened against it, eyes closed. Colors exploded behind her lids as every muscle in her body tensed for the onslaught of sensation. Waves of pleasure cascaded over her body like warm honey.

He thrust into her a final time and held her tightly against him, an arm around her waist. After a minute, he pressed a kiss to the small of her back and released his hold.

As soon as her rebelling muscles allowed, Darcy shifted and rested on her side. Mac lay behind her and pulled her close. He kissed her neck, her cheeks and face until she turned to kiss him fully.

“I love you,” she whispered against his mouth. A thrill ignited in her at being able to say words.

“I love you.”

A comfortable silence settled over them. Sunlight streamed in, falling across and warming their legs. She shifted and stretched in the warmth.

“Darc?”

“Hmm.”

She turned and watched as he pulled away and reached for his jeans. Instead of pulling them on like she expected, he rummaged through the pocket.

"I think this belongs to you. It took me a long time to find the perfect one, and I want you to have it."

He held his hand out to her. The copper choker she had hurled at Richard dangled from his fingers, the clasp repaired.

"You sent this? I thought it was him." Her eyes widened as she thought of the gifts that had arrived during the last week. "And the roses and the sketch?"

He nodded. She leaned over and pressed her face to his chest. Her voice was muffled as she bemoaned, "And I threw it in your face that you'd never bought me anything or showed me you cared. Oh, Mac, I'm sorry!"

"That's okay, baby. I should've been a bit more obvious about the whole thing. Now," he paused to pull her from him and place the choker around her neck, "let me take a look. Ah, just how I imagined it. You wearing this and nothing else. Perfect."

He moved in for a kiss, his lips sliding along hers in a wet caress.

"Oh, one more thing, Darc." His words whispered across her mouth.

"What's that?"

Her arms wound around his neck as she straddled him.

"My lease is up for my apartment."

"Uh huh." Where was this going?

"I'm thinking I need a change"

She grinned in understanding. "I might know of someone who's looking for a roommate. You interested?"

"Hmm, well, I don't know. It'll all depend. Is this roommate female?"

"Uh huh."

"Is she cute? She's gotta be cute."

With a snort, she pinched his side. "And what do you consider cute?"

"Oh, I like long, reddish brown curls. Oh, she'd have to use this nice smelling strawberry shampoo. That's a must. Green eyes and a tight, sexy body."

She sighed playfully. "Sorry. Don't know anyone like that. Guess you'll have to renew your lease."

She shrieked with laughter as he ran his fingers up and down her sides. "Okay, okay. I guess you can move in with me."

He leaned back and let his gaze travel over her. "Hair the right color and length? Check." He buried his face in her hair and inhaled deeply before looking into her eyes again. "Hmm, strawberry shampoo? Check. Green eyes and tight, sexy body? Check, check. Okay, I'll move in with you."

"It's an awfully small place. You'd have to share a room. In fact, you'd have to share a bed," she drawled out and tightened her embrace.

"Oh, I think I can live with that."

"I certainly hope I can live with you," she teased.

"Oh yeah? Well, there are perks to the arrangement."

She snickered. "I'll believe that when I see it."

A deep sigh escaped him, but it was the glimmer in his eye that had Darcy trying to scramble off his lap.

"I guess I'll just have to prove it to you."

He stood and tossed her onto the mattress again. Laughter filled the room as he pounced on her and set to the task of showing exactly what living with him would entail.

About the Author

To learn more about Jessica Jarman, please visit www.jessicajarman.com. Send an email to Jessica at jessica@jessicajarman.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Jessica, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/journeyintoromance>.

When Jared Romero gets shot the only person he can turn to is Macayla Sullivan, but will she risk her heart—and her life—to help him?

Take Your Medicine

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After escaping from an abusive relationship, Macayla has no interest in tying herself to another man, even if he is drop dead gorgeous. Unfortunately, Jared doesn't understand the meaning of the word no and breaks down her defenses as fast as she can put them up.

When Macayla saves Jared's life, little does she know that she's putting her life—and her heart—in danger.

Sequel to *Surprise*

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Take Your Medicine*:

Should she go down to clear the air with Jared? Maybe a little space would be best for both of them. She wasn't the type to hold a grudge, but there was a time and place for every discussion. The fact that she was still feeling a little overheated from Jared's kiss, and he was downstairs working out, possibly with his shirt off, didn't bode well for an intelligent conversation. She had never seen a man as good looking as Jared, even Connor wasn't as ruggedly handsome, and he was no slouch.

Thoughts like those weren't going to help clear her mind any.

Macayla went into the kitchen and started a meatloaf for supper. She wasn't sure if her stomach was up to that yet so she put in an extra potato to bake just in case. She cleaned up the kitchen and puttered around the house, straightening little things, cleaning the bathroom, making the beds. When she had run out of things to do and Jared was still downstairs, she figured she had better stop him from hurting himself.

Idiot man, he's going to overdo it just like I said. Why is it men think they are so much smarter than women? Macayla muttered to herself as she headed for the stairs leading to the home gym. As she stomped her

way down, she was blasted by the music Jared had blaring from the speakers. His face was turned away from her as his arms pumped the free weights. He had his shirt off, just as she had expected, and his torso was beaded in sweat.

The muscles in his arms rippled with the effort he made to lift the weights over and over again. Macayla paused, speechless as she watched him work out. He was definitely eye candy. Forget eye candy, he was eye chocolate. The overhead lights emphasized his every asset—the glints in his midnight black hair were almost blue, his hairy chest was pumping up and down with exertion. His sweatpants sagged on his narrow frame and revealed the upper curve of his pelvis, a sight Macayla found irrationally erotic.

Her mouth hung open as she stood staring at him, wondering how to take her eyes off him long enough to form a coherent thought in her head. She had completely forgotten the reason she had come downstairs in the first place.

Jared dropped the weight and pressed his hand to his side. When he looked up and saw her, he lowered his hand guiltily. He stood and walked over to her, drying himself on the towel as he went. His chest moved up and down with his heavy breath from his workout. She said nothing as he came within inches of her. He stopped, waiting for her to make the next move.

Macayla stared at Jared, watching him as he ran the towel over his body. She wanted to be that towel, wrapped around that gorgeous chest, feeling his heartbeat, touching his body. She licked her lips as though she could already taste the salt from his skin. The rational part of her brain yelled at her to say something, to break the spell, but her body wasn't listening. It was too busy watching him.

Slowly, almost against her will, she moved closer to him. She reached him, just a breath away from all that glorious skin, but he didn't make a move to touch her. She almost whimpered.

She wanted to be pressed against his chest, to feel the fire spread and burn. She waited breathless seconds for him to move, but when he

did nothing more than grip the towel and stare at her; she knew it was up to her to decide what was going to happen.

She watched a bead of sweat work its way from the hollow of his throat, down his chest, over his stomach, and stop at the waistband of his sweats. She could feel her control snap as she saw the evidence of his desire directly below the devious drop of sweat.

Struggling to find courage, she stood on tiptoe and placed her mouth against his throat. She delicately licked her way from his throat to the oasis of his chest.

What a dilemma. She had dreamed about these acres of muscles for days now and, like a kid in a candy store, didn't know where to begin. She wanted to touch and taste everything at once, yet wanted to linger over it as well. She kissed a path between his nipples, and brought her hands up to run her fingers through the hair on his chest, grabbing his pectorals gently and rubbing his flat nipples between her fingers.

Jared remained silent, his hands gripping the towel. He held on for dear life, afraid to make a move and break the spell. Macayla devoured his chest—and his control. Her hands explored his torso like a blind person reading Braille. Fire exploded in his gut as her mouth trailed kisses over every inch, and worked lower second by agonizing second. When she reached the waistband of his pants, Jared pulled her up to him.

“Macayla, you have about five seconds to decide if this is what you want, because if it isn't, you had better run for your life.”

“You talk pretty tough, but I don't believe a word of it.” Macayla ran her hands over his chest. It was like now that she had finally given in, she never wanted to stop touching him.

The last thing Amanda Storm needs is a man in her life—but no matter where she goes, she can't seem to get rid of them.

Miss Independent

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After three marriages and a near-miss, Amanda decides to wash her hands of men once and for all and try living life on her own. She moves away from her family, buys a cottage and gets a job waiting tables at a busy local bar to put herself through college. But then she meets Joe, who appoints himself as her savior, and everything goes downhill from there.

Joe Baker knows a woman in trouble when he sees one. Amanda might be good at faking it, but she's in way over her head. As her neighbor, he's willing to help her with whatever she needs done around the old cottage, but she won't accept his help. All he can do is sit back and watch things fall apart around her, and try not to say I told you so when it happens. Somewhere along the way, his protective feelings turn into something more, but after three failed marriages, Amanda wants nothing to do with commitment. Joe isn't a man to give up, and he's determined to show her they're meant to be together—no matter what it takes.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Miss Independent*:

Amanda checked her watch and shifted on the edge of the curb just outside the bar parking lot. It had only been fifteen minutes since she'd called the auto club, and yet it felt like three hours.

Humidity still clung to the air despite the late hour—a little after midnight—and she swiped the back of her hand across her forehead. Of all the nights, and all the times, for her car to break down, it had to be now, when she was exhausted after a long night at work. Her feet hurt, her legs ached and she could barely keep her eyes open. The operator at the auto club told her a tow truck would be right out to help her, but

even Amanda understood it would take a lot longer than a few minutes for someone to show up.

“Is everything okay?”

She glanced up to see Joe standing over her, hands in the pockets of his denim shorts. She sighed. A neighbor who wanted to “help”. Yet another thing she had no use for—but relief flooded her anyway. “It’s fine, thanks.”

“Is there a specific reason why you’re sitting on the sidewalk?”

“Other than the fact my car won’t start? Nope.”

“Want me to take a look at it?”

“Thanks, but I’m all set. The guy from the auto club will be here any minute now.”

She expected Joe to walk away, but instead he propped his hip against the side of her car. “What’s wrong with it?”

Other than it being well past its prime and ready to fall apart at the seams? She had no clue. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

“Does the engine turn over?”

“No. But it’s really not your concern. They’re going to tow it to the garage and the mechanic will take a look at it in the morning.” And how she’d get to work until she had her vehicle back, she had no idea. She had enough to deal with tonight. She could worry about transportation to work later, when she’d had some sleep.

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. “How are you going to get home after that?”

She hadn’t thought that far yet. *Thank you, Joe, for giving me yet another thing to worry about.* “I’ll call a cab.”

“Good luck getting one at this time of night.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The only cab company in town has two cars, and the same number of employees. The cabs don’t usually run past eleven.”

She groaned. Just lovely.

"I'll stick around until the tow truck gets here. Then I'll give you a ride home."

She started to protest, but Joe held up his hand. "Don't. Unless you're planning on walking home or staying in town, you don't have many options. I don't mind giving you a ride. Your place is on the way to mine."

She had to admit he was telling the truth. Staying in town for the night held little appeal, and walking wasn't even an option. It would take her all night to get home. What would be the harm in taking a ride from her new neighbor? If he was friends with Barry and had Alex to vouch for him, he couldn't be that bad.

"You're not a serial killer or anything, are you?"

"Not hardly. You?"

What was it about him that put her at ease, yet made her all edgy at the same time? She might have seen herself becoming friends with him—if she wasn't so attracted to the man. She couldn't be friends with a man she wanted. Especially a man who was currently unavailable. Those were the ones she always ended up marrying. And divorcing.

"Where are you from?" Joe asked, his tone casual. He glanced up and down the street before returning his gaze to her.

"Vermont."

"What made you decide to move out here?" This question was less casual and a lot more probing than she was ready to deal with.

She shrugged, ready to give him the answer she gave anyone else in town who asked. The easy answer, and half of the truth. "I'm starting school at the college in the fall."

"Not many college students buy houses within a month after moving to town."

She was willing to wager not many college students were three-time divorcees, either, but she didn't point that out to him. "I like it here. Always have. My family used to vacation on the lake when I was growing up. I figured it would be a good place to settle down."

“Do you have family or friends here?”

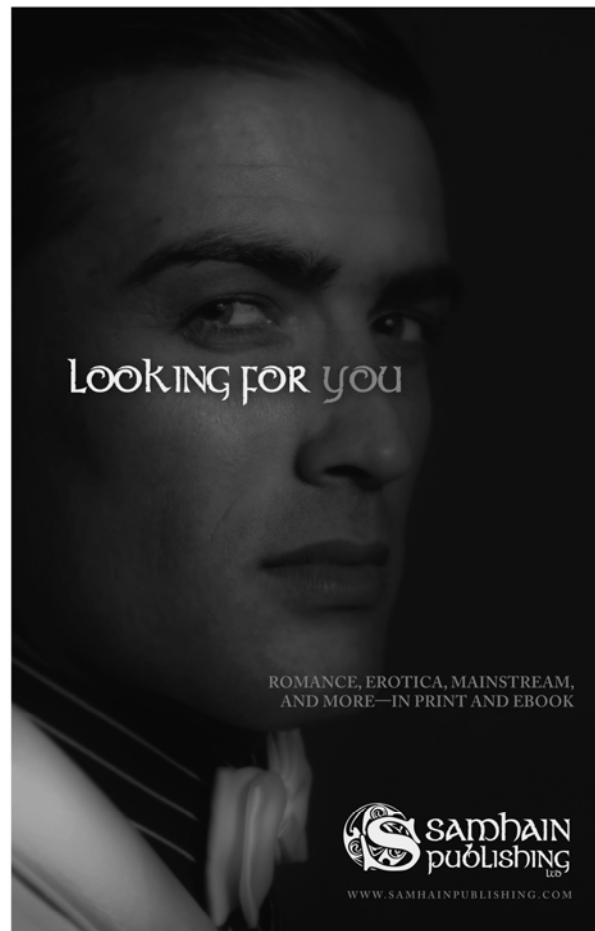
“Isn’t that kind of a personal question?”

He smiled. “I don’t know. Is it?”

“Yes, it is.” She swiped her hand across her forehead again and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “And no, I don’t.”

The lack of family in the area was the reason she’d chosen it. The place was familiar enough that she could make her way around town without getting lost, yet there was no one there to smother her with good intentions.

At least there hadn’t been, until her sexy neighbor had pushed his way into her life.



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