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Heaven and Lace

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HEAVEN AND LACE

Linda Bleser

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Chapter One

Rick Orlando paced in front of his editor's desk, fuming. "Why me?"

Del Dernhelm shrugged and tapped the ash from his cigar. "I figured none of the married guys' wives would let them cover this thing. Not without a fight, anyway."

"But a romance convention?" Rick considered himself a serious journalist. As far as he was concerned, a romance convention was neither serious nor newsworthy.

"Yes, a romance convention," Del said, the careful enunciation of each word warning Rick his boss was in no mood for an argument. "It's in town and it's big. What I want is the local slant. Interview the writers, the fans, the booksellers...hell, even the cover models." He shot Rick a conspiratorial grin. "Look at the bright side, there'll be over a thousand women there."

At Rick's frown, the editor chuckled. "What are you afraid of? That they'll lock you up and use you for research?" He snorted. "You should be so lucky."

Rick ran his fingers through his hair in irritation and grumbled, "I've never even read one of those silly books. My mother has them all over the house, though. Maybe I could send her?"

Del pinned Rick with a look that made him squirm before asking, "If you haven't read them, how do you know they're so silly?"

Rick grimaced. "You're kidding, right?"

"You're a reporter, Rick. Do your research. You may be surprised at what you find. Romance is big business. You want statistics? I've got them right here." He picked up a press release from his desk, stabbing at the figures as he quoted them. "Did you know that romance novels dominate the paperback fiction market?"

"No, but—"

Del continued reading numbers from the paper, shooting holes into Rick's arguments with a rapid-fire burst of facts and figures. "And did you know that last year there were over one-thousand seven-hundred romance novels published by twenty-eight publishers?"

"Well..."

Del handed Rick the press release. "Take this with you. Maybe it'll convince you why this is something we need to cover for our readers."

Rick scanned the page and shook his head. "But why me?"

"Look, you're one of my best reporters. This convention is big and it happens to be in our town this year. I want my best man on it. There's even a local author up for some big award. I've got her name here somewhere..." He rifled through the papers on his

desk, retrieving a sticky note that he handed to Rick. "*Lace Kincaid*. I want you to stay close and focus the article on her. You know—overnight success, local author makes it big, that kind of thing. You know the drill." He glanced pointedly at Rick. "So, can I count on you?"

Rick knew he'd already lost this scrimmage, but decided to take a hostage along with him. "Throw in Penny Ritmeyer as my photographer and we've got a deal," he conceded.

Del shook his head with mock disapproval. "Rick, Rick, Rick. You mean to tell me, with hundreds of women in one hotel, you're still not happy? You want Penny Ritmeyer, too?"

Rick grinned. "She's one of the best photographers on staff, and we work well together. Besides, misery loves company, and I owe her one for getting me involved with that time-share scam last fall."

Del chuckled and ground his cigar stub into a ceramic ashtray already overflowing with soggy, chewed ends. "Okay, you've got it. You and Penny cover this convention, and I'll see to it you get a full center spread in the *Lifestyles* section. Will that make you happy?"

"No," Rick grumbled. "But I'll do it anyway. Just don't expect me to enjoy it."

"You may surprise yourself," Del said, smiling as he ushered Rick out the door.

* * * * *

Ashley Kincaid clutched the pages of *Heartlines Magazine*, growing more furious with each word she read. Disgusted, she rolled the magazine up and slammed it against the table. "Alexis, what in the world were you thinking?"

Her sister jumped at the sound, nearly spilling her bottled water. "Don't call me Alexis! You know I hate it when you do that."

"That's nothing compared to what I *feel* like calling you. And don't change the subject." Ashley bristled. She felt like slapping her sister silly, but stopped herself, afraid there was enough truth to the statement that identical twins shared every pain to make her think twice before inflicting some. "God, Lexi. This is awful! Do you have any idea what this article will do to our reputation?"

She picked up the magazine and read further. Under the heading, "A Chat with Lace Kincaid, the Queen of Romantic Passion," was some of the most ludicrous phrases she'd ever heard. The more she read, the more her face heated with embarrassment. She groaned at the next passage, reading it aloud.

"*When asked how she finds the time to write with her busy lifestyle, Ms. Kincaid replied,*" Ashley intoned, giving dramatic emphasis to the response, "*When I'm writing, I'm totally focused—driven, you might say. The words, the characters, the settings come to me in a white-hot burst of creativity. Sometimes they surprise me, taking over and simply carrying me along...*"

Lexi shrugged. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's a load of bull," Ashley snorted. "That's what's wrong with that! 'A white-hot burst of creativity'? God, Lexi, if I wrote like that we'd be laughed out of the business."

Lexi grabbed the magazine from her sister's hands. "Look, I'm the marketing expert. I've gotten us this far, haven't I? Trust me. I know what people want from me. From *us*, I mean—Lace Kincaid. I talk to these people all the time."

Ashley shook her head. "You're just feeding into the stereotype."

"Isn't that my job? To be larger than life? I'm just giving the public what they want." Lexi glared at her sister. "You're the one who's out of touch. You've been tucked away in front of that computer screen too long." She ran a long, flame-red nail down the page of the magazine. "This is what the public expects from a best-selling romance novelist."

Ashley couldn't help comparing her sister's perfectly manicured nails to her own ragged stubs. She chewed them to the quick, especially when writing. But it wasn't only their nails that set them apart. Ashley glanced at her sister, mentally cataloguing their differences.

While Ashley wore her auburn hair brushed back in a swinging ponytail, Lexi's layered locks fell in a sexy tumble of copper curls. Ashley had on her usual attire—comfortable jeans and a T-shirt—while Lexi looked as if she'd just stepped off the cover of a magazine in a clinging designer dress and four-inch heels. Sometimes Ashley found it hard to believe they came from the same family, let alone the same egg.

As if she hadn't heard a single word, Lexi continued defending herself. "I was just doing my job, dear."

Fighting back a wave of resentment, Ashley countered, "Just don't forget, *dear*, that you wouldn't have a job without me. If I didn't write the books, you'd have nothing to promote, remember? Then you could kiss your conventions and banquets and book signings and adoring fans goodbye. Along with all those long-haired, broad-chested male cover models you find so irresistible."

Lexi frowned, and Ashley noticed that even her practiced pout was designed to impress the public. "Well, it's not as if *you* want to do this, Ash. That was our deal, right? I take care of publicity and promotion—which I do well, I might add—leaving you free to write without having to deal with the public."

"But you're taking it too far, Lexi." What she wanted to say was that Lexi had become a caricature of herself, carrying the stereotypical romance author image to the extreme. Most of the writers Ashley knew didn't dress or act like Lexi. They were mothers and wives, doctors and lawyers, pilots and police officers—women as down-to-earth, diverse and interesting as the books they wrote. "I'm just saying maybe you should tone it down some."

"Tone it down?" Lexi slammed the magazine on the coffee table. "Fine, Ash. If you think I'm doing such a lousy job after all these years, then do it yourself."

"I didn't say that! And don't call me Ash." Not for the first time, Ashley wondered why every time she argued with her sister, they ended up sounding like twelve-year olds squabbling on the playground. She half expected one of them to shout, "You're not the boss of me!"

Lexi fluffed the pillows on the couch, a sure sign she wanted to end the conversation. "What is your problem lately? I know it's not PMS. We're not due for another two weeks."

Ashley sighed. She couldn't even blame hormones, since they shared the same cycle. And if she suffered crankiness or irritability at that time of the month, then Lexi, the drama queen, was sure to be on her deathbed. Lexi always hogged the limelight. That's why this arrangement had made so much sense in the beginning. Posing as Lace Kincaid, Lexi traveled from conventions to book signings to photo shoots, leaving Ashley free to write without having to deal with the time demands and pressures of the publicity circuit.

Ashley had always been the creative, right-brained twin, while Lexi had the organizational and business skills. When Ashley had written her first book and couldn't find an agent, Lexi had studied the market and taken over the job, selling and promoting that first book and every book after that. The first time Ashley was invited to a conference, she'd begged Lexi to go in her place. It was a natural arrangement that suited them both.

They were a team. Together they were Lace Kincaid, best-selling romance novelist and darling of the convention crowd. Why mess with success? Although Ashley could probably hire any agent in the business now, she still believed Lexi was the best she could get, and who better to look out for their interests? As far as the conventions, she'd much rather spend her time writing than courting the press at fan conventions—something Lexi positively thrived on.

"Maybe I should start giving the written interviews from now on," Ashley suggested.

"Okay, maybe I did go overboard...a little." Eyes glittering, Lexi explained, "I just couldn't help myself. That reporter was so damned adorable I couldn't think straight."

Knowing this was the closest Lexi would ever come to an apology, Ashley's expression softened. She should have known there was a man involved in this somewhere. Men were her sister's only weakness. "Your hormones are going to get us into trouble someday, Lexi," she chided.

Ignoring the crack, Lexi sighed. "God, what a hunk! Kinda Clark Kent-like, you know? He had blond, windswept hair and incredible eyes. Green. Green as...um, grass."

"Green as grass'? How descriptive."

"Oh, hell," Lexi giggled. "You're the writer, *you* provide the adjectives."

"No, we'll stick with green as grass. That'll be the title of the next book—*Eyes As Green as Grass*."

"Stop teasing me." Lexi kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet beneath her. "Okay, okay. I'm not a writer. You do the interviews from now on. But seriously, Ashley, we have to be careful this week with the convention in town."

Ashley couldn't agree more. *Heartline Magazine* was holding its annual convention in Albany, New York, this year, only twenty minutes from their hometown. It was the kind of event Lexi lived for, with male cover model contests and throngs of autograph-seeking fans. Not only that, but they'd been nominated for a Crystal Quill Award.

Ashley chewed on her thumbnail. Her concern had nothing to do with Lexi's interview. Anything could go wrong. Up until now they'd managed to keep their arrangement secret, but one wrong move could blow the whole charade sky-high. They'd have to be on their guard for the next several days.

"Did I tell you I booked a suite at the hotel?" Lexi asked. "I couldn't see driving into Albany every morning."

"Plus, you love being waited on," Ashley teased.

"That too," Lexi agreed. "Now, what should I wear for the banquet?"

"Whatever you wear, you'll look wonderful. As always." Ashley wasn't the least bit surprised that her sister was more concerned with what to wear than the award itself. Competition was fierce for the Crystal Quill Award, and it boosted a writer's credibility and sales. For Ashley, the award would be a validation of her work.

But Lexi wasn't a writer. She was a promoter, the visible face of Lace Kincaid. The actual books—the words, the stories, the characters—all came from Ashley's imagination. For the first time in their joint career as Lace Kincaid, Ashley regretted their working arrangement. She wished she could be the one to walk across the stage and accept the award.

She gnawed her lower lip, fighting a familiar wave of apprehension. *The way things are going*, she thought, *this may be my last chance*.

The ringing phone shook her out of her reverie. A cool, detached male voice on the other end asked for Lace Kincaid. "I'm calling from the *Albany Times*."

"One second." Ashley hit the hold button and held the phone out to Lexi. "Some reporter from the newspaper."

Lexi shrugged. "So? I thought I wasn't allowed to speak with reporters anymore."

Ashley felt like throwing the phone at her sister, knocking that gloating little smile of triumph off her face. "Will you just take the call?"

"Nope. You're the writer, remember? And I've got a date." With that she turned and strode out the door, but not before sticking her tongue out at her sister and grinning from ear to ear.

Ashley sighed and punched the button, glaring at her sister's departing back. "Sorry, there was someone at the door. This is Lace Kincaid." The pen name felt awkward on her tongue, but she forged ahead. "You said you're from the *Albany Times*?"

"That's right. My editor spoke with you about an article we're doing in conjunction with the *Heartline* convention."

"Oh. Right." Damn Lexi for not telling her!

"Is this a bad time?"

"No, not really. I'm just a little...what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't." He chuckled and the sound was like silk rustling over stone. "It's Rick. Rick Orlando. I was hoping to get started on some background information before we get too caught up in the convention. You know, things like when you started writing, what made you decide to work in this genre, what's your average working day like."

Ashley twisted a strand of hair around her finger, pacing with the portable phone and getting lost in his voice. She decided he had a wonderful voice, slow and a sexy, with just a hint of huskiness. A bedroom voice.

"I could come over now if that's all right."

"No!" she cried, looking around the room. She'd been so busy trying to get her latest manuscript finished before the convention that she'd neglected her housework. Fast-food wrappers and unwashed coffee cups cluttered the kitchen. A basket of laundry overflowed onto a living room chair and she could write the prologue to her next novel in the dust along the piano. "I mean, tonight's not a good time. I was just, um...getting ready for bed."

Damn, she was stuttering. That's why she preferred writing—there was time to go back and edit all the things you should have said.

"Okay," he said, not commenting on the fact that it was only nine o'clock in the evening. "When would be a good time?"

Desperately searching her memory, Ashley gave him the number of Lexi's suite. "Tomorrow at noon. No, wait. Make that Saturday." Today was Thursday. That would give her an extra day to coach Lexi so they didn't have a replay of the *Heartlines Magazine* article. "I'm staying at the Empire Resorts Hotel, room 723."

"Saturday at noon, then. I'm looking forward to meeting you."

She could almost hear the smile in his voice. "So am I," she mumbled, wondering if that smile was as attractive as it sounded.

When he hung up, she held the phone to her ear for a few more minutes, wishing she hadn't been so quick to push him off on her sister.

Chapter Two

Ashley slumped at her desk, wondering what it would be like to have a normal job with weekends off and paid vacations. The cursor on the computer screen blinked impatiently, as though tapping its foot waiting for her to type the next line. Too bad she didn't know what the next line was. She'd been blocked for weeks now, lying every time Lexi asked how the book was coming along.

It wasn't.

Every line she typed was garbage. The characters were flat. The plot bored her to tears. Her writing went beyond pitiful. She felt like a cartoon character with a two-ton block suspended over her head—but instead of "Acme," the word "Deadline" was carved on the front. It was only a matter of time before the rope broke and the weight came crashing down on her, crushing her career forever.

Evidence of her writing slump cluttered the desk, from chains of paper clips to empty coffee cups and a half-finished *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

She sighed and turned back to the accusing blank screen. "Write something," she chided herself. "Anything. You can always go back and fix it later." Her brow furrowed. Nothing came to her.

She turned off the computer and cradled her head in her arms while tears of frustration rolled onto the desk. She knew what her problem was. It was impossible to write happy endings when she no longer believed in them. For the past five years she'd woven romantic fantasies for other women, yet her own life had been a frustrating series of broken relationships.

The most recent fiasco was her broken engagement to Steve Canterbury. She'd ignored the rumors that he was cheating on her, telling herself he was just a natural flirt with the kind of personality women made fools of themselves over. He'd even flirted with her sister, something that provoked Ashley's deepest insecurities.

Two months before the wedding, she'd surprised him at his office. The surprise was more than she bargained for, considering he and his secretary were conducting business naked behind his desk.

She'd felt like the biggest fool ever born, and even wondered whether his supposedly innocent flirtations with Lexi were as harmless as he'd claimed. Despite her suspicions, she didn't really want to know. Men were expendable, but she only had one sister.

Although she'd had her share of dates before and since, no man ever quite measured up to the characters in her novels. Real men couldn't compete with the dangerous, sensual heroes who leapt from the pages of her books—wild, adventurous

men who swept the heroines off their feet. Men who rode their horses along dusty plains, only to come home and whisper romantic words of love in the arms of their adoring women. Men like that just didn't exist anymore.

At least for her. Lexi, however, was a different story. Men groveled at her feet. Wherever her sister went, adoring throngs waited for one glance from her sensuous green eyes.

Green as grass. Ashley chuckled. The same green as her own. Identical green eyes, identical auburn hair and identical pearly-white smiles. Not for the first time, Ashley wondered how the same ingredients swirled into the gene pool turned one twin into a radiant star and the other into a limp dishrag.

As a teenager, Ashley had tried wearing Lexi's clothes and makeup, even styling her hair the same way, but somehow she always missed the mark. She felt silly, like a participant in a masquerade ball.

She'd realized long ago that it wasn't anything as simple as clothes or makeup. Lexi had an undefined quality, an aura of sensuality that Ashley lacked. Lexi had mastered the art of subtle sensual come-hitherness—a raised eyebrow, a half turn of her full lips, a wink, a pout. Lexi oozed sexuality. *All I ooze is plain*, Ashley thought. *I'm vanilla yogurt compared to Lexi's strawberry creme flambé.*

Except when she wrote. When she wrote, Ashley became every man's fantasy, every man's dream. She was the heroine of each of her novels.

And now she couldn't even count on that anymore. She stared at the now-dark screen. She could sit here all day staring at the screen or she could get out and try to recharge her batteries. She decided on the latter.

* * * * *

Jenny Teo popped a breath mint into her mouth and turned to Ashley. "Let me get Mrs. Willis settled under the dryer and then we can chat."

Ashley watched her best friend flutter around the cotton candy pink beauty parlor, a blur of motion reflected in the wall-to-wall mirrors as she checked one customer's rollers, fiddled with dryer settings for another, and brought coffee and magazines for a third before making her way back.

"There, I'm all yours now," she said, straightening her smock. The words "Scissor Shack" were embroidered in flamboyant script across the front of the rose-colored smock. She tugged on Ashley's ponytail. "Want me to trim this? Just an inch as usual, right?"

Ashley started to nod then changed her mind.

Jenny unfastened the barrette holding Ashley's hair back and ran her fingers through it. "You have gorgeous hair. I wish you'd let me do something with it. You're way too old for ponytails."

"I know," Ashley admitted. She'd been thinking exactly the same thing. Maybe it was time to dig her way out of this rut. Time for a change. She was tired of living in her sister's shadow while life went on beyond the glow of her computer screen. A little change would do her good. *And besides, she thought, at least hair grows back.*

"What did you say?" Jenny's eyes lit up. "You mean you're finally going to set me loose with this hair?" She grinned and rubbed her hands together.

"Well, not loose exactly," Ashley countered. "Nothing drastic. But maybe you could layer it a little?"

"Like Lexi's?"

"No." Ashley frowned. "Not exactly." She twirled a lock of hair around her finger. She wasn't trying to copy Lexi, although she had to admit that Lexi's hairstyle framed her face perfectly. And they had the same face, right? "Well, maybe a little," she conceded. "But softer, more casual."

Jenny nodded. "I know exactly what to do. Just leave it to me."

After being pampered with apple-scented shampoo and deep conditioning, Ashley relaxed and let her best friend go to work. Wet curls fell around her shoulders as Jenny snipped and chattered, stopping occasionally to loosen another customer's rollers or adjust dryer settings.

"Speaking of Lexi," Jenny asked. "Who is she in love with this week? An ambassador? A rock star? The pool man?"

Ashley chuckled. "She's too busy to be in love this week. The convention starts tomorrow, and she has a thousand and one things to deal with."

Jenny uttered a soft tsk of disbelief. "Lexi is never too busy to be in love. Stay still," she said when Ashley nodded her head in agreement. "Are you going to the convention at all?"

"Nope."

"You're crazy. I would. It sounds like a hoot!"

Other than Ashley and Lexi's parents, who'd retired to Florida two years ago, Jenny was the only one who knew their secret. She knew all of Ashley's secrets. They'd been best friends since fifth grade.

"How's the new book coming?" Jenny leaned forward, measuring strands of hair along Ashley's chin.

"Don't ask." The words were almost lost in a weary sigh.

Jenny looked into her friend's eyes. "You know what you need?"

Before Ashley could say, "No, but I'm sure you'll tell me," Jenny did just that.

"You need to get away from that computer and find yourself a man."

"Oh God, now you sound like Lexi. She thinks that finding a man is the answer to all of life's problems."

"No one has *that* many problems," Jenny chuckled, never missing an opportunity to poke fun at Lexi.

Ashley rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay. I know she's your sister, but can't she leave *one* stone unturned? Does she have to have every man that wanders through her line of vision?"

Ashley sighed. It was true. Lexi was happiest surrounded by adoring men. When she grew tired of one, another was always willing to take his place. But Ashley loved her sister, and no one but Jenny could get away with talking about Lexi the way she did. Even Jenny knew there was a limit to how far she could go before Ashley rushed to her sister's defense.

Jenny raised her voice to be heard over the blow-dryer. "Guess who came in for a haircut the other day?"

"Who?"

"Steve."

The name hung in the air for a moment. Ashley felt a stab of pain at the mention of his name.

"He asked about you," Jenny said, rolling a strand of hair around a fat bristled brush and aiming the blow-dryer at it. She caught Ashley's gaze in the mirror.

"So?" Ashley shrugged, knowing her nonchalance didn't fool Jenny one bit. Ashley still couldn't believe how blind and gullible she'd been. She'd thought Steve Canterbury had been *the one*—her very own happily-ever-after. For a little while, Ashley had felt like one of her own heroines—treasured, adored, desired and loved. Caught up in a fantasy. But that's all it had been, really. A fantasy. She'd trusted him completely and he'd betrayed her. She'd overlooked his flaws, believing her love could change him. That was her first mistake.

"He asked if you were seeing anyone," Jenny said casually.

Ashley kept her voice just as casual. "I'm not."

"I know." Jenny put the blow-dryer back in its holder then squeezed Ashley's shoulder. "Hey, are you okay?"

Ashley nodded, swiping the back of her hand across her eyes. "That solution they use for permanents not only smells bad, it burns my eyes."

Jenny had the good grace not to mention that no one was getting a perm at the moment. "There," she said, swiveling Ashley's chair around to face the mirror. "What do you think?"

Ashley shook her head, watching her hair fall in soft, feathery waves to her shoulders. Wisps of auburn curls framed her face, making her cheekbones stand out and emphasizing her eyes. "I love it," she gushed.

Jenny smiled. "And we're not done. Turns out Kristie has an opening. I penciled you in for a manicure."

Ashley started to object, then took one look at her raggedy nails and changed her mind.

"You won't believe what Kristie can do with acrylics," Jenny babbled. "The girl's an artist." She gave Ashley's hair another quick fluff, admiring her handiwork in the mirror. "You're beautiful. I don't know why you didn't let me do this years ago."

For once Ashley didn't argue. She ran her fingers through her hair and smiled at her new reflection. Maybe beautiful wasn't the word she'd use, but it was definitely an improvement. If only it were this easy to fix everything else wrong with her life.

* * * * *

Rick closed the book and glanced at his watch. Where had the time gone? It had already grown dark in his apartment, a restored brownstone in the heart of Albany's political district.

He flicked the light on and slipped a piece of paper between the pages of the book, surprised to see he'd read nearly three quarters of the way through. He'd only meant to scan Lace Kincaid's novel and jot a few notes for the interview, but he'd become caught up in the story, captivated by characters that jumped off the page. When he closed his eyes he saw the heroine, Ambriehl, her hair blowing in the breeze, her hand shielding her eyes as she stood on the moors watching and waiting for her lover's return.

Surprisingly, he now looked forward to meeting the author of this book. Lace Kincaid. He smiled, wondering what kind of imagination generated such fire and passion, and what kind of woman turned everyday words into magic.

Lace Kincaid.

He hoped she was a redhead.

A familiar triple knock at the door interrupted his musing. He shoved the book under the sofa pillow and called out, "Come on in, Penny."

Penny elbowed the door open. "I come bearing gifts," she said, her eyes twinkling.

Rick retrieved the familiar bakery bag from her. "Bagels and cappuccino, I hope."

"You know me too well, Mr. Orlando."

Rick smiled. True. Despite his editor's wisecrack and Rick's well-known weakness for redheads, he and Penny were best friends, not lovers. Who else but Penny knew enough to bring carbs and caffeine for a late-night work session?

"Sesame, cream cheese and lox for you," she said, adding her purse to the mountainous pile of papers on his dining room table. "Toasted oat bran for me."

She held out a small red gift bag. "And to prove that you're not as smart as you think you are, here's a little surprise I picked up for you."

Rick eyed the bag suspiciously. "It's not my birthday, is it?"

"No," she laughed. "If it was your birthday, I'd be here with a ribbon tied around my luscious body and nothing more." Penny settled on the black leather couch, tucking her legs beneath her.

"Wait, I'm pretty sure it *is* my birthday, now that you mention it. Where's your ribbon, woman?"

"In your dreams, Mr. Libido."

The sexual banter was innocent and as much a part of their relationship as the mutual support they each knew they could count on. Penny was like a sister to him, the one person he could depend on for a sympathetic shoulder or a smack in the head...whichever he needed most.

Rick reached into the bag and dug through the tissue, his fingers brushing against soft suede. He pulled out a strip of material and raised a questioning eyebrow in Penny's direction. "And this would be?"

"A loincloth," she said, poker-faced. "To help you cover your assignment."

He held up the skimpy strip of material. "I'm afraid this isn't quite enough to cover my, er...assignment."

Penny laughed. "Well, don't *we* have an overblown opinion of ourselves?"

"Not overblown at all. At least not at the moment. I suppose you want me to model this?" He shook his head in mock dismay. "Honestly, Penny. The things you'll do to get a peek at my buns."

She pretended to gag. "Not before my bagel, please. I'd hate to lose my appetite."

Rick set the coffee and bagels on the coffee table, then joined Penny on the couch. "You're not mad that I dragged you into this assignment, are you?"

Penny nodded. "Yup. I'm furious. And I'll make you pay, too." She grinned. "Just think. I could be covering the governor's speech with Harvey Greenspan right now instead of picking on you."

Laughing, she grabbed a throw pillow from the corner of the sofa and tossed it at him. He ducked but not quick enough. The pillow bounced off the side of his head and he pretended to fall off the sofa, groaning and thrashing in mock agony.

Penny giggled. "And the Emmy goes to..." She held up the book that had been tucked out of sight beneath the pillow. "Hey, what's this?"

Rick blushed. "Research." He stood and made a grab for the book, but Penny pulled it out of his reach.

"Research, huh?" She flipped through the pages, finding the spot he'd marked. "Looks like you're really getting into your *research*. Don't tell me you're a closet romance reader now?"

Rick put on his best wolfish expression. "No, just a closet romantic. I thought you loved that about me?"

"If so, it would be the only thing I've found yet to love about you." Penny skimmed the pages. "Hey, mind if I take this home? I should do some research too if I'm going to be trailing along with you all week."

"No!" At Penny's startled glance, he realized his reply was too quick and emphatic. "I mean, I'm not finished. You know, getting my interview questions ready. I'll need to—"

"You want to see how the book ends, don't you?" Penny grinned. "You want to finish reading it!"

"Well..."

She reached out and chucked him under the chin. "You're very cute when you blush, you know."

Rick reached for his cappuccino, blowing on the hot liquid to avoid her knowing gaze. He couldn't hide anything from Penny and he knew she'd tease him unmercifully about this all week long.

She ran her hands over the glossy cover, fingers trailing along the bare-chested, swaggering brute stealing a kiss from a swooning woman. "So, is it hot?"

"The cappuccino?"

"No, Mr. Answer-A-Question-With-A-Question. The book. Are the love scenes spicy? Hot? Sexy? Passionate?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But? Let me guess. It's not the physical stimulation you're after, but the *intellectual* stimulation, right?"

Surprised by the annoyance he felt, Rick became defensive. All right, maybe he wasn't a big fan of the genre, but he really enjoyed what he'd read of this book. Who knew? Maybe if he read a few more he'd change his opinion. But he didn't dare tell Penny.

She flipped to the back page. Rick knew she'd find a black and white picture of Lace Kincaid there. He knew because he'd stared at it more than once tonight. There was something about that face. The author's eyes were playful and mischievous, but open and honest too. He'd found himself fantasizing about what she must be like. Especially after reading one very sensual passage. Rick felt himself blush again, but Penny wisely ignored it this time.

"So, this is the famous Lace Kincaid," she said.

Rick nodded, feeling a slight flutter in his chest when he looked at Lace's picture again. He pushed the cappuccino aside, blaming the butterflies on too much caffeine.

* * * * *

Lexi held the telephone cradled between her head and shoulder while she filed her perfect nails. Her editor, Rita Ffaz, was just about out of patience. She'd been

understanding and supportive for months, extending the deadline twice for *A Little Piece of Heaven*, and the book still wasn't finished.

"I promise, Rita. Just a few more weeks. I'm nearly done. Just let me get this convention behind me. You know how nervous I am about the award and I just can't think straight."

A soft sigh fluttered over the receiver. Rita's normally friendly voice sounded tired. "How close are you to finishing?"

"I'm putting the final touches on the last few chapters now. Then I just need to make a few quick revisions and I'll have it on your desk. I promise."

Lexi hoped she could make good on that promise. The truth was she had no idea how close Ashley was to finishing the manuscript. Well, she'd at least bought them some time. Hopefully Ashley would pull it all together this week before the convention ended.

"You know we're going all-out promoting this book, Lace."

Lexi didn't need to be reminded of that—or the implications behind it. A six-figure contract hung in the balance for a three-book hardcover deal—a deal being negotiated based on prior sales. There was even talk of a miniseries down the line. *A Little Piece of Heaven* was supposed to be her breakout book. It was no wonder Rita and the publishers were concerned.

After another ten minutes of reassuring Rita there was nothing to worry about, Lexi hit the disconnect button then dialed her sister's number. Her business side took over. She'd worked too hard and this deal was too important to let a little case of writer's block stand in the way of their skyrocketing career.

She stopped, knowing what Ashley would say. *It's coming along fine. Don't worry.* The exact same words she'd used with Rita just now. And probably equally as transparent a lie.

No. This was too important to handle over the phone. She wanted to see Ashley's face and find out exactly how much of the manuscript was finished. *Better to be prepared*, she thought, grabbing her car keys and driving to her sister's house.

What she wasn't prepared for was the state she found her sister in when she arrived. Ashley paced the floor of her office, her eyes red and swollen.

Alarmed, Lexi pulled her sister into her arms. "Ashley! What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ashley sniffed. "Everything." A stream of words bubbled between choked sobs. "I can't write anymore. I can't think of anything new to say. Steve stopped by the beauty parlor and asked if I was seeing anyone. I don't have anyone and the toilet is stopped up. Whatever made me think I had anything important to say? I'm not a writer. I can't do it anymore."

Lexi let her sister ramble, smoothing her hair while making soft, comforting noises. She couldn't help noticing Ashley's new haircut, but now didn't seem like the right time to bring it up. "Stop, Ash. You're a wonderful writer. Everyone loves your books. The

fans can't get enough. And besides," she said firmly, "Steve was a jerk. I never trusted him. We both know you can do much better."

"When am I going to meet a man who's *not* a jerk?" Ashley mumbled.

Lexi picked up the phone. "I'll call the plumber for you."

"Don't bother," Ashley said, waving her away from the phone. "He's a jerk too."

Lexi laughed. "No, I meant for the toilet, silly. Besides, I think he's married."

"Oh," Ashley said then sighed. "I'm not surprised. Even the jerks are taken."

With an indulgent smile, Lexi pulled her sister to the couch beside her and wiped her tears away. "Now, what's this bull about not being able to write? Are you serious?"

Ashley cradled her face in her hands, her voice quivering. "I'm deadly serious."

"What can I do to help? Want to talk about it? How much of the book is done?"

Ashley shrugged. "About three-quarters, I guess."

Three-quarters? Lexi gulped, her eyes wide with shock. "I thought you were almost finished."

"I lied," Ashley admitted, slumping back on the couch. "Every day I delete more than I write. Today I threw away two whole chapters. I don't know what's wrong."

I do, Lexi thought. *I know just what you need, and it's not a plumber.* But she didn't dare say it out loud.

Lexi snapped her fingers. "I know!" she said, grabbing a pencil. "Why don't I take a stab at it?"

Ashley stared at her so long, Lexi was almost afraid she was seriously considering the offer. Then Ashley started laughing, a little at first, then louder.

"I made you laugh," Lexi said, grinning.

"Yes, you did." Ashley hugged her sister. "I love you, you know that?"

"Well," Lexi shrugged. "You have to or I'll tell Mom." Then in a quieter voice, "I love you too, Sis. And we'll get through this together. I promise."

Chapter Three

Rick knew the interview wasn't going well. Lace had asked to meet them in her suite at the hotel, where she blended right in with the elegant surroundings like a gilded lily in a cut crystal vase. Although she answered his questions she seemed preoccupied, and he found himself wondering what had happened to all that wit and sparkle he'd seen in her book. Maybe she saved it for her writing, or maybe she was just having a bad day.

He scribbled in his notebook. *Lace Kincaid is a pretentious diva who soaks up attention the way a loofah sponge absorbs bathwater.*

He sighed. She wasn't anything like he'd expected. And he was stuck with her for a whole week. He turned and caught Penny rolling her eyes as if to confirm his suspicion that it was going to be a long, long week.

He stared at Lace Kincaid. *Just my luck*, he thought. *A redhead, too.* Well, at least the limelight flattered her. Rick couldn't help admiring the soft curve visible beneath her satin lounging robe. She caught his glance and smiled. There was something predatory about that smile, like a woman who was accustomed to getting everything she wanted, and wanting everything she could get. Rick shivered, grateful for Penny's company. He had a feeling Lace Kincaid would eat him alive if they were alone.

Lace glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I have another appointment soon. Could we finish this interview later?"

Rick stood and nodded, grateful for an excuse to escape. "Sure," he agreed, closing his notebook. "When would be a good time for us to meet you?"

"Us?" Lace frowned and looked from Rick to Penny. "We don't need any pictures tonight, do we?"

Penny agreed. "No, I've got all the pictures I need right now. You two kids have fun."

Rick shot her a piercing glance, which she studiously ignored as she packed up her camera and film.

"Would nine o'clock be all right?" Lace asked.

"Okay," Rick agreed hesitantly. "Why don't we meet for coffee? Do you know where the Copper Café is?"

He wondered what he'd say if she suggested the suite would be more comfortable. He didn't want to be in a room alone with her. Especially a room with a bed.

When she nodded, glancing once again at her watch, he couldn't help feeling he'd just dodged a bullet. A cold and beautiful bullet, but a bullet just the same.

The door had barely closed behind them when Penny elbowed him in the ribs. "She wants you."

"Don't go there, Penny," he warned. Although Lace couldn't get them out of the suite quick enough, ushering them into the hallway and locking the door behind them, she seemed determined to get him alone later. Rick was afraid Penny might be right.

"She wants you in a loin cloth, Mr. Stud Muffin. She wants you throbbing and pulsing and hot and steamy and sweaty."

"I'm warning you, Penny," he growled.

Ignoring his discomfort, Penny continued ribbing him playfully as they made their way to the elevators. "I think you're about to become immortalized in her newest bodice-ripper."

"Not if I can help it," Rick muttered, jabbing the elevator button.

Penny laughed. "By the way," she said. "I peeked at your notes. Loofah sponges don't soak up bathwater. They're hard."

"Oh yeah?" Rick nodded. "Well, I'm not surprised. Not one bit." Hard was exactly the word he'd use to describe Lace Kincaid.

* * * * *

Lexi stared at the closed door of her suite, chewing her lower lip thoughtfully. There was something familiar about that reporter, Rick Orlando. Something very familiar.

Then it hit her. That raven-black wavy hair. Those piercing amber eyes, intelligent yet somehow sensitive too. Tall, broad-shouldered, with—what would Ashley call it?—chiseled features. That's it! He was exactly like every hero Ashley had ever created. Rick Orlando was precisely the type of man her sister had a weakness for.

Lexi stared at the closed door, an idea forming. Rick Orlando could be the answer to her prayers. Ashley's self-esteem had plummeted since that creep Steve Canterbury had hurt her. She felt unloved and unattractive. A little romance might change that, give back some of her confidence. And Lexi knew that could be just the shot of adrenaline needed to break through her sister's writer's block.

All she had to do was push Rick Orlando into Ashley's path and let nature take its course. *A little romantic interlude is sure to get Ashley's juices flowing again—creative and otherwise*, she thought with a sly grin.

She could introduce them and hope for the best, but time was of the essence here. No, there was a better way. Since she and Rick would be thrown together all week anyway, she might as well use that time to spark his interest. Then when he was properly primed, she'd set him loose and let him turn all that smoldering sexuality on Ashley.

Mulling over the possibility, she turned and opened the door leading to the suite's bedroom. "Hi there, handsome," she drawled in a sultry voice. "Did you miss me?"

The Sapphire Man, this year's hot cover model, looked up from the bed, caressing her with his languid gaze. "More than I can say, darlin'. Did you get rid of your guests?"

Lexi smiled. "They're gone." She admired the cover model's golden chest gleaming in the soft candlelight. He half sat, half reclined on the bed, blond waves cascading to his shoulders. A white sheet, draped casually across his waist, emphasized rather than concealed his state of arousal.

"Then what are we waiting for?" he asked.

"Patience, lover." Lexi reached for the phone. "I just have one thing to take care of and then I'm all yours."

She sat on the side of the bed and reached for the phone, shivering when he ran his fingertips along the nape of her neck.

Lexi dialed and waited, her leg bouncing with impatience.

"Ashley, I need you to do me a favor," she said as soon as she heard her sister's voice on the other end. "I've got an interview with that local reporter tonight and I can't make it. You'll have to cover for me."

She quickly overrode her sister's arguments. "No, you remember how I screwed up the last interview? I thought we decided you'd do the interviews from now on." Lexi knew she was splitting hairs, but justified it by telling herself that this was for Ashley's own good. If things worked out as planned, Ashley would thank her one day.

It took some cajoling, but Ashley finally agreed to play the role of Lace Kincaid for the interview with Rick Orlando. Lexi replaced the receiver and smiled. Yes, this was just what her sister needed. And with any luck, one glance at the handsome reporter would have her sister thinking romance again. Better yet, *writing* romance again. *With an added little push in that direction from yours truly*, she thought.

Lexi leaned back into The Sapphire Man's warm embrace, satisfied with herself.

"Now," she said. "Where were we?"

As usual, he jumped at the chance to show her exactly where they'd left off.

* * * * *

Jenny scraped the remains of their Chinese takeout into the garbage and filled the dishwasher while Ashley changed for her interview. "So," she shouted. "What's this reporter's name?"

"Rick something," Ashley called from her bedroom. "Starts with an O. Oleo? Oleander?" She stepped into the doorway and posed. "How do I look?"

"You look great."

"You sure?" Ashley had stood in front of her closet for what seemed like hours trying to decide what to wear. Being a writer, she always joked, was the only career she had the proper wardrobe for. But her usual attire of jeans and an oversized T-shirt

wouldn't do for an interview. She'd finally settled on a pale green cotton sundress that fell to mid-calf in soft, flowing folds. She'd slipped into a pair of espadrilles and studied her reflection in the mirror. The dress accentuated her eyes as well as her hair. Jenny had been right about the haircut. She should have done it years ago.

"I'm positive," Jenny said, smiling. "You look gorgeous. That oleo man won't be able to take his eyes off you."

Ashley blushed. "I doubt that." But she couldn't deny a thrill of anticipation. She felt pretty. And she was going out. Sure, it was only an interview, not a date or anything. But it felt good.

"Ready?" Jenny asked.

Ashley took a deep breath. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess." She smoothed wrinkles that didn't exist from her dress. "Oh, now I remember," she said.

"What?"

"Orlando. His name is Rick Orlando."

Jenny nodded and smiled. "It's a nice name. I like it."

"Me too," Ashley said, swinging her car keys around her index finger as she headed out the door to her car.

"Good luck," Jenny called, heading in the other direction toward her own car.

Ashley waved. "It's just an interview. How much luck will I need?"

The Copper Café was only ten minutes away and Ashley was early. Since the reporter thought they'd already met, it would look suspicious if she didn't recognize him, so she chose a secluded table across from the entrance where he'd be sure to spot her. Even though Lexi had described him, she couldn't trust her sister's powers of description where men were concerned. Lexi found them all incredibly handsome and sexy.

Her precautions were unnecessary. The moment he strode through the door she knew this was the man she was waiting for. He said something to the hostess then scanned the room. When his gaze swept over her he smiled, and she felt as if someone had flipped a switch and turned the lights a little brighter.

She caught her breath and smiled back, wondering why Lexi had let this one get away. He turned and thanked the hostess before making his way to the table, his movements confident and purposeful. Although he looked all business, she detected a boyish playfulness behind those sparkling amber eyes. One look in those eyes and she forgot all about Steve, her stopped-up toilet and her writer's block. Nothing else existed. Nothing but the copper glints in his eyes and the play of dimples when he smiled.

"I see you already ordered coffee," he said, setting his notebook on the table. "Do you mind if we order something to eat? I forgot to have dinner."

She laughed. "I thought I was the only one who forgot to eat when I was working."

He looked at her with what seemed like surprise, tilting his head and studying her in the candlelight. Ashley wondered if she'd given herself away already. What would Lexi have said? Probably something suggestive.

She blushed thinking of the possibilities and studied the menu, not trusting herself to get lost in those eyes again. "I'll have a salad," she said to fill the silence.

"That sounds good," he said, grinning. "Except I'll have mine with a burger on the side."

Ashley laughed again, her heart doing flip-flops when his grin broadened into a smile. She had to remind herself that this was an interview, not a date.

When the waitress refilled their coffee, they both reached for the sugar at the same time and their fingers brushed. She laughed nervously and pulled back, and Rick found himself enchanted by the delicate blush that sprang to her cheeks.

Was this the same Lace Kincaid he couldn't wait to escape from only hours ago? She seemed sweeter, more innocent somehow.

His notebook sat forgotten on the table while they ate. Although he'd been guarded at first, before long they were laughing and sharing more than coffee. Like the fact that they both adored "I Love Lucy" reruns and strawberry licorice, would rather own a dog than a cat, and preferred fishing to the opera.

"Speaking of fishing," he said. "I've got a little camp up on Saratoga Lake. It's just a two-bedroom, lakeside cabin that once belonged to my grandfather, but it comes complete with an array of reels and rods and a nice little fishing boat. Nothing fancy," he finished, feeling suddenly shy. What was he doing inviting Lace Kincaid fishing? He would have laughed at the idea this afternoon, but tonight it felt right. Perfect, in fact.

"I'd love that," she said, her face lighting up. "I'll bring the bait."

That smile was all the bait he needed. Her lips were full and sensuous. It was all he could do not to reach out and trace the gentle curve, imagining how they'd feel brushing against his. She looked away and he realized he'd been staring at her lips far too long.

The intimate little corner of the Copper Café began to feel like their own private haven as Ashley relaxed, surprised to realize how much she enjoyed his company. It was almost midnight before he turned the conversation around to her writing, and his insightful questions impressed her.

"You've read one of my books?" she asked.

Rick frowned slightly. "Well, to be honest, not until now. And only because I wanted to be prepared for this article."

Ashley waited, trying to read the expression on his face, but he didn't offer any further explanation. She wanted to ask which book he'd read and whether he liked it, but stopped herself. What if he hadn't? His opinion suddenly mattered to her. Did she want to know if he hated it? Especially now, when she was struggling with her own writing demons?

When he reached for the check, his fingers brushed against her wrist and Ashley felt a delicious tingle run through her. Her breath quickened and she held his gaze for what seemed an eternity.

He broke the connection first and cleared his throat. "Where shall I meet you tomorrow?"

Her heart fluttered. Tomorrow? She smiled and started to answer, then realized he wasn't meeting *her*. He was meeting Lace Kincaid, and Lexi would be playing that role for the rest of the week. Lexi would be sitting across from him, getting lost in his eyes, running her perfect fingernails across his hands. How long would it take her sister to seduce and win him? How long before Lexi had Rick Orlando wrapped around her little finger?

"I'll call and let you know," Ashley said. Something inside her wanted to fight for him, to win his heart before Lexi had a chance to charm him away.

Her shoulders slumped. That was silly. When had she ever been able to compete with her sister?

Never, she realized, reaching for her purse. And men like Rick Orlando didn't fall in love with plain, vanilla yogurt women in the real world.

Chapter Four

Penny dug deep into a baker's bag and offered Rick a jelly-filled doughnut and two napkins.

"Don't you have a home of your own?" he asked.

"Yeah," she replied, waving her hand to take in the entire three-room apartment. "But your place has so much more ambiance. I think it's the moose head that gives it that intriguing bachelor pad flair."

"Hey," he said defensively. "That moose died of natural causes."

"Oh, and I'm sure his dying wish was to be stuffed and hung on your wall, right?"

"Now Penny," he chided. "You know my grandfather was a taxidermist on the side."

"Whose side? Certainly not the moose's." She tossed her silk scarf over the antlers, covering the glassy-eyed moose stare, and changed the subject. "So," she said. "Did the dragon lady try to eat you alive last night?"

"No," he answered. "As a matter of fact, I had a great time."

Penny's probing gaze seemed to read more into his statement than he'd intended.

"Really," he insisted. "She was different once we were alone. I don't know how to explain it. She was softer, sweeter...more innocent."

Rick thought about the woman he'd had coffee with last night. Without all the glitter and makeup, Lace Kincaid had lost all trace of artifice. There was something touchable about her. Something vulnerable.

He couldn't help smiling. The evening had ended too soon. He'd wanted to kiss her goodnight and found himself staring again at her full lips, wondering how they'd feel crushed beneath his. He'd wanted to bury his face in the fresh-smelling silk of her hair. Wanted to feel her soft and pliant in his arms, hear her whisper his name.

Penny waved her hand in front of his face to get his attention. "Hello?" She reached forward to wipe a smudge of powdered sugar from his chin. "Where were you just then?"

She wouldn't believe it if he told her. He hardly believed it himself.

"Hey. You like her, don't you?"

"Yeah," he said, grinning. "I think I do. As a matter of fact, I *know* I do."

"Are we talking about the same Lace Kincaid?" Penny asked, disbelief written all over her face. "Loofah Woman?"

Rick shrugged. "I think we just caught her at a bad time yesterday. The woman I had coffee with last night is nothing like the woman we interviewed. It's almost as if she were two different people."

"Well, well, well," Penny chuckled.

"Well what?" Rick bristled at Penny's tone of voice and that familiar, "I know you better than you know yourself" look on her face.

"Nothing. I was just wondering, though. Should we have, like, a code or something? For when you want to be alone with Ms. Split Personality?"

Rick shot her a warning glance and dumped the remains of his coffee down the sink. "Knock it off, Penny."

"I know! I'll watch for that goofy puppy dog look you get on your face. As soon as I see that look, I'll make a quick getaway."

Rick sighed and regretted asking to have Penny cover this convention with him. Once she started, Penny would tease him mercilessly. It was definitely going to be a long, long week.

The phone rang, putting a temporary end to her taunts. Rick smiled when he heard Lace on the other end of the line. Did he detect a soft promise in her voice when she asked him to join her for lunch?

"That's it!" Penny said when Rick hung up the phone.

"What?"

She pointed to his face. "There's that goofy puppy dog look. Yup, you're falling for her."

Rick didn't bother to argue. So what if he was? He could even tolerate Penny's wisecracks, which she continued all the way to the hotel, making the fifteen-minute drive feel like an eternity.

They waited well beyond the scheduled meeting time, and when Lace finally made an entrance she arrived holding court over an adoring throng of admirers.

Rick watched her glide into the room. She wore a leather miniskirt as dark and rich as Swiss chocolate. A bronze jacket over a sheer tan camisole set off the glints of copper in her hair. He caught his breath when she stared at him and smiled.

She took his breath away, looking even more beautiful than he remembered. Still, he preferred the way she'd looked last night—natural and innocent and touchable.

"Rick, darling," she called, kissing him lightly on the cheek and introducing him to the crowd around her. He waited for the spark when her lips brushed his skin, but it never came. He could have been kissing one of his sisters for all the excitement he felt.

He frowned. What was wrong with him? Last night he'd been convinced she'd fit perfectly in his arms, like two pieces of the same puzzle. Today the angles felt all wrong.

Lace claimed the seat beside him and the conversation continued as if he wasn't even there. She regaled the crowd with sparkling conversation that seemed as rehearsed as her throaty laughter.

Rick nursed his rum and Coke and watched the interaction around the table. People hung on her every word. She was the center of attention and wore it comfortably. A woman Lace had introduced as her editor chewed her lip, frowning when Lace announced that her new book, *A Little Piece of Heaven*, would be on the stands by next Christmas. Penny looked slightly amused, as if challenging him to prove there was anything soft or vulnerable about Lace Kincaid.

Finally Lace sighed and addressed the group at the table. "I hope you all don't mind, but Rick and I have to get some background information together for his article." She stood and looked at him as if begging him to back up her hasty retreat.

Caught by surprise, he mumbled agreement and followed her to the doorway. When they were out of hearing range, he reached for her elbow and turned her to face him, more confused than annoyed. "What was that all about?"

She looked at him with liquid eyes and sighed. "I just had to get away. I'm under so much pressure right now. My editor keeps talking about this new contract which means so much more work, and asking when the book will be finished, and everyone wants to know how I feel about the award. I haven't been alone since I got up this morning and I'm exhausted. I just need to get away. I need to stop being Lace Kincaid for a little while and just be me."

Rick smiled. That sounded great. He wasn't sure he liked the public Lace Kincaid all that much. Maybe getting away from this arena where she felt she had to play a part would help him rediscover the attraction he'd felt last night.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asked.

"Not at all. Where would you like to go?"

He led her to his car and held the door open. She slipped inside, leaned back and sighed. "Someplace quiet," she said softly.

Rick nodded. He knew just the place.

* * * * *

Ashley stared at the screen. *Okay*, she thought, *what comes after meatloaf?*

Jenny stepped into the office and tossed a kernel of popcorn, which bounced off Ashley's forehead and landed on the keyboard, lodging between the J and K keys.

Ashley glared at her friend. "You're not helping."

"Well, you're not writing anyway."

"I was thinking," Ashley grumbled. She dug at the kernel, leaving a streak of gibberish across the screen that made just as much sense as anything she'd written so far.

"What were you thinking?" Jenny asked, pushing aside a pile of papers on the desk to make room for the bowl of popcorn.

"What comes after meatloaf?" Ashley asked.

Jenny frowned thoughtfully then clapped her hands together. "I know. A sex scene!"

When Ashley scowled at her, Jenny added, "Just be sure they brush their teeth first."

"Yeah, that should fill up a couple of pages."

Jenny laughed. "Well, if anyone can make brushing teeth exciting, it's you." When Ashley didn't respond, Jenny's voice softened. "What's wrong?"

Ashley sighed and rolled her chair away from the computer. "I don't know. I can't write anymore. The words fall flat and everything comes out all wrong. I don't feel excited about my work."

"Take a break," Jenny suggested. "Let's go shopping. You'll come back fresh and inspired."

Ashley shook her head. "That's all I've been doing is taking breaks lately. I'm so far behind schedule now I'd have to write twenty-four hours a day to make my deadline."

"You're just in a slump." Jenny put her arms around Ashley's shoulders. "Tell me what you have so far."

Ashley outlined the story, ending with the meatloaf scene she'd written that morning.

"Funny," Jenny said. "The hero. What's his name?"

"Mitch Desmond."

"Yeah. Mitch. He sounds an awful lot like that reporter you told me about. The one you had coffee with last night."

"No. He's nothing like—" Ashley began, then stopped herself. Jenny was right, she realized. Now that she thought about it, Mitch Desmond could *be* Rick Orlando. They both had the same coloring, the same hair, the same build. They both had the same way of catching your gaze and smiling in that slow, secret way. They both liked outdoor sports and preferred soccer to football.

Ashley thought back to last night and the way Rick's arm had brushed against her when he'd held the door open. A tingle rippled down her spine at the memory. She shivered, imagining those arms around her, strong and warm and solid. She had a feeling his embrace would feel like coming home.

Before she knew it, she was lost in a fantasy so intense her toes tingled.

"So, are we going shopping?" Jenny asked.

Ashley didn't reply. She had already started typing, the words flowing so fast she couldn't keep up and she was afraid of losing those tenuous threads running through

her imagination. She wrote fast and furiously, forgetting Jenny was still in the room until she spoke up again.

"I guess you figured out what comes after meatloaf, huh?"

Ashley turned and grinned. "You were right."

"I was?"

"Yeah," Ashley said. "A sex scene comes after meatloaf."

What she didn't say was that her hero had suddenly come alive for her. He was hot and sexy with a hint of danger, and in her mind, if not on paper, his name was Rick Orlando.

* * * * *

Rick opened the door of the cabin and Lexi stepped inside. She wrinkled her nose at the musty smell that hung in the air as she looked around. The walls of the cabin were paneled in knotty pine. Fishing poles leaned against a soot-covered potbelly stove and a shotgun hung over the mantel.

This was hardly the romantic backdrop she'd choose to entice a man. She cringed at the thought, a twinge of guilt flickering inside her. It wasn't as if she was seducing him. She just wanted to pique his interest for Ashley. A little feminine lure could go a long way. Was it wrong to try to attract a man for her sister? It was obvious there was a spark between Ashley and the handsome reporter. All she had to do was fan that spark into a flame and let nature take its course. *Besides, she justified, it's not as if I'm going to sleep with him or anything.*

Rick beamed proudly, gesturing to take in the rustic cabin. "Well, what do you think?"

Lexi tried not to let her real feelings show on her face. "Are we going hunting?"

"No," he said. "But there's a canoe down by the dock. I've got some cutoff shorts and a T-shirt you could slip into if you'd like to go fishing. There's nothing more relaxing than being out on the lake with a fishing pole, right?"

Fishing. She liked the analogy. Think of it as fishing. She would set the bait, hook him then turn the line over to her sister to reel in the catch.

Lexi nodded with what she hoped looked like enthusiasm. The way Ashley would react. *Ashley*. She had to remember why she was doing this. There was no mistaking the sound in her sister's voice when she'd talked to her this morning. Just as she'd suspected, Ashley and Rick had hit it off. Her sister needed someone like Rick in her life. Of course he'd think she'd be impressed by this remote cabin on the lake. It was just the kind of place Ashley would love.

But a canoe? Lexi lowered herself gingerly onto a tattered orange and brown plaid sofa. "Could we just sit for a few minutes? I need to catch my breath." She patted the cushion beside her and coughed delicately when a light cloud of dust drifted upward.

Not seeming to notice, Rick sat beside her. Lexi kicked off her heels and curled her legs beneath her in a long, slow sweep, secretly relieved when his gaze traveled the length of her leg from ankle to thigh. At least he had working hormones. Now all she had to do was stir them up and set him loose. Once he turned that smoldering sexuality on Ashley, it was sure to start her creative juices flowing again.

He cleared his throat. "I thought this would be a great place to relax. You said you loved the lake."

"Oh, I do," she replied, covering a tiny yawn. "I'm just so tired right now." She leaned forward, resting her head on his shoulder and letting her hand drop to his knee.

He patted her back stiffly. "Would you like me to make some coffee?"

"No," she said, snuggling closer. "Tell me something I don't know about Rick Orlando."

She had to be careful, she realized. She had only a vague idea of what he and Ashley had talked about last night. "What's your favorite color? What's your favorite cookie? Where would you live if you could live anywhere in the world?" She traced a lazy circle along his knee with the tip of her fingernail.

"Red, peanut butter and...oh, jeez!"

His response, she noticed, was immediate and expected. She tilted her head up and stared into his eyes invitingly. He hesitated a moment, then tightened his arm around her and swept her upward into a hungry kiss. He broke away first, a confused look on his face.

Nothing. Not a thing. Where was that tingle he'd felt when their fingers had touched last night? Why didn't her lips feel as inviting as he'd expected?

She draped her arm around his shoulder and leaned forward. "I could show you a little piece of heaven," she said in a throaty voice that held a world of promise.

He gently eased her away. "Why don't I make that coffee now," he said, standing up and turning toward the kitchen.

Lexi sighed. There was no chemistry between them. Good thing, too. She played the vixen so well it was all too easy to get carried away. Her sister was interested in Rick, and that was a line Lexi wouldn't cross. As much as she wanted to rev this relationship into overdrive before pushing Rick and Ashley together, she was going to have to depend on things between him and her sister developing at a slower rate. That didn't mean she couldn't help things along in her own way, though.

"Rick?"

He turned and looked at her questioningly.

"I think I need to get back now. Could we save the coffee and fishing for another day?"

"Of course," he said.

Was that relief on his face? Lexi took a business card from her purse and scribbled her sister's address on the back. "Could you swing by my place tonight and we'll do some work then?"

Their fingers brushed when he took the card from her hand, but she felt no sparks at all.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said.

The smile on his face almost took the sting out of his rejection. Even though she'd been trying to entice him on her sister's behalf, Lexi couldn't help feeling annoyed. Who did he think he was?

"Well, don't lose the card. If you can't reach me at the hotel, you can reach me there. I've put my cell phone number and address on the back."

He glanced at the card, nodded and tucked it into his pocket. It was obvious to Lexi he had no intention of using it.

Her mind working feverishly, she formed a plan. Back in his car, she tucked her purse between the bucket seats. She may have lost this battle, but the war was far from over.

Chapter Five

Rick caught up with Penny in the lobby of the hotel, where she was shooting pictures for the Sunday layout.

She reached out and straightened his collar, fingering a smudge on the crisp linen. "Lipstick," she said with a wink. "It looks like Rum Raisin to me. Now, who do we know who wears that particular shade of lipstick?"

You knows very well who, Rick thought, but refused to rise to the bait. "Penny, can I talk to you?"

"Sure," she said, snapping the lens onto her camera. "Trouble in paradise?"

Rick couldn't help smiling. *Trouble in Paradise* was the title of one of Lace Kincaid's novels. He led Penny to a quiet corner in the lobby. A fish tank teeming with iridescent tropical fish lined the wall beside them. Rick followed the lazy kaleidoscope patterns of swimming fish as he gathered his thoughts, letting Penny's rambling chatter fill in the silence.

"This is a gorgeous hotel, isn't it?" she asked, not waiting for an answer. "Did you see the peacocks in the gardens out back? I've got some great shots of the grounds and the cover model beauty pageant. Tomorrow we have interviews with the award candidates, but we're free for the rest of today. Want to do something tonight? Maybe we could go line dancing at Duff's."

Rick shook his head. "I don't understand her."

"Her?" Penny raised an eyebrow. "Lace Kincaid, I presume?"

He nodded. "Yeah. One minute she's all soft and sweet and innocent and I want to shelter her from the world." He was too intent on his thoughts to notice Penny's snort of disbelief. "The next minute she's this transparent prima donna intent on seduction, and I don't feel anything at all for her. Not a thing. It's as if she's two women and I react to each one differently."

"I'm not sure I can help," Penny said. "I've only seen the one and I'm not all that crazy about her." She grinned. "Maybe I ought to get to know the other one, the one you've kept to yourself. Then I could make an informed judgment."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I think maybe the more distance I keep between me and Lace Kincaid, the better. She's confusing the hell out of me."

He was interrupted by a sudden outburst from across the lobby. At the center of the commotion was an Adonis with flowing blond locks who looked as if he were carved from sun-lit bronze. An open suede vest revealed an astounding expanse of bare chest. Tight, laced leather pants hugged bulging thighs. A group of women surrounded him, their eyes wide and adoring, as if a god had stepped down from Mt. Olympus and

entered their midst. He signed their books, leaning down and kissing each swooning woman in turn.

"Who's that?" Rick asked.

Penny giggled. "That's The Sapphire Man. He's this year's hot cover model."

"Does he have a name?"

"Sure he does. I wrote it down somewhere. But I think 'Sapphire Man' suits him better, don't you?"

"Yeah, right," Rick smirked.

Penny sighed and chewed her bottom lip. "Rick?"

He turned and waited, but she must have decided against whatever she'd been about to say.

"Never mind," she said, shaking her head. She stared thoughtfully at the crowd gathering around the cover model.

"Do you think he's attractive?" Rick asked.

"Him? Mr. Pulchritude?" Penny giggled. "Nah...I like my men wimpy and manageable."

He curled his finger under her chin and turned her to face him. "What were you going to say – before?"

Penny stared thoughtfully into his eyes. Then, as if making a difficult decision, she sighed. "I don't know if I should tell you this or not. Well...it may only be a rumor, but I hear that Lace Kincaid and Mr. Sapphire here are an item."

Rick felt a sharp pain, like a quick jab to his gut. "An item? You mean lovers?"

Penny shrugged. "Like I said, it may only be a rumor..." She let the sentence dangle, her personal opinion evident in her tone of voice.

Rick nodded, a coldness settling over him as he tried not to care. The truth was he wasn't surprised. Lace was a seductress, a temptress who delighted in her sexual power over men. At least the public Lace, anyway. They'd be a perfect match, wouldn't they?

But the thought of the woman he'd had coffee with last night in the arms of this Fabio wannabe was ludicrous. And the thought of her with another man wounded him to the very core.

* * * * *

Ashley slumped at her desk, exhausted but happy. She'd written all day long and knew it was some of her best work yet. She quickly read over the finished chapters, surprised that they needed only the most minor of revisions.

The prose was inspired. She smiled, knowing just who to thank for the inspiration.

She hit the print button and waited. As each page emerged, she felt a delicious thrill of accomplishment. After struggling so long with this writer's block, it felt incredible to

be working again. Writing. She defined herself as a writer. That's why this block had been so hard to deal with. If she couldn't write, then who was she?

She knew the answer to that. She'd be what she'd always been—Alexis Kincaid's sister. A pale imitation of the real thing.

Ashley checked the manuscript pages that had printed so far. The last five or six were blank. Damn. The printer had run out of ink. She hit the pause button and removed the ink cartridge, scrambling in her drawer for a refill kit.

She sighed and straightened out the instruction sheet, then started lining up the various pieces of the ink filler in the holder. She pumped ink, and when the cartridge was full, she checked the next step, running her finger along the tiny print as she read the instructions out loud. "With cartridge primer in place, plug up the fill hole..."

The fill hole? Didn't I already –

She jumped out of her chair as ink began oozing from the bottom of the cartridge, spilling all over her desk. She quickly shoved papers aside, out of the path of the ink, dabbing at the flow with tissues that hardly seemed to make a dent in the expanding black puddle.

"Damn, damn, damn!" she shouted as ink dripped off the corner of her desk.

Lexi entered just then. "Oooh, aren't *we* the little gutter-mouth!"

Ignoring her sister's taunt, Ashley swiped at the ever-growing puddle. "Don't just stand there, do something!"

Lexi left and came back with a roll of paper towels. Between the two of them they managed to clear the mess. After making sure there wasn't too much damage to the papers scattered all over the desk, Lexi turned to Ashley.

"What in the world were you doing?"

"I ran out of ink," Ashley said.

"I can see that. But you're not supposed to bathe in it."

"I think the directions were wrong on the refill kit. Either that or I messed up," Ashley admitted with a wry grin.

Lexi stared at her sister. "Refill kit? Why don't you just buy a new cartridge? Hell, you can buy a whole case of cartridges."

Ashley shrugged. "Well, the refill kits cost half the price of a new cartridge."

With barely concealed exasperation, Lexi said, "Ash, do you have any idea how much our advance was for *A Little Piece of Heaven*? We're signing a six-figure contract for the next series. For God's sake, Sis, you can afford the stupid cartridges."

"It still seems like a waste of money," Ashley said.

Lexi flipped through the pages stacked on the desk and raised an eyebrow at her sister. "You got all this done today?"

Forgetting all about the spilled ink, Ashley smiled with pride. "Yes. And more too, but I ran out of ink before I could print it all out."

Lexi hugged her. "That's wonderful! Now I'm *really* glad I brought you a present today. It'll be your reward for all the hard work you've done."

"A present?" Ashley exclaimed, wiggling with excitement. "What is it? What is it?"

"You'll just have to open it to find out, won't you? Come on downstairs. But wash that ink off your hands first."

Downstairs, Lexi handed her a package wrapped in gold foil and ribbons. Ashley tore it apart and caught her breath. Inside was a beautiful linen and lace nightgown from the most expensive lingerie store in town.

Ashley held up the nightgown, hugged it to her body and twirled around the living room. Delicate folds of ivory linen swirled around her. The hem and sleeves were edged in a luxuriant fall of handmade lace, and the neckline dipped in a modest sweetheart curve sprinkled with tiny pink satin rosebuds. It was the most beautiful nightgown she'd ever seen—the kind of romantic lingerie one of her heroines would wear.

There was more, too. Underneath the tissue was a basket of assorted bath gels and lotions and bath crystals.

"I love it!" Ashley cried, hugging her sister. "What's the occasion?"

Lexi beamed. "I knew you would. And no reason. I just saw this at the store and it screamed your name."

Ashley danced around the room with the nightgown clutched in front of her. "Thank you. Thank you so much!"

"Hey, I have an idea," Lexi said. "Let's have a slumber party tonight. We'll celebrate all the writing you finished today."

"Really?" Ashley smiled. "But what about the convention?"

"There's nothing going on tonight. The rest of the week I'll be busy, but tonight I'm free." She reached for the basket of bath goodies. "Why don't you go pamper yourself and put your new nightgown on? I'll go get my things and be right back, okay?"

Ashley squeezed her sister once more before scurrying off to fill the tub with steamy, fragrant water.

Lexi waited until she was sure Ashley was out of hearing range then picked up the phone. She dialed Rick Orlando's number, then scribbled a quick note and posted it on the refrigerator before locking the door behind her.

Ash,

I'm so sorry, but Rita called me to an emergency meeting. We'll have to cancel tonight, but I promise to make it up to you. Enjoy your present. Love ya!

Lexi

* * * * *

Rick put down the phone, grumbling. "Why can't women hang onto their damned purses?!"

He called Penny to tell her he'd be late meeting her at Duff's since he had to return Lace Kincaid's wayward purse. After promising Penny he'd hurry and hanging up the phone, he searched his car and found the purse wedged between the bucket seats. He dug through his pocket for the business card Lace had given him then drove off, choking down his growing irritation. A niggling suspicion told him this was all a ploy, that Lace had purposely maneuvered him into coming to her home tonight. He felt manipulated.

Less than fifteen minutes later he pulled up in front of an unpretentious Cape Cod on a quiet cul-de-sac. He double-checked the card to make sure it was the right address. For some reason he'd expected Lace to live someplace flashier, like a penthouse suite. This house was charmingly old-fashioned, with an inviting front porch lined with hanging pots of bright red blossoms. He knew they were called impatiens because his mother had them growing in riotous mounds all over her backyard. The thought made him smile, softening the edges of irritation.

Tucking the purse under his arm, he lumbered up the porch and rang the doorbell. When the door opened, what was left of his annoyance disappeared like a cloud of mist.

Lace stood in the doorway, a vision in white linen. Although the nightgown was in no way revealing, she looked sexier than any woman he'd ever seen. Her hair was pulled high on her head, with delicate damp tendrils falling along the curve of her neck. A clean, sweet scent that reminded him of green apples floated like a cloud around her.

She looked at him with wide-eyed surprise and something more. Pleasure. She seemed genuinely surprised and pleased to see him.

That look did incredible things to his heart.

He held the purse out. "Your...um, purse. I found it between the seats. In my car." He was embarrassed to find himself stuttering. She had that effect on him.

She blinked, looking puzzled for a moment, then recovered and held out her hand for the purse. "Oh, thank you so much for bringing it by." Her smile went straight through him, making his heart jackhammer in his chest. If this was a ploy, he was falling for it hook, line and sinker. Funny—he could have resisted her if she'd answered the door in leather and fishnets, but this soft, sweet innocence did him in completely.

"I, um..."

"Would you like to come in?" she asked.

He nodded, afraid his voice would tremble if he tried to speak.

She sat primly at a dining room chair and gestured him to the chair across the table. When she'd called, he'd expected another seduction attempt. Now he felt a stab of disappointment that he'd been wrong.

After a few minutes, he finally found his voice. "I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to go fishing this afternoon."

"Fishing?" Her brow furrowed for a moment, then relaxed as if she'd just heard the punch line of a joke. She bit down on her lower lip, stifling a giggle. "Yes, that would have been very, um...interesting."

"Maybe we can take a rain check on it?" he asked, wondering what was so funny.

She nodded and smiled. "Yes, I'd like that a lot. Today wasn't the best day for it. I, uh, wasn't dressed for fishing."

"No, you weren't. And you were tired. When you said you wanted to get away, the cabin came to mind. I guess I wanted to impress you. After our talk last night, I thought you'd love the cabin my grandfather left me."

He wanted her to know how much the cabin meant to him, how many wonderful memories were tied up in his special place. He wanted her to love it as much as he did.

"We had such wonderful times there—hunting and fishing and playing nickel-dime poker long into the night. I wanted to share it with you."

She seemed to be holding her breath then released it with a long sigh that tugged at his heart. "Thank you. Thank you for sharing your special place with me. And yes, I'll take a rain check on that fishing trip."

He reached out and covered her hand with his, marveling at the softness of her skin, the thrumming vibrations which seemed to tremble from her body to his.

I must be going crazy, he thought.

When he squeezed her hand, she lowered her eyes with a shy sweep. He was entranced to see a delicate blush color her cheeks. A blush! Lace Kincaid blushing?

His arms ached to hold her. What had she said this afternoon? *I could show you a little piece of heaven*. His body hardened when he remembered the sultry promise in her voice, and he slid his chair farther under the table to hide his immediate response.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

His answer was so quick he surprised himself. He did, but what he really wanted was an excuse to stay there and stare into those amazing green eyes that seemed to bore into the depths of his soul.

"Lemonade?"

"Perfect."

And it was. Everything about her tonight was perfect. A silly thought came to him. Maybe she was like a reverse vampire, all clawing advances during the day and sweet blushing innocence at night. He chuckled out loud.

She smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Um. I was thinking..." Now what was he going to say? "About The Sapphire Man," he finished, pleased at his quick save.

"The Sapphire Man? You mean the cover model?"

He nodded. "Penny and I saw him at the convention today. He was dressed as if he'd just stepped off the cover of a novel and surrounded by women acting like giggling teenagers. I just thought it was funny, that's all."

Before he could stop himself, he blurted out, "Do you know him?"

She hesitated, as if choosing her words carefully. "Not really." A tiny frown creased her forehead. "I mean, I've met him of course. But I don't really know him."

"Oh? I heard you two were close." He was fishing and he knew it, but he couldn't stop himself.

Lace tipped her head and cast a questioning glance at him. "Close in what way?"

Now it was his turn to blush. "You know. Close."

She nodded and pursed her lips. "I see. And where did you hear this?"

"I'm sorry. It's just a stupid rumor. I shouldn't have mentioned it." The look on her face convinced him his suspicions were unfounded and he was ashamed for pushing. He simply needed to be sure.

"No," she said. "I'm glad you told me. I'll get to the bottom of it, believe me."

A sigh of relief escaped his lips. There it was again—that tilt of her head and the sparkle in her eyes that made him want to scoop her up and carry her into the bedroom.

She stood then, and he wondered if she'd read his thoughts.

She reached out and took his hand, thanked him for stopping by and then led him to the door.

No, not yet, he wanted to scream. *Don't make me go yet*. At the door he stopped and stared into her eyes. Couldn't she tell how he felt? Where was the promise she'd held out earlier?

He curled his finger beneath her chin, tilting her face to his. Had he ever seen lips so soft, so full and inviting? He leaned forward until they barely touched, lightly brushing his lips across hers in the merest whisper of a kiss.

She seemed to pull away for a second, then leaned into him, her lips parting in an invitation he couldn't resist. He slid his hand to the small of her back, pulling her closer, kissing her harder.

When she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, falling deeper and deeper into the kiss, he held her tight against him, pressing his body into hers and letting it speak for him.

Her response was everything he could ask for. Nothing else mattered—not the article, not The Sapphire Man, not the way she confused him shifting from hot one minute to cold the next. The only thing that mattered was the way their hearts pounded in harmony, the way her lips molded soft and warm against his, the little sounds of pleasure she made as they kissed.

He buried his hands in her hair and parted her lips further, exploring the soft, warm surfaces of her mouth and gasping when her tongue met his. Groaning, he pulled back and trailed kisses down her neck to her throat.

His voice was husky at her ear. "How about showing me that little piece of heaven now, sweetheart."

She broke away, pushing hard against his chest and frowning into his face. "What did you say?" Her eyes, so soft before, darkened with anger.

He stuttered, unprepared for the sudden shift from the heat of passion to the ice-cold anger he now saw. "I just meant...you said —"

She folded her arms across her chest and cut him off, glaring at him. "I think you'd better leave," she said, opening the door.

"But —"

"Please go."

Her tone of voice left no room for argument and the tearful shimmer in her eyes made him feel like the biggest creep who ever walked the Earth. What had he done? The way she was acting, you'd think he'd forced himself on her. Hadn't she been intent on seducing him all along? Why was he suddenly the bad guy?

"Lace?" he called. But she slammed the door behind him, leaving him wondering if he really was crazy.

Obviously one of them was.

Chapter Six

Rick wished he'd never mentioned Lace Kincaid to his mother. How could he have known Carmella Orlando considered herself Lace's biggest fan and could recite whole paragraphs from her books verbatim?

Carmella placed some cannoli on Rick's plate and gushed like a schoolgirl. "I can't believe it, Ricky. I've never met a real writer before!"

"Huh? What about me?" Rick asked.

She patted his arm and added another cannoli to his dish. "Oh, that's different," she replied. "You write for newspapers."

"And if there were half-naked people splashed across the front page of the newspaper, would you be more impressed?"

"Don't go losing your temper with me, Ricky. You know what I mean."

"No, I don't, Mom," he said through gritted teeth. "And I'm not losing my temper."

"I just mean that you write about—you know—*real* stuff. You report things that happen. You don't write *books*!" The look of rapture on her face when she said "books" made it obvious she believed writing "real stuff," as she put it, was for people who weren't talented enough to spin fiction.

"I'm a journalist, Mom." He sighed. This was an argument he couldn't possibly win with his mother, who had learned English by reading romance novels and watching American soap operas. Writers and actors were her idols. Apparently, Lace Kincaid was at the top of the list. How could he tell her that her favorite author was a nutcase?

"What time is the book signing?" she asked, her eyes twinkling. "And what should I wear?"

"Momma, you always look beautiful."

She smiled and patted his head. "But to meet Lace Kincaid I must look special. I don't want to embarrass you."

It was too late to disappoint his mother, Rick realized. From the time she'd heard he was interviewing Lace Kincaid, she'd looked forward to the book signing and having her cherished copies autographed by her favorite author.

When he first told her about it, she ran to her bookshelf and started stuffing a collection of dog-eared books into plastic grocery bags. Each book looked as if it had been read a dozen times, with bent corners and creased spines.

He'd put his hand out to stop her. "Mom, you don't want these raggedy old paperbacks signed. Let me buy you new books to be autographed."

She'd argued at first, but he knew she would treasure the special signed books and keep them in mint condition. She finally agreed when he'd turned his most winning smile on her, saying, "I want to do this for you, Mom."

She looked at him with the adoration reserved for the only son in a sea of daughters. "You would do that, Ricky?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, leaning down to kiss her cheek. "Anything for my best girl."

Since then, all she'd talked about was meeting Lace Kincaid. Rick didn't have the heart to let his mother down. He hoped Lace would be on her best behavior tonight and not disappoint his mother.

"So," his mother said. "How's Penny?"

"We're just friends, Mom." The statement was automatic. His mother had tried for years to push him into Penny's arms in her quest to get him married and producing more grandchildren to add to her dynasty.

"I know, I know," she said. "I'm just asking how your friend is, that's all."

"She's fine, Mom."

"You're not getting any younger, you know. Your sisters keep asking me when you're going to settle down."

"That's funny, they never ask *me*."

"They don't want to embarrass you."

Rick gritted his teeth. "Why don't you wear the pretty blue dress you bought for Aunt Rosalie's birthday party?"

Carmella smiled. "Don't change the subject. But yes, the blue dress makes me look thinner, and I know when you don't want to discuss something. So, case closed." She muttered under her breath, "For now."

Rick turned away.

"And don't go rolling your eyes at me," she said.

"I'll pick you up at seven o'clock, Mom," he said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

Lexi finally realized what she was doing wrong. Obviously Rick Orlando liked his women a little less flashy, less secure, less aggressive. More like Ashley.

Considering the sparkle in Ashley's eyes when she mentioned his name, the attraction was mutual. Lexi realized if she was going to push this romance into overdrive, she'd have to act more like Ashley. She could do it, too. She'd gotten away with it before in high school. It was just a matter of thinking herself into Ashley's mindset and being careful to curb her own natural instincts.

Lexi flicked through the clothes in her closet for something suitably "Ashley". The closest she found was a tailored white linen suit. Very understated, but soft and elegant.

She washed her hair—letting it air dry into soft, unstructured waves—and added just a hint of makeup for a glowing, natural look.

Smiling, she studied her reflection in the mirror. There. She looked enough like Ashley to fool anyone but their own mother.

A knock on the door interrupted her inspection. Lexi opened the door and smiled at the gorgeous vision filling the doorway. The Sapphire Man stood looking down at her, his collarless shirt unbuttoned halfway down his sculpted chest.

Lexi slipped her hand inside his open shirt and placed it over his heart. “Hi, lover,” she cooed.

He leaned forward and kissed her tenderly, brushing his lips lightly over hers, then pulled back and stared into her eyes. “I’ll wait while you get ready,” he said.

Lexi giggled. “I am ready. I’m going for a more natural look. What do you think?”

“I like it. I like it a lot.”

“Really?” Lexi frowned. “Better than how I usually look?”

“Not better, no. I love how you look all the time.” He growled. “Dressed or undressed.”

“Mmmmm,” Lexi purred. “Good answer.”

She kissed him again, wishing she didn’t have to be at the book signing in fifteen minutes.

“So,” he said, “is that reporter going to be sniffing around all night again?”

“I’m afraid so. And while he’s here I’m going to have to be careful. But I promise to make it up to you, Sapphie.”

He winked. “I’ll hold you to that promise, darlin’.”

She gave him one final hug before locking the door of the suite behind them. They made their way to the banquet room where rows of tables were lined up waiting for the authors participating in the signing.

Lexi took her place, sitting demurely behind stacks of her books while Sapphie strolled the room, having his picture taken with fans.

* * * * *

Rick watched Lace Kincaid enter the room with The Sapphire Man. There was no mistaking the chemistry between them. The air sizzled with it.

She’d lied to him. There was obviously something going on between Lace and that half-naked jewel guy.

“There she is,” his mother said. By the tone of her voice, you’d think the Pope had granted them a personal audience.

Tucking his mother’s arm through his, he led her over to Lace’s table. He noticed that while other authors had an occasional book break, a constant crowd clamored around Lace. People obviously loved her and her books.

As he got closer, she looked up from her signing and noticed him. She smiled brightly. There was no sign of the anger he'd seen last night. Not anger really. Disappointment? Yes, that was more like it. For some reason she'd been disappointed in him, as if he'd behaved badly. But what had he done wrong? She'd been leading him on for days now. If he was a cad, then she was a tease.

"Lace," he said when a spot finally opened up in the crowd. "I'd like you to meet my mother, Carmella Orlando. Mom, this is Lace Kincaid."

Lace clasped his mother's hand in hers and smiled winningly. "I'm so glad to meet you. Your son has been such a pleasure this week. I swear I don't know what I would have done without him."

Carmella glowed with pride. If nothing else, Rick thought, Lace sure knew how to be charming. She continued charming his mother, keeping her enthralled with stories about the characters in her books. His mother talked about each of them as if they were members of her own family. Listening to them talk, if he didn't know better he'd have sworn they were talking about real people, not fictional characters. Maybe that was Lace Kincaid's secret to success – writing characters that came alive for her readers.

Lace kept Carmella nearby while she signed books for others, somehow making everyone feel special while spreading her attention between them. She was good at what she did, he had to admit. Again he found himself wondering why he got mixed signals from her. Of course, she had to wear different hats. It was only natural that she'd be more relaxed, more herself, away from the limelight. Maybe it was all his problem, not hers.

She turned and smiled at him. "Why don't you wander around and take notes, Rick. Your mother promised to stay and keep me company."

He started to argue, but the adoration on his mother's face stopped him. This was a special moment for her and Lace was treating her like a queen. What harm could come of leaving them alone?

He should have known better.

* * * * *

Penny had already taken more pictures of The Sapphire Man than she could possibly use in a lifetime of articles. But the pictures were just an excuse. She was waiting for an opening. Despite Rick's arguments to the contrary, he was obviously falling for Lace Kincaid. Her radar was on full alert. She'd seen him hurt before. As his best friend, she'd been the one to help him put the pieces back together. If Rick was involved with another man-eater, she was going to put a stop to it before Lace Kincaid chewed him up and spit him out.

While she worked, she couldn't help admiring the model. He was a triple threat – not only gorgeous, but charming and intelligent too. She realized she'd expected an empty-headed boy toy. She was ashamed to admit that if a man had assumed the same

thing about a beautiful woman she'd have torn him to shreds with righteous indignation.

He turned those incredible sapphire eyes on her. "Are we through here?" She knew he was named after the Sapphire Romance line that he modeled for, but with those eyes, the name couldn't be more appropriate. Penny tried not to stammer when she found her voice.

"Well, I was wondering if I could get a few shots of you with some of the authors. You know we're focusing the article on Lace Kincaid, right?"

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

There was no mistaking the way his face softened at the mention of Lace's name, or the way his gaze turned inward as if lost in remembered bliss. There was no doubt in Penny's mind. She recognized the look of a man head-over-heels in love.

"Would you mind if I got a few shots of you and Lace together?"

His gaze shifted immediately to where Lace was sitting, as if he kept track of her every movement. A moment's hesitation flickered there and Penny wondered if he'd been warned to keep his distance in public.

"Just a few pictures?" she coaxed.

"I don't see why not," he said, obviously deciding that to refuse would be even more suspicious. But he seemed nervous as they made their way through the aisles toward Lace Kincaid's table.

Penny was surprised to see Rick's mother sitting beside the author, the two of them chatting like old friends.

"Mrs. Orlando?"

"Oh, hello Penny," Carmella said, looking up. "You've met Lace Kincaid, right? Of course you have." Carmella turned to Lace, adding with a conspiratorial whisper, "Penny and Rick are friends—*just friends*."

Penny watched the exchange, wondering why Mrs. Orlando thought it important to clarify their friendship.

"Rick is my best friend," Penny said pointedly.

Lace raised an eyebrow in her direction. Her gaze probed Penny's for a moment then flickered to The Sapphire Man. Something unspoken passed between them, making Penny even more determined to get to the bottom of their relationship.

All through the silent exchange, Rick's mother chattered on and on about what a big fan of Lace Kincaid she was, which Penny realized would only make things more difficult.

Penny cleared her throat and turned to Rick's mother. "I'm taking some pictures of Lace and The Sapphire Man. How would you like me to take a few extras for you?"

Mrs. Orlando's face lit up as she moved beside Lace. "Oh, would you?"

"Of course. Now smile." Penny took a few shots of the women together then waved The Sapphire Man into the frame. "Closer," she urged, waving her hand inward. "I want to get all three of you in the shot."

She waited, knowing if she were right he wouldn't be able to stand so close to Lace without revealing his true emotions.

"Just a bit closer now."

Sure enough, when their arms touched, The Sapphire Man stared deep into Lace's eyes, his feelings evident on his face.

"There!" Penny snapped the shutter.

Lace gazed back at him. Her eyes softened and her lips parted slightly, turning up in a secret smile.

Snap. Snap.

Penny caught it all—every silent, emotion-charged glance. Rick would have to be an idiot not to see what was evident in these pictures. *I'll make sure of it*, Penny thought.

She realized Mrs. Orlando was asking a question and focused her attention on Rick's mother, barely catching the drift of the conversation.

"And I've convinced Lace to join us. You'll be there, right? Do you think the pictures will be ready by then? I can't wait to show Rosalie and Angela. They'll be green with envy!"

It only took a few minutes for Penny to catch on—the big Orlando family picnic. Of course. The annual event was this Saturday. Lace was going?

Penny couldn't imagine Lace Kincaid surrounded by the raucous Orlando clan. There was no way she was going to miss this show. She wondered if Rick knew yet.

Chapter Seven

Ashley stamped her foot. "No, no, *no*!"

"Ashley, please?" Lexi begged.

"No."

"I don't understand. I thought you liked Rick Orlando."

"I did." Ashley frowned, avoiding her sister's imploring gaze. She knew the minute Lexi showed up at her door with *that* look on her face that her sister wanted something. Lexi always got her way. But not this time. "I thought he was different, but it turns out he's just a lech."

Lexi blinked. "A lech? Are you kidding me? I couldn't even..." She stuttered and caught herself. "I mean, I didn't get that impression at all! He's been a perfect gentleman."

Her argument infuriated Ashley more. "Really?" She wondered what that "I couldn't even" referred to, but was too angry to pursue it at the moment. "Well, he attacked me last night."

"What? Are you all right? What do you mean he attacked you?"

Ashley blushed at her sister's sudden concern. "Well, he didn't actually attack me. But we were, um, kissing, and —"

Lexi smiled, cocking an eyebrow. "You were kissing? How? When?"

"He stopped by and it was nice—at first. We talked. Then when he left we kissed." Remembering that kiss made her feel soft and warm inside. "Oh Lexi, it was beautiful. My heart fluttered and the world seemed to hold still for a moment. There was just the two of us joined in a heart-stopping kiss." Ashley sighed. "It was like the lyrics to every love song I've ever heard."

"God, you sound like a romance writer." Lexi chuckled. "But I knew it. You do like him!"

Ashley pouted. "Yes, I did. But then he changed. He leered at me, I swear it! He made the most crude, suggestive comment."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, something about me showing him a piece of heaven. Can you believe that? Sure I kissed him, but that didn't mean I was ready to hop into bed with him. We just met! What does he think I am?"

Lexi started laughing. It started as a slow, throaty giggle then bubbled over until she was clutching her stomach and rolling on the couch.

"What is so darn funny?"

Lexi tried to catch her breath. "Ashley, you totally misunderstood him."

"I don't think so. I know a come-on when I hear one. I pushed him out the door so fast his head spun!"

"You didn't!"

"I did."

Lexi thought quickly. Her plan was working better than she expected. Too bad she'd forgotten how prim and proper her sister could be. She scrambled for an explanation to deflect Ashley's anger then hit on the perfect excuse.

"Oh, Ashley. He was referring to the book. I asked him for his opinion on *A Little Piece of Heaven*. He promised to look at it."

Ashley blinked. "What?"

Lexi wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "He was talking about the manuscript. Sorry to disappoint you, Sis, but he wasn't trying to seduce you. He was simply extending a professional courtesy."

Ashley felt both relieved and disappointed at the same time. Then mortified when she remembered the shocked expression on his face when she'd shoved him out the door. "Oh, my. I almost slapped him."

Lexi bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing again. "I thought he seemed a little jittery today at the book signing. Maybe he was afraid I was going to beat him up."

"Stop teasing. I feel awful now."

"Listen," Lexi said, squeezing her sister's hand. "He seems to have gotten over it. And I met his mother. She adores Lace. Now say you'll go to this picnic, okay? And take Rick up on his offer. Show him *A Little Piece of Heaven* and see what his opinion is. He's a professional writer and can help you over this hurdle better than I can."

Now that she knew how wrong she'd been, Ashley jumped at the excuse to see Rick Orlando again. Besides, a picnic sounded like fun. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Good. The picnic is Saturday. That gives me two more days to..."

Ashley stared at her sister questioningly. "To what?"

"Um, to tie up the rest of this article for him so you can relax and just be yourself."

Myself, Ashley thought. *Is that who he wants? Or does he want the Lace Kincaid that Lexi plays so well?* She sighed. This was all getting much too complicated.

Speaking of complications, there was a little something she needed to straighten out with her sister. "What's up with The Sapphire Man?" she asked.

"Hmm? The Sapphire Man?"

Ashley wasn't fooled for a moment by her sister's innocent act. The look on Lexi's face told her everything she needed to know.

"You heard me. I said The Sapphire Man. You know—that broad-chested hunk of testosterone?"

"He has a name, you know," Lexi replied.

"Really? And what is it? 'Oh, God'?"

A Cheshire cat smile crossed Lexi's face. "You're just jealous."

"No, I'm worried," Ashley replied. "Worried about our reputation. Don't forget that whoever you climb into bed with, you take Lace Kincaid with you."

"Ooh, sounds kinky."

"Stop joking. I'm serious."

"Since when have you ever worried about who I spend my time with? I know what you're really worried about. You're afraid Rick will get wind of this and think you're having a wild, torrid affair."

"Wild and torrid? So I was right?"

Lexi actually blushed. "Yes, wild and torrid and hot and sexy and —"

Ashley covered her ears. "I don't want to hear this."

"Oh, right. Like I haven't read those love scenes you've written?"

"Yeah, well, I'm not writing them about my sister."

"No? Who are you writing them about? Do you ever imagine yourself doing those things? Do you research those steamy scenes?"

"Lexi! I can't believe you'd ask me that. If I wrote a murder mystery, would you ask if I researched it by actually killing someone? If I wrote a time travel, would you wonder if I transported myself back in time to make the scene more authentic?"

"All right, all right. Forget I asked. Sheesh, aren't *we* the sensitive one today."

Ashley let that pass. "So, what's his name?"

"Who?"

Ashley poked her sister in the ribs. "You know. The Sapphire Man."

"Why?"

"No reason, just curiosity."

"Which, I might add," Lexi grinned, "killed the cat." Lexi purred dramatically and giggled before changing the subject.

* * * * *

With her sister's warning already forgotten, Lexi sat at the hotel bar watching Sapphie stride across the room, stopping every now and then to sign an autograph or pose for a picture. *Come on*, she thought, getting hotter with every step that brought him closer. She'd never met a man she wanted as much as she wanted him. Every day, every night. She couldn't get enough of him.

They locked gazes and her entire body rippled with desire. She was afraid if he didn't hurry, she'd run across the room and throw herself into his arms. Wouldn't that make a good snapshot for that snoopy photographer she'd seen hanging around all

night? *Even if she is Rick's friend*, Lexi thought, *I wouldn't put it past her to be waiting to catch me in an uncompromising position and sell the photos to one of those gossip magazines.*

Lexi looked around. The redheaded photographer was nowhere in sight. But suddenly her man was. She didn't have to look. She could feel him. Her body knew because the very air changed as if it were charged with electricity.

She turned, tilting her legs at an angle along the barstool. *Touch me*, she wanted to whisper. *Make love to me.*

His husky voice sent tingles through her. "Can I buy you a drink, darlin'?"

"No thank you, I don't drink," Lexi said politely, continuing the public charade.

He gave her a smoldering glance and lowered his voice to a throaty whisper. "A woman should allow herself some pleasures, don't you think?"

"Such as?" Lexi nearly melted. She forced herself to remain in control.

His lips curled up in a knowing grin. *He knows exactly the effect he has on me*, she thought. *He knows and he loves it.* She had to admit he was good at it, though—teasing and tempting and whipping her into a frenzy of sexual frustration that he'd then satisfy so well. Lexi smiled and continued their role-playing.

His hand slid up her leg, his thumb grazing seductively at the hem of her skirt where it rode along her thigh. A shiver ran through her, radiating from the palm on her skin straight to her center, but she stayed in control. Barely.

He whispered in her ear, his warm breath raising goose bumps along her skin. "Pleasures such as sex, darlin'. Wild, passionate sex."

Lexi felt a flush rise to her cheeks. She swallowed hard. "When?"

"Now," he said. "I want you right now." With that his hand slid beneath the hem of her skirt, barely brushing against her before casually reaching up for his glass at the bar.

"Yes." She reached for her purse, afraid her legs would give out beneath her. "Give me five minutes then meet me in my suite."

She glanced at his lap, all too aware that she wasn't the only one affected by their forbidden flirtation. "You might need more than five minutes before you can stand up without embarrassing yourself."

He smiled and winked. "Wear something red, darlin'."

* * * * *

Huddled in a dark corner, Penny didn't miss a single touch or gesture between the two, and she could guess about the whispered conversation. No wonder rumors were flying. The sexual attraction between Lace Kincaid and The Sapphire Man was obvious to even the most casual observer.

When Lace rushed past, her face flushed and her gaze distracted, Penny hid behind the wine menu, although she doubted Lace was aware of anything beyond the man

sitting at the bar watching her with lust written all over his face. Penny had no doubt they were lovers. All she needed now was proof to convince Rick.

She didn't have to wait long. In less than five minutes, Penny saw The Sapphire Man gulp down the rest of his drink and leave the bar, following the same route Lace Kincaid had. Penny was sure it would lead them both to the same bed.

She followed at a safe distance and congratulated herself when The Sapphire Man knocked softly on the door of Lace Kincaid's suite and quickly slipped inside.

I knew it, she thought. But it was a hollow victory. She felt protective of Rick, who obviously was falling for Lace. She hated having to tell him this, but he was her best friend and she wasn't about to let him get hurt.

Penny left the hotel. She'd seen enough. She had all the proof she needed that Lace Kincaid wasn't the woman for Rick. She checked her watch. There was still time to make her appointment at the beauty parlor. Even though she was only taking pictures, she wanted to look her best at the awards banquet Sunday night. She'd overheard some of the women talking about the dresses they'd bought for the formal event. There was no way she was showing up in jeans. Not when everyone else would be wearing sequins and lace.

Lace. She grimaced. She was beginning to hate that word. There was something about that woman that set her teeth on edge. Besides the fact that she was a sneaky liar, sleeping with one man while setting out to seduce another, Penny hated her for using a subterfuge of innocence to appeal to Rick's good nature.

Driving like a maniac, she made it to the beauty parlor with five minutes to spare.

* * * * *

Ashley and Jenny laughed over their purchases as they walked back to the salon. They'd spent the last few hours at the Double M Western Gear Boutique getting outfitted from head to toe. It was Jenny's idea to visit the country-western dude ranch tonight to reward Ashley, who'd been hunched over her computer for the last few days, printing out reams of paper as the story flowed with a life of its own.

Ashley knew Jenny was right. A night out was just what she needed to recharge her batteries. Not for long, though. She couldn't stay away from the story when it was hot like this. Ashley had to force herself to go to bed before the morning sun peeked into her office window. At the rate she was going, that deadline no longer seemed like an impossible mountain to hurdle, but rather a gentle hill she could easily jog over.

"Fringe," Ashley said. "That's the secret."

"Fringe," Jenny repeated, laughing. "The perfect accessory to Western gear."

Everything Ashley bought was covered with fringe, from her red cowboy boots to the flared denim skirt and embroidered white cotton blouse. She and Jenny had even topped their outfits off with authentic cowboy hats.

"Now all I need is to learn that two-step thing."

"No problem," Jenny assured her. "When everyone else gets on the dance floor, you just watch the person in front of you and follow along."

"Unless all this fringe sets off a whirlwind and blows everyone else off the floor," Ashley joked, but she was looking forward to tonight. She hadn't been out in ages, and with Jenny there, she couldn't help but have a good time.

"It's nice to see you smiling again," Jenny said.

Ashley grinned. "I hadn't realized I'd stopped."

"Well, you hadn't really. You still smiled, but it never quite got as far as your eyes. Now they're sparkling again. Alive. It's obvious the writing is going well. Either that or there's a man in your life."

Ashley blushed. "Or both," she said.

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "Really? Do tell."

"There's nothing much to tell yet."

"Nothing? Not even a name? Or can I guess? How about Rick. Rick Orlando?"

Ashley felt her blush deepen.

"I guess that's my answer," Jenny said with a satisfied smile. "I'm not surprised. I suspected you were interested in him. I could tell by the way your voice changed when you said his name and the way your eyes shifted, as if looking somewhere far away."

"Oh, stop being melodramatic."

Jenny laughed. "Yeah, that was pretty melodramatic, huh? How about this?" She reached into the bag swinging by her side and pulled out the shirt she'd spent nearly a full day's salary on. "You were like this shirt without the fringe, plain and serviceable. Now you're all spiffed up, sparkling and eye-catching."

"Well, underneath all the fringe I'm still just a plain white shirt. Always have been. Lexi, on the other hand, is silk. I used to resent that, you know? I wondered what it was about her that drew people. I wondered how we could be so different, not only in personality, but in the way people respond to us."

"You're real. That's the difference."

"No," Ashley argued, automatically defending her sister. "Lexi's real, too. It's just that *her* real is more vivid somehow. Breathtaking. She has a way of making everyone feel special and interesting, so they keep coming back for more of that feeling."

Jenny contradicted her. "With Lexi it's all surface, though. She doesn't care deeply about people the way you do."

Ashley knew her friend was biased. The truth was her sister had gotten all the magic, leaving her none. It wasn't Lexi's fault, just destiny's toss of the dice. While others basked in Lexi's reflected light, Ashley had lived in her sister's shadow far too long to question it anymore.

Jenny put her hand on Ashley's arm and turned her until they faced each other. "You can't compare yourself, Ashley. Lexi is all fringe, all show. Stop judging yourself by some definition only Lexi fits."

Ashley sighed then smiled gratefully at her best friend. "Come on, you're going to be late for work."

Bags swinging at their sides, they continued to their destination. A block away they passed a man on the sidewalk who seemed to be carrying on an animated conversation with an invisible companion, and suddenly the words to a poem she hadn't heard in ages came into Ashley's head.

*As I was going up the stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today,
I wish, I wish he'd stay away.*

Her father used to recite that poem and it always bothered her for some reason. Lexi would laugh at the ending, but Ashley couldn't help feeling a deep sense of sadness when her father reached the last line.

Her sister's giggles had seemed calculated, produced only to charm their father, which she always did. Neither of them felt the sadness Ashley did over the man who annoyed people even though he was invisible.

Then it hit her with such clarity she wondered why she hadn't seen it before. *That's me*, she realized. *I'm the little man who isn't there and still manages to get in everyone's way.*

"I'm here," Ashley murmured. Then louder, to convince herself, "I'm here."

"Yup, we're here," Jenny said, opening the door of the Scissor Shack. "You know, we should go shopping more often. It was fun."

Ashley gave a distracted nod, surprised to find herself standing on the sidewalk outside the beauty parlor. She felt as if she'd been snatched from a dream.

"I'll pick you up at eight o'clock," Jenny called, waving from the doorway. "Prepare to kick up those high-heeled cowboy boots tonight, girl!"

Penny was sitting under the dryer, getting a much-needed deep-heat conditioning treatment, when she thought she saw Lace Kincaid outside the beauty salon laden with shopping bags. She checked her watch. Only forty-five minutes had passed since she'd seen The Sapphire Man sneak into Lace's suite. Lace couldn't have had enough time to bring him to the gates of bliss and still go on a marathon shopping spree.

Suddenly, Penny wasn't so sure of herself. Maybe she was wrong. She was grateful she hadn't spouted off to Rick yet.

While she waited for the timer to go off, she tried to understand why it was so important to discredit Lace Kincaid in Rick's eyes. Was she jealous or simply protective?

No, she decided. She and Rick were only friends, as close as brother and sister. And she'd protect him the way she'd protect any member of her family from predators.

Predators? Wasn't that a little strong? *All right*, she admitted. Maybe she and Lace had gotten off on the wrong foot. True, she didn't trust her. Her female instincts screamed that something was wrong, even though Rick obviously saw something different in Lace, something Penny was missing. But then, men were more easily fooled.

Penny jumped when the timer went off behind her. Her stylist flipped the hood back and hustled her off to a chair right next to the woman who had come in with Lace. Penny shamelessly eavesdropped on the conversation between the coworkers.

As snippets of damp curls flew from the glittering blades of the scissors, the one wearing "Jenny" on her nametag chattered about the new clothes she and her friend had bought to go line dancing that night.

Penny cleared her throat and broke into the casual conversation. "Wasn't that Lace Kincaid, the writer?"

Jenny nodded slowly and stared at her, suspicion and something else on her face. It was the look of a mother cat protecting her kittens, a protective calm hiding barely-sheathed claws. Penny almost laughed at the thought of Lace Kincaid needing protection from anyone. She was a woman who could definitely take care of herself.

"I thought I recognized her," Penny lied, hoping to draw the woman out. People usually jumped at the chance to impress someone with their intimacy to celebrity, but Jenny was having none of it. Somehow Lace had earned at least one person's devotion and loyalty.

When it was obvious Jenny had nothing further to say, Penny dropped the subject, even further confused by the conflicting image of Lace Kincaid forming in her mind.

She decided to bide her time before sharing her suspicions with Rick. But she'd keep an eye on Lace Kincaid, and if there were any signs at all that Lace was playing some adolescent game with Rick's feelings, she'd be sorry.

Chapter Eight

Ashley pushed her chair away from the desk. She glanced at the clock, surprised to see that four hours had passed. She'd been writing since leaving Jenny this afternoon and was stunned at the word count she'd racked up. But even though she'd been prolific, writing at a furious pace just like the old days, that poem had drifted in and out of her mind all afternoon. The more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

Who had made her invisible? It wasn't Lexi's fault, she realized. It was her own. She'd decided a long time ago she couldn't compete, and hid in the shadows rather than trying. It was unfair to blame Lexi for being herself. No one could cast their shadow over you without your permission.

Ashley thought about her heroines. They were all strong, bold, adventurous women. Not whiners or wallflowers. But that was easy. She invented them. She drew up a character chart and, along with eye and hair colors, gave her heroine certain personality traits. She couldn't reinvent herself, though.

She stopped that line of thought. Why not? Maybe she couldn't change overnight, but why not change a little bit at a time? Her first change, she decided, was to stop being invisible.

She turned off the computer without guilt. She'd done enough work for the day. Now it was time to pamper herself.

She began with a long, leisurely bath, then dressed in the clothes Jenny had insisted she buy for their night on the town, determined to be just as stunning and vivacious as any one of her heroines.

When she finished dressing, Ashley barely recognized the figure in the mirror, from the top of her jauntily tipped cowboy hat to the fringed, red high-heeled boots. She turned and the skirt swirled around her thighs, drawing attention to her long legs. She felt flirty and cute and not the least bit invisible.

"Not bad," she said, winking at her reflection. "Not bad at all."

When Jenny arrived, decked out in tight jeans and a denim vest, she agreed with Ashley's assessment.

Jenny gave her a quick lesson in the two-step and Ashley didn't feel silly at all. Maybe it was the clothes, maybe it was her new attitude, but she felt natural dancing to the kinky little song on the radio. She felt as if she could take on the world.

* * * * *

"What's this?" Rick asked, fingering the package Penny tossed in his lap.

"Open it and see," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"It better not be another loin cloth." Rick tore at the wrapping paper and uncovered what looked like a petrified cucumber skeleton.

"I'll ask again," he said, turning it around in his hands. "What's this?"

Penny grabbed the object and bopped him over the head with it. "It's a loofah sponge. See? It's hard. Like your head."

Rick snatched the loofah from her hands. "Oh, I get it. Go ahead, rub it in."

Penny quoted him dramatically. "*Lace Kincaid soaks up attention the way a loofah sponge absorbs bath water.* Try soaking that and see how much water it absorbs, Mr. Semantics."

"I still like that sentence," Rick said.

"And it's still wrong."

"Which I'll probably never hear the end of, right?"

"Not until you admit I'm right and you're wrong."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Admit it."

"Okay," Rick admitted. "You're always right..."

"I thought so."

"...even when you're wrong."

Penny cleared her throat and went from teasing to serious in the blink of an eye. "I think you might be wrong about Lace Kincaid, Rick."

Rick nodded. "Me too. I was pretty hasty. But I still like that sentence."

"I don't mean about the sentence," Penny said. "I mean about her and the way you're starting to feel about her."

"What do you mean?"

Rick knew exactly what she meant but didn't want to admit it even to himself. Just the thought of Lace Kincaid sent a delicious thrill through him, despite his reservations. He still couldn't understand the disparity between the public Lace who had inspired the loofah quote, and the private Lace who took his breath away.

If he were honest with himself, he'd admit he had reservations. Big reservations. But they all flew away when he saw that special smile that seemed only meant for him.

"I mean," Penny said, "maybe your first impressions were right. Don't forget you hated her on first sight."

"I understand my parents hated each other at first too, and they've been married thirty-five years."

Penny sighed. "Knock it off."

"What?"

"That stupid look on your face. Knock it off. It makes you look goofy."

"Look," Rick said, realizing he sounded as insincere as he felt. "You're making too much of this. It's not like I'm serious about her or anything."

Penny simply stared at him, her eyebrow raised in a way that made him want to grind his teeth to stubs.

"And besides, once this convention is over I won't be seeing her anymore." He knew that wasn't true. Just the thought of never seeing her again made him feel empty inside.

Penny's silence was worse than any arguments she could come up with.

He tried a different tactic. "You know, if you could see the Lace I've seen, you'd change your mind about her. When she's relaxed and away from her adoring public, she's completely different."

"I doubt I'll see that side of her," Penny said.

Rick thought he saw a smirk on her face, but she turned before he could be certain. "Sure you will. At the picnic."

She spun around to face him again. "She's definitely coming to your family picnic?"

"Yeah." Rick refused to let her put him on the defensive. "Mom invited her and she promised she'd be there."

"Oh, this should be interesting."

Rick felt a churning in his stomach. He couldn't argue with that. He'd been worried about the same thing himself.

* * * * *

Ashley was glad she'd let Jenny talk her into going out tonight. They hadn't had this much fun in ages. She hitched herself up onto a bar stool and ordered a cola, wiping what she preferred to think of as a feminine glow rather than sweat from her forehead. It was the first time she'd sat down since they got there nearly two hours ago. Jenny hadn't even given her a chance to watch before grabbing her arm and dragging her onto the dance floor, where they'd joined a boisterous line of heel-clicking, hip-dipping, hootin' and hollerin' dancers. After a few wrong turns, she'd picked up the rhythm and mastered the steps. She was feeling pretty proud of herself when a new song started and there was a whole new dance routine to memorize. Then another. And another.

She gulped half the cold drink down in one long swallow, then held the cool glass to her flushed cheek. She closed her eyes for a moment, leaning into the glass as her heartbeat settled back into a steady rhythm.

She was interrupted by a deep voice whispering at her ear. "Can I buy you a drink, darlin'?"

Ashley turned to the man who'd sidled up to the bar beside her. His smile was both charming and familiar.

"No, thank you, I don't drink," she said, smiling to take the sting out of the rejection before turning away.

She saw Jenny being led in a slow, swingy dance by a slim-hipped cowboy. Jenny looked her way and winked, and Ashley smiled back and gave her the thumbs up sign.

The man she'd almost forgotten was there spoke up again in that disarmingly familiar way. "Are you sure, darlin'? A woman should allow herself some pleasures, don't you think?"

"Excuse me?" Ashley replied, turning her attention back to the Romeo at her side. He was good-looking, but not her type. His hair was too long and his smile too smug, as if he was accustomed to women falling into his arms.

She couldn't believe it when he dropped his hand to her thigh and stroked the bare skin below the hem of her flared skirt. Before she could react, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "Pleasures such as sex," he said. "Wild, passionate sex." He glanced down at her red boots and grinned. "I see you're wearing red. You know how hot I get seeing you in red."

His hand crept beneath Ashley's skirt, caressing her inner thigh.

"I'll show you red," Ashley choked, reaching back and slapping him hard with the flat of her palm. "Just who do you think you are?"

He reared back, a look of stunned surprise on his face. "But —"

"But what?" Without thinking, Ashley tossed what was left of her soda into his face.

"Lace?" he said, looking like a puppy that had just been locked out in the rain.

The bartender loomed over them. "Problem here?"

"Yes," Ashley started — then realized her sexual attacker had just called her "Lace". She looked at him again, realization making her blush.

"No. No problem here," she assured the bartender, who took a step backward, still keeping a suspicious eye on the man who Ashley now finally recognized. He was The Sapphire Man. No wonder he'd looked familiar. And he obviously had mistaken her for her sister.

"Is this a new twist, darlin'?" he asked, rubbing the scarlet imprint of her hand on his cheek.

Ashley scrambled to think of an explanation for her behavior. The way she saw it, she had two choices. Either she could pretend to be Lexi — which she'd always failed miserably at — or she could come clean and trust someone else with their secret.

The words to the poem fluttered through her mind again, along with the realization that it was time to come out of the shadows once and for all. She sighed and decided on the truth.

"I'm not who you think I am," she said, handing him a napkin.

He seemed unconvinced. "You're not Lace Kincaid?"

"Well, I am. But I'm not." Ashley sighed. "I'll explain, but you have to promise to keep it our little secret."

He watched her warily then agreed with a nod and a promise. His eyes widened as the story unfolded but rather than being angry, the man seemed slightly amused. As she explained, Ashley felt an invisible burden drop from her shoulders. It felt good to finally reveal her secret. With each word she moved one step farther from under Lexi's shadow.

I am Lace Kincaid, she realized. The writer and the woman. I don't need Lexi to shoulder the burden anymore.

When she finished her story to an incredulous Sapphire Man, she explained why it was important he not reveal their secret yet. Not until after she'd had a chance to prepare her editor first.

And Lexi. She'd have to tell Lexi.

* * * * *

It took a moment for Penny's eyes to adjust to the dim interior of Duff's, but it didn't take her long to make out Lace Kincaid sitting at the bar.

I knew it, Penny thought, seeing Lace deep in conversation with The Sapphire Man. I just knew it!

The problem was she couldn't tell Rick. He wouldn't believe her unless he saw it with his own eyes. Stubborn. That's what he was.

She had to get Rick here to see for himself.

Penny reached for her cellular phone and punched in Rick's number, rolling her eyes when she got his machine. She kept her gaze locked on Lace and Mr. Stud Muffin at the bar as she whispered into the receiver. "Rick. This is Penny. If you don't get home too late, meet me at Duff's. I want —"

"Who are you talking to?"

Penny jumped at the question and looked up to see the woman from the beauty parlor — the one she'd seen with Lace earlier that afternoon.

"What do you mean?" Penny closed the cell phone, wondering why the woman seemed so angry. "Didn't we meet at the beauty parlor today? You're Bobby Jo, right?"

"Jenny," she corrected. "Are you following us?"

Penny wondered how much she suspected. "Of course not! Whatever gave you that idea?" She tried to laugh, but it sounded forced.

"You wouldn't be the first fan to stalk Ash...Lace."

Penny noticed the slip, but couldn't catch the significance of it. There was something strange going on here and she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

She glanced at the door, even though there was no hope of Rick getting there that quickly.

"Let me tell you what I think," Jenny said pointedly. "I think it's no accident that you're here tonight. I think you overheard our plans at the beauty shop and followed us."

She held up a hand to stop Penny's argument and continued. "Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you only want an autograph or something. Or maybe it's more. But I'm warning you that before you get to Lace, you'll have to deal with me."

Penny didn't like the way the woman's voice rose. People at nearby tables turned to stare and it wouldn't be long before Lace noticed. If Lace was half as deceptive as Penny suspected, she'd see right through any excuse. Penny decided to get out before that happened.

She slung her purse over her shoulder. "Look, you've got this all wrong. But I'm leaving anyway. Happy now?"

Jenny crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes," she said, glaring at Penny. "I think that's a good idea."

"Fine." Penny turned toward the door. The last thing she wanted was to cause a scene. Rick probably wouldn't show up anyway. If he did, he'd see Lace and The Sapphire Man with his own eyes.

Let him draw his own conclusions.

Chapter Nine

Rick stood in the doorway of Duff's, letting his vision adjust to the dim, smoky interior of the dance hall. He looked around but didn't see Penny anywhere. He wasn't sure what time she'd left the message on his machine or if she'd even planned to wait for him. Maybe she went home when he hadn't shown up earlier.

He turned to leave but changed his mind when the music started. The band wasn't half bad. He tapped his foot in appreciation and decided to stay for one set and a cold beer.

He never made it to the bar. A blur of motion on the dance floor caught his eye. Was that Lace Kincaid out there? He shook his head, convinced his obsession with the writer had caused her to materialize out of thin air. The thought of her kicking up her heels in a smoky, out-of-the-way bar was preposterous. This was the last place he expected her to turn up.

He blinked. It *was* Lace. But he'd never seen her like this before. She lit up the dance floor, long legs kicking up a flared denim skirt, her eyes flashing with laughter.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. And he wasn't the only one. An unexpected twinge of jealousy gripped him like a cold fist around his heart as he watched her dip and swirl and swing from the arms of one man to the next.

The music dropped to something slow and sexy, and before he could reconsider he strode across the dance floor, not sure what he would say, only knowing he wanted her in his arms before someone else beat him to it.

When the tempo slowed, Ashley tried to find Jenny in the crowd as the line of dancers merged into smiling couples. A gentle touch at her elbow drew her attention and she turned. The music masked her quick gasp of surprise.

Rick!

He smiled and held out his hand. "Could I have this dance?"

When her voice caught in her throat, she simply nodded. With one sure, sweeping gesture, he drew her into the circle of his arms. He held her close, lifting her hand to his heart and covering it with his own. She felt his heartbeat thrumming beneath his shirt, a sensation she found both erotic and soothing. Her attention shifted to the warm pressure of his other hand at the small of her back as he guided her across the dance floor. They moved effortlessly together, as if they'd been dance partners all their lives.

Every nerve in her body tingled with his nearness. She rested her head on his shoulder, breathing in his scent, an intoxicating combination of musk, spice and man. She wanted to drown in the aroma of Rick Orlando.

As if answering an unspoken prayer, the band segued into another slow tune. Rick knew eventually the music would end, but he found himself wishing he could keep her in his arms forever. She fit perfectly there, as if they were meant to hold each other like this. He rested his cheek against her hair, marveling at the feather softness. He pulled her closer. Then closer still.

"You dance beautifully," he whispered into her ear.

She shivered as the gentle current of his breath caressed her cheek. She turned, meaning to return the compliment, and forgot what she wanted to say at the nearness of his lips. Suddenly the room seemed warmer, the air charged with electricity. Their eyes locked for what seemed like an eternity and she thought she'd never seen eyes quite that color, like amber brandy swirled in fine crystal.

"Yes," she said with the barest of sighs.

He chuckled and she was reminded of water tumbling across smooth, weathered rocks.

"I don't remember asking a question," he said. "But I like your answer."

The twinkle in his eyes and the seduction of his remark made her stomach flutter in a way she hadn't felt since she was a teenager. She lowered her gaze and smiled, feeling a blush rise to her cheeks.

Rick pulled her closer, charmed by both the blush and the smile. He wondered at this precious combination of innocence and self-assurance, marveling at the duality of the woman in his arms—Lace Kincaid.

"Lace," he murmured.

Ashley stiffened. *Lace*. He'd called her *Lace*. Suddenly she remembered she was an impostor, and she wanted more than anything in the world to hear him whisper her name. *Ashley*, she wanted to tell him. *I'm Ashley – not Lace, not Lexi. Just me, just Ashley.*

But she couldn't. It was one thing to confess to The Sapphire Man, but Rick was a reporter covering the very event that required their secrecy. Despite what she was beginning to feel for him, she couldn't confide in him. Not yet.

The music ended and the mood was broken, suspended for a moment between them like a silken cord before she stepped out of his arms and back into the lights and sounds and smells of the real world.

* * * * *

Lexi felt her knuckles strain as she clenched her fists beneath the table, all the while keeping a stiff smile on her face. This was going worse than she'd expected. She hadn't been able to charm her publishers into extending the deadline again. If she didn't have the manuscript on their desks by the end of the month, they claimed they were releasing her from her contract.

Lexi smiled her most disarming smile and forced a calmness she didn't feel into her voice. "I can assure you that you'll have the complete manuscript on time. And," she winked, "I think this is the best book I've ever written."

They seemed reassured and the tension dropped a few degrees. For the next half hour Lexi calmed everyone's fears, praying Ashley would come through on her promise. Everything depended on it.

When the meeting finally ended, Lexi strode to her suite, not giving in to her exhaustion until she closed the door behind her. Once inside, she kicked off her heels and slumped onto the love seat. She wanted another glass of wine, despite the fact that she'd already nursed two in the bar while wrangling with the publishers.

She barely had time to catch her breath when a knock at the door startled her. *Now what?* she wondered, not wanting to deal with anyone else tonight or have to cram her aching feet back into her pumps. She sighed and muttered under her breath, "Go away. Please just go away."

Another knock, this time accompanied by a voice that set her skin tingling and made her forget how tired she was. Best of all, she wouldn't need her shoes.

She unlocked the door and Sapphie slipped inside, a seductive smile on his chiseled features. He leaned close and whispered in her ear, "Hi, darlin'."

"God, you're gorgeous," she breathed.

"And?"

Lexi grinned. "And oh-so sexy!"

Sapphie lifted her and carried her to the couch, settling her on his lap. "I love when you say that." He kissed the hollow of her neck, letting his lips trail slowly to her ear. "I've wanted you so much. All night. I couldn't wait to get back to you. You drove me wild tonight."

He kissed and nibbled and licked his way downward, murmuring against her skin. "You feel like warm silk."

Lexi couldn't think clearly with his lips traveling along her skin, so the implication of his words took a while to sink in. It wasn't until he lowered his lips to her breast that she realized exactly what he'd said.

"What?" she asked.

He looked up from his tender attention and grinned. "I said your skin feels like silk."

"Mmmm...no, not that." She forced herself to concentrate. "You said I drove you wild tonight."

"You always drive me wild, darlin'."

His lips were back at her breast, his breath a warm whisper across the silk of her blouse, dangerously close to her nipple, which already pressed forward as if begging to be touched.

"Tonight?" she asked, her voice a throaty tremble.

"Yes, love. Tonight. Tonight I'll make such passionate love to you the world will cease to exist."

"No."

"Yes," he assured her. "You know you want it too."

"Yes...I mean no. I mean, just what did you mean when you said I drove you wild tonight?"

"You know exactly what I mean, you little tease," he said with a wickedly naughty smile. His hands gripped her hips and tugged her tight against his lap. "Oh, you were quite the little actress tonight. You even had me convinced you didn't know who I was for a moment."

She nodded, having absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

"You were so sexy in that little cowgirl outfit." His eyes twinkled. "Where is it, by the way? Why don't you change back into that outfit and be my little rodeo girl tonight?"

It didn't take long for Lexi to figure out what had happened. He must have run into her sister somewhere tonight and mistaken Ashley for her.

She cocked an eyebrow. "Your 'little rodeo girl'?" With an effort, she pulled out of his embrace, fighting a feeling she wasn't accustomed to—jealousy.

An initial case of mistaken identity was one thing, but she thought Sapphie knew her better. Apparently not. If he did, he would have known the difference. Her blood boiled to think he could be so easily fooled. Not only fooled, but turned on by another woman. Even if it was her identical twin!

"And just how wild did I make you tonight?" she interrogated, the spark of jealousy catching and flaring up with each word.

He raised her arm to his lips, licking the sensitive skin of her inner elbow and sending goose bumps skittering along her skin. "Wild enough that I couldn't wait to be alone with you and end the charade. Every word, every gesture, every movement of your body aroused me tonight."

Jealousy burned hot and wild now, shattering her self-control. "That wasn't me tonight," she blurted out.

"Of course it was you, darlin'. There's no need to play this game anymore, as charming as it is. We're alone. Finally. And I wanted you tonight like I've never wanted you before."

Lexi tore herself away, climbing off his lap. She stood before him, hands on her hips, eyes flashing. "I told you it wasn't me!"

"Oh, I get it," he said with a wink. He put on an affected tone of voice. "Can I buy you a drink, ma'am? I'm The Sapphire Man. And what's your name, pretty lady?"

Lexi refused to play along. "Stop."

"Stop? But darlin', I've barely begun."

"I'm not playing a game," Lexi said through gritted teeth. "I'm serious. That was *not* me you were with tonight. I've been here all night being pulled in a thousand different directions while you were off flirting with someone else."

Lexi turned her back on her lover and stalked across the room. She fought back tears, hurt more than she cared to admit. She and Ashley had always made a game of their similarities. Growing up they'd fooled friends in school, and once Ashley had even taken a biology test for her because she'd been too busy socializing to study. But this was different.

They'd always kept their love lives separate. It wasn't conscious. Neither of them was attracted to the same type of man, anyway. And if they had been, would there be any contest?

That was it, Lexi realized, suddenly ashamed of herself. They'd fallen into roles each of them now accepted. Ashley the wallflower, Lexi the vixen. Lexi led while Ashley followed.

Had it always been that way? Or had they swung to opposite extremes in their haste to affirm some measure of individuality? Lexi frowned, suddenly unsure of herself. She didn't like feeling this way. Not one bit.

"Darlin'?"

She hadn't heard Sapphie creep up on her. She tried to avoid his gaze, but he turned her face until their eyes met.

"Darlin', I'm sorry. I was just teasing you." He reached out and brushed her cheek with the back of his curled fingers. "I know it was your sister Ashley. We talked and she explained everything."

"You knew? Ashley told you?" Lexi was stunned. She'd been so careful, not even telling this man she loved, and Ashley had just blown the whole deal! Whatever had possessed her to confess?

She turned her attention back to Sapphie. "Why didn't you tell me? Why the charade?"

He shrugged. "I guess I was a little annoyed that you didn't think to tell me something as important as having a twin sister in the first place. I thought I was important to you."

She stared into his eyes. "You are. You *are* important to me." She suddenly realized just how important he'd become.

"It's just," she stammered, "we're usually too busy doing other things." She blushed. "You know."

He smiled. "I know. And I like other things. But sometimes I'd like to talk, to get to know you better."

Lexi looked into his eyes. "You know I'm not really Lace Kincaid. My sister writes the books. I'm only the showpiece. I'm sorry to disappoint you."

"Darlin'," he said, taking her hand. "It's not your writing that attracted me in the first place."

She smiled and led him back to the couch. "Sit down," she said. "We've got lots to talk about."

* * * * *

The crowd slowly thinned as the band played its final set. Ashley and Rick sat in a secluded corner talking quietly. A nimbus of flickering candlelight surrounded them, making them feel somehow alone in the room.

Rick leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I can't believe how different you seem tonight." He wasn't complaining. This was the Lace Kincaid he enjoyed—relaxed and unassuming.

Ashley waited, chewing her lower lip. *Different*. He'd said she was different. For a moment she'd forgotten how much time he'd spent with Lexi. She'd responded to him as Ashley, instead of playing the part of the fictional Lace Kincaid. What if she said something wrong? What if she gave herself away?

Ashley realized she'd have to be more careful. If Lexi were here she'd warn her to be on her guard. They couldn't take any chances. Not now.

"Different how?" she asked, knowing the answer already. She couldn't compare to Lexi. It was silly to even try.

Rick shrugged. "I don't know. Just different." He didn't have the heart to tell her that her public persona didn't suit her half as well as the unassuming charm she wore when she was being herself. Like tonight.

"Are you nervous about the award?" he asked, changing the subject.

"To be honest," Ashley replied, glad to be on familiar ground, "yes." She grinned. "I mean, writing is such a solitary profession. It always surprises me a little to hear people talking about my books. I almost forget they go out there in the world and take on a life of their own after they leave my word processor. There's about a two-year span between the time I finish a book and the time it hits the stands. By then, I've sent off another manuscript and I'm knee-deep into a third."

"You write a book a year?"

"That's about right for me, yes. I know some writers who produce two or three books a year, others who might take five years to write one. Everyone works differently."

Ashley rambled, her confidence returning now that she was on familiar territory. It felt good to talk about her work. With Lexi working the promotional end of things, Ashley felt isolated. She'd forgotten how much fun it was to sit around with other writers and talk about the problems they all dealt with—the deadlines, the days you hated everything you wrote, the sting of rejection.

"It's quite an honor, I guess," Rick said. "A Crystal Quill Award."

Ashley beamed. "Yes. But that's not why I write. There were years I never thought I'd see a word published, but I never once thought of giving up."

He leaned forward, staring into her eyes while she spoke, nodding and encouraging her when she faltered.

"I still get excited when I see the cover art or galleys for a new book. It surprises me to see someone sitting on a park bench reading one of my novels. When I get a moving letter from a fan asking me what happened to one of my characters after the book ended, that's the greatest reward of all."

Her mind wandered and she almost missed Rick's question. When she realized that he was asking to escort her to the awards ceremony, her breath caught in her throat.

"What?" she asked, a faint tremor in her voice.

His smile was shy and uncertain. "Well, not only would I be proud to escort you to the awards ceremony," he said, "but it would cap off the article nicely."

"Yes, of course. The article." Ashley tried not to think about what his words did to her. She wished his invitation had nothing to do with the article, but a desire to be with her. She wished she could be sure he was attracted to her and not Lexi. Most of all, she wished *she* was the one walking onto the stage Sunday night receiving the award while Rick watched from the audience.

This arrangement with her sister had seemed perfect at the time of its inception, but now Ashley felt trapped in a lie. She couldn't really blame Lexi either. She was the one who wanted to hide in the background, free to immerse herself in fantasy while Lexi handled the reality.

Maybe it was time to grow up. Hadn't she vowed tonight to come out from under her sister's shadow? The thought was both exciting and frightening. She closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like to walk across the stage, gazing out at the packed room of people who knew her not as the fictional Lace Kincaid, but as Ashley Kincaid, the person and the writer. And there in the front row she imagined Rick Orlando, watching her with pride and love shining from his eyes.

She wanted it so badly she could taste it, feel it—see it. She'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted this.

Rick's hand covered hers. So warm and tender it made her gasp.

"Was that a yes?" he asked.

Her answer was barely a sigh. "Yes."

His hand tightened around hers. "I'll bring you home early Saturday night so you can rest and prepare for the banquet Sunday."

"Home?" Ashley had no idea what he was talking about.

"From the picnic," he explained. "Remember? You promised my mom you'd come to the picnic Saturday. You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

Ashley remembered promising Lexi she'd go to the picnic. What else had she said? Hadn't Lexi asked Rick to look at the manuscript? Ashley shuddered. She never let anyone see her first drafts. How was she going to get out of this?

"Yes," she assured him. "Of course I'm still coming to the picnic. Can I bring anything?"

Rick laughed. "You don't know my family. Believe me, there'll be more than enough food to go around." His voice softened. "My mom really likes you. She can't stop talking about how nice you are. She's looking forward to seeing you again."

Ashley realized this could be a problem. This deception grew more dangerous by the moment. What could she say? "Your mother is a wonderful woman." There, that seemed safe enough.

"Yes, she is," Rick agreed.

Ashley toyed with her glass, swirling a watery mixture of cola and melted ice.

"Would you like another?" he asked.

She didn't. Not really. But she didn't want the night to end yet either. "Yes."

She watched him walk to the bar, admiring the slow roll of his hips.

Jenny's voice startled her. "Nice butt."

Ashley smiled. "I wasn't—"

"You were too. And I don't blame you. He's a fine specimen."

"You're so bad," Ashley said with a chuckle. "But yes, he's fine."

"Would you like me to disappear?"

"No." Ashley's immediate response was nearly a shout. "I can't take that chance. He doesn't suspect yet that Lexi and I are two different people, but if I'm not careful I might give us away."

"I can't believe he can't tell the difference between you and Lexi," Jenny snorted. "You two are as different as night and day. Hell, even that's too similar. You're as different as tulips and head cheese."

Ashley laughed. "He doesn't have any reason to suspect we're not the same person." But deep down, Ashley wondered the same thing. She was more than a little disappointed that someone who made his living reporting the facts wasn't more perceptive.

"So," Jenny asked. "When are you going to end this charade?"

"Not until after the convention. There's too much at stake right now to let a hint of scandal escape—the new contract, the award and this article Rick is writing. But after that, Lexi and I will quietly explain to everyone who needs to know."

"Ah, you're making too much of this. It's not as if you did anything illegal or immoral. It won't affect your career at all. If anything, it will add a certain mystique to your name and perhaps even increase your sales."

"Tell that to the singing group who disappeared after the big lip-synching scandal."

"That's not the same and you know it."

Ashley shrugged. "I hope you're right. But to be safe, we'll wait until the convention is over."

Jenny started to argue, but Ashley shushed her when she saw Rick returning from the bar. He carried a pitcher of soda and three glasses.

When he smiled at Jenny and asked her to join them, Ashley's heart swelled. The simple gesture of including her friend made him more endearing. Ashley found herself looking forward to the picnic Saturday and the chance to get to know Rick better.

Chapter Ten

Ashley was surprised when Lexi stormed in the next morning. The look on her face spelled trouble. Ashley tried to deflect some of the tirade she could see coming. "What are you doing up so early? It's not even noon yet."

Lexi slammed the door behind her, ignoring the wisecrack. "I can't believe you told Sapphie!"

"Sapphie?"

"Don't play innocent with me, *rodeo girl*! He told me all about your little conversation. After all the trouble we've gone through not to let the cat out of the bag, you just blurt it out to Sapphie between do-si-do and allemande left?"

Ashley chewed her lip. Lexi was right. She'd been worrying about the same thing ever since her impulsive outburst the night before. But Lexi's attitude put her on the defensive. "First of all," she argued, "we weren't square dancing. We were line dancing. And secondly, he promised not to say anything."

Lexi's hands whipped through the air. "Oh hell, I'm not worried about Sapphie saying anything. But that's not the point. You have to be careful, Ash. You can't just go blurting this out to anyone. Not yet, anyway."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"What if that had been Rick there when you *weren't thinking*? That's all we need. A full-page scandal right before the awards."

"Lexi, do you really think it would be that bad? It's not Watergate, for heaven's sake! We didn't do anything wrong."

Lexi sighed and collapsed on the sofa. "No, we didn't do anything wrong, but you know that rumors and innuendo can ruin a career. I've worked so hard to get us to this point, Ash. I know it seems one-sided sometimes—like you do all the work and I just bask in the glory. But I've done my part, too. I've worked hard to guide your career to this point, and I'm not going to sit by and watch it come crashing down. Not now, when we're right on the brink of success. We've come too far to lose it all now."

Ashley sat beside her sister. "I never thought you weren't holding up your share of the deal, Sis. Honest. I couldn't ask for a better manager."

"Damn right!" Lexi replied, but the anger was gone from her voice. "You know what the funny part is? I love the wheeling and dealing. I love negotiating contracts and handling promotions—"

"And posing with hunks."

Lexi blushed. "Well, one in particular."

"Was he angry that you hadn't told him?"

"A little," Lexi said. "But not for long. And not before he got his revenge by making me squirm as he went on and on about how hot I made him in my little cowgirl outfit. It didn't take me long to realize what had happened. But I have to tell you, Sis, I was more than a little jealous."

"What? *You* jealous of *me*?"

Lexi gave an abrupt little laugh. "Yes, of you. Why is that so hard to believe? You're beautiful and talented and witty." She winked. "But then, I might be biased. Heck, if I couldn't be me, I'd want to be you."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Closest you'll ever get. Now, promise me you'll be more careful around Rick?"

"I'll try, but...well, I can't always think straight when he's around." She remembered the way his lips had felt against her neck when they danced, how he'd closed his hand, gentle and firm, around hers in a way that made her feel she belonged to him alone.

She warmed at the memory. "Lexi, is it possible to fall in love with a man you've known less than a week?"

Lexi chuckled. "Sure. I do it all the time."

"Seriously. When I'm with him, time seems to fly. We talk about everything. And nothing. We laugh over the same things and finish each other's sentences. And when he looks into my eyes... Oh Lexi, I just melt."

Lexi took her sister's hand and squeezed it. "Sounds like love to me."

"But we just met."

"When you're ready to find that person you've waited your whole life for, sometimes meeting is the only thing necessary. Maybe that's part of the reason your books are so popular. They reinforce the fact that your once-in-a-lifetime, perfect love may be waiting right around the corner."

Ashley thought about what her sister said. Was it that simple? "But what about Rick?" she asked. "How can I be sure he feels the same way? How do I know if it's me he's attracted to or..."

"Or what?"

Ashley felt a blush rise to her cheeks. "Well, I'll admit I've been a little jealous of all the time you two spend together. I can't help but wonder how much of his attraction is because of you."

Lexi let out a snort. "Hah!"

"What?"

"Honey, I'll tell you a little secret, okay? I'll admit I tried flirting with Rick."

Ashley felt something roll and plummet in her chest.

Lexi held her hands up and rushed to explain. "Wait. It wasn't like that. I had a feeling the two of you were meant for each other. I figured I'd arouse his interest a little to push the situation into high gear."

"What do you mean?" Ashley spluttered. "Didn't you think he'd be interested in me without your help?"

"No, it's not that. But ever since that episode with Steve you've been so cautious, so reserved around men. I didn't think you'd let Rick close. So I talked you into meeting him for coffee and arranged for him to come over to return the purse I'd hidden in his car that night. I just had a feeling the sparks would fly given the chance. And I was right. Admit it."

But Ashley was still stewing over the fact that Lexi had turned her not-so-subtle charms on Rick. She wanted to know more. She *needed* to know more. "So, how did he react to your, um...flirtation?"

Lexi grimaced. "If you tell anyone, I'll kill you. But the truth is I've never seen a man deflate so quickly. The harder I tried, the more distant he got. You'd think I was going to eat him alive or something."

Ashley's heart lurched. Could it be possible?

"From what you've told me, Rick is different with you than he is with me. I have a hunch that whatever feelings he has for Lace Kincaid are generated by you. Not me."

Ashley wanted to believe it, but she had her doubts. Since when had any man preferred her to Lexi? Rick would be the first, if it *were* true. But oh, how she wanted to believe just that.

After Lexi left, Ashley thought about her warning. Could she trust herself not to blurt it out to Rick the same way she had with...? She realized she still didn't know the cover model's real name. Lexi had simply called him Sapphie.

She shrugged. The point was she couldn't trust herself not to tell Rick the truth. And Lexi was right about one thing—the timing couldn't be worse. If she could only hold out a few more days, everything would be all right and she was sure he'd understand.

But there was the picnic tomorrow. She'd be spending the whole day with him. Sitting on the grass, feeling his hand on hers, drowning in those smoldering eyes. There was no way she'd get through the whole day without giving herself away.

She had to cancel.

* * * * *

Rick read the same paragraph for the third time. He couldn't keep his mind on his work. All he could think about was Lace Kincaid. Twice already this morning he'd picked up the phone to call her, but stopped himself.

When the phone rang, he grabbed it on the first ring, his heart racing when he heard her voice.

"Lace. I was just thinking about you."

"You were?"

He loved the little stammer in her voice, the touch of shyness that belied the assurance she wore like armor in public. "Well, I was working on the article."

"Oh. Was there something you needed to ask me...for the article, I mean?"

"No, not really. But we can talk about that tomorrow."

"Rick. That's why I'm calling. I don't think I can make it tomorrow."

He felt a sharp stab of disappointment. The only thing getting him through today was knowing he'd see her at the picnic.

"Oh, you have to," he said. "My mother's been telling everyone you'll be here. She'd be so disappointed." He added quietly, "And so would I."

When she didn't reply, he rushed ahead, anxious to change her mind. "I've really been looking forward to seeing you again, away from all the clamor of the convention. I love the times we spend together when you relax and put your public image aside."

Still she hesitated. He could feel her wavering. "Please?" he begged. "For me?"

He held his breath waiting for her answer, and when it came it was more a sigh than a yes. He let his breath out with a rush and thanked her, promising she wouldn't be sorry.

He kept her on the phone, not wanting to let her go, captivated by the soft cadence of her voice. When he said goodbye, promising to pick her up at noon the next day, he was surprised to see that an hour had passed. He wasn't one for long telephone conversations. He usually stated his business and got off immediately. But he could have talked with Lace another ten hours and still regretted when it was time to hang up.

He smiled and ran his hand along the curve of the receiver, fighting the urge to call her back just to hear her voice again.

Tomorrow, he told himself. *Tomorrow I'll have her all to myself the entire day.* With that promise to look forward to, he went back to work on his article, a renewed sense of purpose inspiring his words.

* * * * *

Despite her reservations, Ashley found herself looking forward to spending the day with Rick. She'd changed her clothes three times before settling on an outfit that was casual enough for a family picnic but sexy enough to keep up the "Lace" charade. She'd checked her hair and makeup in the mirror until she was sure she could pull it off. All she had to do was act like Lexi for a few hours. How hard could that be?

When Rick swung by promptly at noon as promised, her heart did a quick leap. She met him at the door and the approving look in his eyes assured her she'd made the right choice—at least as far as her appearance was concerned.

"Ready?" he asked.

Ashley reached for her car keys. "I'll follow you." She needed an escape route in case everything blew up in her face. By way of explanation, she held out her cell phone and, in her best "Lexi-the-Diva" voice, said, "You never know when my adoring fans might need me."

He nodded, but a little of the light went out of his eyes.

When they arrived at his parents' house, Ashley thought it felt more like a country carnival than a family picnic. She'd expected a few brothers and sisters, hot dogs on the grill and maybe a game of horseshoes or volleyball. Instead, a swarm of people and mountains of food surrounded her. Sausage and peppers roasted on the grill and the sweet aroma of fried dough wafted from the kitchen window.

Rick introduced her to more people than she could remember. Each of them called her Lace, which was something she'd never gotten used to, although Lexi answered to the name as naturally as her own.

Rick brought her a plate piled high with food, and as they ate Ashley tried to keep track of all his sisters, their husbands and which tousle-haired toddler belonged to whom. Yet she felt comfortable, as if she belonged there. The Orlandos were warm and open and friendly. She barely noticed when Rick slipped away to help with the cooking or mediate a tug of war between two kids who absolutely had to have the same sand shovel.

Then there was Carmella Orlando, who knew every character she'd ever written about almost as intimately as Ashley herself did. Ashley fell immediately and totally in love with Rick's mother and her warm, sweet-smelling hugs and approving smile.

Rick took her hand as they mingled among groups of boisterous relatives. It was obvious how much his family meant to him. She started to see him in a different light and was proud he'd wanted her to be a part of this family event, proud of how he held her hand so tenderly as he introduced her to aunts and uncles and cousins.

Rick showed her how to play bocce ball. When they won, he lifted her off her feet, held her tight against his chest and swirled her through the air. She stared into his eyes and he held her gaze for so long she nearly forgot to breathe. If people hadn't surrounded them, she knew they'd have lost themselves in a kiss that would have lasted forever.

Before her feet touched the ground, music filled the air. Ashley watched as Uncle Miguel played the accordion while the group around him clapped and stomped their feet. Or was it Uncle Dominic? She couldn't keep them straight.

Rick swept her up in a wild and rousing tarantella, his arm tight around her waist as he twirled her around and around. She followed his lead, her head thrown back with laughter, never wanting the dance to end.

Just when she thought she'd never be able to catch her breath again, the music became slow and tender and wistful. Rick held her closer as they swayed in a sweeping

slow dance. Once again she was overcome with how right she felt in his arms, as if they were adjoining pieces of the same puzzle snapping quietly into place.

When he leaned forward and sang softly in her ear, his breath warm against her neck, she trembled in his arms. His voice deepened with emotion and although the words were in Italian, it was unmistakably a love song. She melted in his arms. She'd never heard anything so incredibly sexy—and never felt so alone as when the song ended and she stepped out of his embrace.

"Rick?" Her voice was a throaty whisper she barely recognized.

Without answering, he led her to a picnic blanket spread beneath the shade of a red maple tree. It felt as if they were the only two people there. When he stared into her eyes, she couldn't remember what it was she wanted to say.

She cleared her throat. "I love your family. Thank you for bringing me today. I'm having a wonderful time."

He smiled as if she'd given him the greatest gift in the world. "Why thank you, sweetness."

Her heart hammered against her chest at the endearment. When he took her hand and raised it to his face, brushing the back of her fingers against his lips, she gasped.

"Can I tell you a secret?" he asked.

Finding her voice with some effort, she replied, "I love secrets."

"Well," Rick said. "When my mother invited you, I had my doubts. I didn't think you'd fit in."

"Why not?" Ashley asked incredulously.

A look she couldn't identify crossed his face. "This just didn't seem up your alley, you know?" He frowned. "I figured you'd be more accustomed to lobster and Chardonnay than hamburgers and cola."

How could he be so wrong about me? Ashley wondered. Then she remembered he'd spent most of his time with Lexi. Of course he'd be confused. She almost laughed trying to imagine Lexi here. Rick was right. She wouldn't have fit in.

Before she could stop herself, the words came tumbling out of her mouth. "Rick, I have to tell you something."

He waited, but before she could explain they were interrupted.

"There you two are! Rick. Lace. Hi!"

Rick stood and Ashley looked up at a curvaceous redhead who reached out and hugged him in an all too familiar way.

"Penny, you made it," Rick said, pulling Ashley to her feet.

"Of course I did, silly. Have I ever missed an Orlando family reunion?"

"Well," Rick said, laughing. "There was that year you had mononucleosis."

Penny slapped him playfully. "It wasn't mono, it was bronchitis."

Their laughter and little inside jokes made Ashley feel left out. It was obvious that Rick and Penny shared a history. Perhaps more. A stab of jealousy ripped through her.

Penny turned and held a packet of pictures out to Ashley. "I promised Rick's mom I'd have these ready for her today. They came out wonderful. Want to see?"

The three of them glanced through the photos. When they came to the shots with Sapphie in them, Ashley felt Rick stiffen at her side. She looked closer and understood why. There was no mistaking the fact that the woman in the picture and the man with his arm draped possessively around her shoulder were more than friends. It was evident in their eyes and body language. Even in photographs the air sizzled between them.

But it wasn't her! Couldn't Rick see that?

Penny shot a smug glance her way, then casually flipped through the rest of the pictures, pointing out which ones would best suit the article.

Ashley felt more and more abandoned as they chattered and laughed. When Rick's mother called him to help with even more platters of food, he turned and called over his shoulder, "I'll be right back. You girls chat."

Penny studied her thumbnail for a minute before turning to Ashley, her eyes serious. "What kind of game are you playing here, Lace?"

Ashley stalled, hoping Rick would return and rescue her, but he was nowhere in sight. "I don't know what you're talking about," she mumbled, Lexi's warning ringing in her ears. She bit her lip to keep the explanation from tumbling out of her mouth.

"You don't?" There was an accusing edge to Penny's voice. "How about this for starters? I know you're sleeping with The Sapphire Man and stringing Rick along with your sweet little Miss Sunshine act."

Ashley was too stunned to respond. How could she get out of this? And why, she wondered with another stab of jealousy, was Penny so intent on making her look bad in Rick's eyes?

No," Ashley countered. "You have it all wrong."

"I don't think so," Penny said coldly. "Rick may be easy to fool, but I'm onto you."

Ashley stammered, trying to think of an explanation that would satisfy the photographer.

"Look," Penny said with finality. "It's none of my business what you do in private. But Rick *is* my business. I care about him too much to see him hurt."

"I'm not—"

Penny held up her hand as if to ward off any arguments to the contrary. "Either you tell Rick or I will."

"Ladies?"

Both women looked up, startled to see Rick staring at them. "Tell me what?" he asked.

"These pictures," Ashley stuttered. She took a deep breath, pretending indignation. "They won't do."

Rick frowned. "What do you mean? They look fine to me."

"Not for the article," Ashley complained. "I look fat in that dress. Why didn't you tell me I looked fat in that dress?"

She turned to Penny, her eyes pleading, begging her not to say anything more to Rick before she had a chance to explain. "We'll talk about this later, all right? I'm sure out of all the pictures you've taken I'll find something more suitable." She pinned the photographer with an imploring glance and lowered her voice. "I promise."

"Well, I guess that's my cue to leave the two of you alone." Penny stared at Ashley for a moment then turned, tucking the photos into her purse. "I'll see you both tomorrow night at the banquet." She gave Rick a quick kiss on the cheek before leaving them alone again.

Rick stared thoughtfully at Ashley. "There's nothing wrong with those pictures, is there?"

Ashley searched frantically for a diversion. "Let's not talk about the pictures." Then she remembered what Lexi had said about Rick helping her with the manuscript. She couldn't imagine how much help he could possibly be, but maybe it would diffuse the situation.

"Oh, Rick," she said, changing the subject. "I just remembered. I brought my manuscript along so we could work on it together."

Rick looked puzzled.

"You wanted me to show you *A Little Piece of Heaven*, right?"

He grinned and squeezed her hand. "Well yes, but—"

"Well, I brought it with me. We can go over it now if you'd like."

Ashley watched the smile on his face slowly melt away. He looked down at his feet, then back again. He cleared his throat. "Lace, you know I'm not much of a fan of romance novels."

Ashley frowned. "But you said you'd read my book."

"Oh, I did. And I liked it. It wasn't at all what I expected."

"Really. What did you expect?" She felt a familiar resentment building inside her. She'd had this same argument over commercial fiction before, fighting literary snobs who were offended by the very existence of genre fiction.

"Well, you know," he mumbled. "Those covers, for one thing. 'Bodice-rippers' they're called, right?"

"And of course you judge all books by their covers?"

"No. Well—"

"So you read my book despite the cover?" Ashley grew more defensive by the moment. He was patronizing her. She didn't want to think how his attitude about women's fiction would color the article he was writing.

"I told you I only read your book to research the article. To be honest, I wouldn't have read it otherwise." He stopped her before she could argue. "But I liked it. Really."

"But you wouldn't read another one, right?"

He gulped and cleared his throat again. "No, not really. Although I'd like to read more of yours."

She shrugged. "That won't be necessary. The article is almost finished now." She could feel the familiar anger building, threatening to explode and ruin the day.

"Not for the article," he said. "For my own enjoyment. I mean it. I really liked your book."

"For a romance, right?" Ashley couldn't keep the sarcasm from her voice now. She knew she was needling him, but refused to let him off the hook.

"Yes. For a romance, it was very well written. You're very good. Good enough to write a real book."

"A *real* book?" Ashley wanted to scream. "What do you think I spend my days and nights doing at the computer if not writing real books?"

"Ashley, I didn't mean it that way."

"Oh? You mean because it's not literary fiction, what I write isn't real? What about other genres? What about westerns or science fiction or fantasy? Aren't they real either? Do you think people who aren't good enough to write real books can only write genre books? And just who defines what is *real*? People like you?"

Seeing the flush on his cheeks, Ashley realized it was exactly what he'd thought. *Of all the pretentious, pompous, patronizing, priggish...* She stopped, unable to think of another P word and too furious to listen anymore.

"I have to be going," she said, refusing to look him in the eye. "I have a ton of things to do before the banquet tomorrow night." She was relieved that he at least had the good grace not to argue with her. "I'd like to say goodbye to your mother first."

He waited while she hugged Carmella Orlando and thanked her for the wonderful time, promising to send an autographed copy of her next release as soon as she received her author's copies.

Rick walked her to her car. "I'm sorry for upsetting you," he said softly.

She shrugged, digging in her purse for her keys.

He reached out and tipped her chin so she had to look at him. "I'll see you tomorrow night, right?"

She nodded, knowing it was a lie, then slipped into her car, watching him in her rearview mirror as she drove away.

You won't be seeing me tomorrow night, Rick, she thought. But it doesn't matter. You won't know the difference.

Rick watched her drive away, feeling like the biggest fool that ever lived. How could he just let her go like that?

He watched her car until it was out of sight, feeling an emptiness inside so big it threatened to overwhelm him. What was she doing to him? Half the time he didn't even like her. It was that other half that was driving him crazy.

Rick's mother came up behind him. "What did you do to Lace?"

"I didn't do anything."

She made a little *snicking* sound with her tongue and he was twelve again, caught reading comics under the covers with his pocket flashlight. "She seemed upset to me, Ricky."

Rick sighed. "Mom, I hate to burst your bubble, but Lace Kincaid is a certified nutcase."

She *snicked* again and patted his arm. "You're exaggerating. She's adorable. Besides, aren't writers supposed to be a little eccentric?"

"No, they're not. I'm not eccentric and I'm a writer. Why do you always forget that? Is it because I don't write books? Does that mean I'm not a real writer in your eyes?" Rick stopped, horrified by the words that were coming out of his mouth—the very same words Lace had used with him earlier.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he *was* biased. What about the article? Lace was right about that, too. He'd had his tongue planted firmly in cheek for most of it. Because he didn't take romances seriously, he'd slanted the article based on his own personal prejudice.

I'll have to rewrite it, he thought. I'll do my research this time. I'll make Lace proud. That, more than anything, was most important to him. He had to do right by Lace Kincaid.

"I'm going after her," he said.

His mother handed over his car keys. "Good. I thought you might."

Chapter Eleven

"I'm thinking balloons," Lexi said, doodling on a pad of paper at Ashley's kitchen table. "Little cloud-shaped balloons floating out of sky-blue boxes. We'll send them to all the major booksellers." Lexi had been discussing promotion ever since she'd barged in fifteen minutes ago, seemingly unaware that Ashley couldn't care less.

"What's wrong with bookmarks and postcards?" Ashley argued out of habit more than anything else. "That's what we usually do."

"Bookmarks and postcards were fine before, but we're moving into the big leagues now. *A Little Piece of Heaven* is going to put our name on the map, I tell you. I'm thinking prepaid phone cards too, with the book's cover art on the front. A lot of top-selling authors are using those for promotions these days."

Ashley stopped and stared at her sister. "How much is this going to cost?"

Lexi dismissed her concerns with a wave of her hand. "Whatever it costs, it will be worth it. Don't worry."

Ashley shrugged. "Fine."

"You just worry about getting the manuscript finished. I'll do the rest," Lexi continued. "Which reminds me. How's it coming?"

"Fine."

"That's two *fin*es in a row. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ashley said, unzipping the garment bag Lexi had brought over. "Is this what you're wearing tomorrow night?"

"Maybe. And I noticed how smoothly you changed the subject."

Ignoring the jab, Ashley admired the slinky red dress sparkling with sequins. It was sexier than anything she owned or would ever have the nerve to wear. She had an irresistible urge to try it on. She fantasized again about telling Lexi that if she won, she wanted to accept the award herself. She imagined Rick's face as he watched her move across the stage in this dress. His eyes traveling along every curve of her body. His hands clasping and releasing in an unconscious desire to touch her. His breath coming in short, quick gasps.

Then, when he couldn't think straight, she'd make him eat every one of his words.

"I'm not sure whether I'm wearing this dress or the black lace," Lexi said, gnawing her bottom lip. "You know red is Donna Devora's signature color."

"So?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you? The witch is sitting at my table at the banquet. Too bad. I love this dress."

"Well, wear it anyway. Since when have you ever worried about what she thinks?"

"You know what she said about our last book? She said it was *corny*. Can you believe that?"

Ashley fought down a rush of anger. First Rick, now Donna Devora! "Corny? *Corny*? Who does she think she is? I don't see *her* books getting nominated for this award."

"She's just jealous."

"Damn straight she is," Ashley blustered. "Her plots are nothing more than thinly veiled excuses to string together a series of sex scenes. Writers like Donna Devora give the rest of us a bad name."

Ashley knew her anger was misplaced. It wasn't Donna Devora who needed a good tongue-lashing, but Rick Orlando and all the condescending closed-minded people like him.

"That settles it," Lexi said. "I'm wearing the black lace." Lexi jumped up and snapped her fingers. "Which I just remembered is at the dry cleaners." She gave Ashley a quick hug on her way out the door.

"Wait," Ashley called out.

"Can't," Lexi said, glancing at her watch. "The dry cleaner closes in fifteen minutes. Gotta run." She blew her sister a kiss and left before Ashley could stop her.

It was just as well, Ashley realized. How could she tell Lexi this wasn't working anymore? *I want you to step aside now, Lexi, and let me accept my own award. Thanks anyway for all your help, but I'll take it from here.*

She couldn't do that.

Ashley stared at the dress, wondering what it would feel like to stand on the stage, floodlights winking off the sequins and dazzling the audience. She imagined Donna Devora looking as if she'd just sucked on a lemon, green with envy because she couldn't write award-winning *corny* books.

Ashley tugged the dress off the hanger and carried it to her bedroom. Shrugging out of her jeans and T-shirt, she slipped it on. It fit as if it were made for her, clinging to every curve of her body. *Why not?* she thought. She and Lexi had exactly the same measurements.

She turned, admiring her reflection in the full-length mirror as she ran her hands downward, smoothing the dress over the curve of her waist and hips.

Suddenly it was Rick's hands she imagined there, his eyes devouring her. She saw him smiling, standing and applauding louder than anyone else as she accepted the award, pride shining from his eyes as he led the standing ovation.

Ashley shook her head, dispersing the fantasy like a cloud of mist. Silly, she chided herself. Silly and selfish. Lexi had worked just as hard promoting and marketing the books she wrote. They were a team. She couldn't throw her sister out now. Besides, what did she care about impressing Rick Orlando anyway?

* * * * *

Rick gave up. He'd been pounding on the door of the suite for ten minutes now. If Lace was inside, she'd have answered just to make him stop making so much damn noise, even if she didn't ever want to speak to him again. *Face it*, he thought. *She's not here.*

He turned and walked away, his shoulders slumped, then stopped. If she wasn't at the suite, she was probably home. Of course! Why hadn't he tried there first? He punched the elevator button and waited impatiently. When the doors slid open, he rushed inside, nearly trampling a man stepping out.

He muttered an apology and held the elevator door open, barely glancing at the man. Rick waited, but the man shook his head as if suddenly remembering somewhere else he was supposed to be.

Funny, Rick thought. *I was sure he was getting off at this floor just now.* He looked away, then quickly back, recognizing his companion.

"Aren't you The Sapphire Man?" he asked.

"Yes." The man held out a beefy hand which Rick was sure could crush every single bone in his own. "And you're the reporter from the *Albany Times*, right?"

Rick nodded, staring at the expanse of rock-hard chest. He remembered Penny's not-so-subtle hints that there was more than business going on between Lace and The Sapphire Man. His jaw tightened as the images from Penny's photographs jumped out at him, searing their way into his brain.

I can take him, he thought. *I bet he'd go down like a sack of cement.*

Rick cleared his throat. "I was looking for Lace Kincaid. Have you seen her?"

"Nope. What makes you think I'd know where she was?"

It sounded innocent enough, but Rick could swear there was a secretive smile in those piercing blue eyes. He shrugged. "No reason."

The Sapphire Man took a deep breath, somehow seeming to expand and grow a whole foot, like an animal puffing itself up to appear more threatening. It worked. Rick reconsidered his hasty bravado. *Maybe I can't take him*, he thought.

"Have you tried her house?"

"I was just heading there." Now, why did that make him feel as if he'd won a round? He wasn't even convinced they were competing for the same woman, yet he felt a possessive sense of victory letting this walking mountain realize he not only knew where Lace lived, but felt perfectly comfortable dropping in unannounced.

When the elevator stopped, Rick reached out to hold the door open. The Sapphire Man smiled and walked past him toward the lobby. "If I see Lace, I'll tell her you were looking for her," he said, his lips curling into a half-sneering smile.

Rick nodded. "You do that," he muttered when The Sapphire Man was out of hearing range.

He turned in the other direction, toward the parking lot. Something about that guy needled him. Maybe it was the smug self-assurance, those brawny good looks, the throngs of adoring women who flocked around him. Maybe it was none of those things at all, but the thought of those big, beefy hands touching Lace's silken skin. The image filled him with such rage that by the time he reached his car there was no doubt in his mind he could take him if he had to.

* * * * *

When the doorbell rang, Ashley fumbled for the zipper of the sexy red dress, feeling foolish for indulging in fantasies. She stopped and stared toward the living room, her heart pounding.

Rick, she thought then stopped. No. Why would he be here? Just because she was daydreaming of him at the very moment the doorbell rang? There was no reason on Earth for him to be here tonight. You couldn't summon a dream out of thin air.

Still, her heart fluttered as she walked to the door. Through the frosted windowpane she saw a man's silhouette outside. A tremble went through her as she combed her fingers quickly through her hair and smoothed the dress over her hips. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

Her jaw dropped. "Steve?"

He smiled that toothpaste-ad smile and she felt...nothing. Nothing at all. Was this the man she'd spent months crying over? The very same man she'd sworn she couldn't live without?

He held out a dozen roses. She almost laughed. Flowers? He hadn't gotten her flowers once in the two years they'd dated. She didn't take them.

He frowned. "Lexi? I was looking for Ashley."

Ashley nearly laughed again. He thought she was Lexi! She'd spent two years with this man and he couldn't see beyond the clothes and hair to recognize the woman he'd promised to share his life with. And she'd wasted tears on him?

"Ashley's not home," she said, making no effort to correct his mistake. "Besides, she's involved with someone else."

"But Jenny said she wasn't—"

"Well, she is," Ashley interrupted, turning from the doorway.

He stopped her, his hand tightening on her shoulder as he swiveled her back around to face him. "And what about you, Lexi? Are you seeing anyone? Or does it matter?"

She waited, wondering what he was leading up to.

He leered and leaned closer. "You know, I always found myself comparing Ashley to you — wishing she had your charisma, your sex appeal."

A deadly calm settled over Ashley. Time seemed to stand still. She smiled with a cold, cat-like cunning. "Did you?"

He seemed to take her smile as an invitation. His hand slid from her shoulder to her back, pulling her a bit closer. His voice lowered huskily. "Yes. God, you're so sexy, so incredibly desirable. I used to watch you and wish Ashley was more like you."

Ashley could barely hide her revulsion. She forced herself to remain calm, mentally wearing her sister's self-assurance like armor. "Why didn't you tell me you felt that way?" she asked, lowering her eyes provocatively.

His face lit up, like a long-distance runner finally spotting the finish line, and he gave a final, frantic burst of seductive speed, wrapping his arm completely around her and pulling her close. His sour breath washed over her face as the words tumbled out. "You were so unattainable, so breathtakingly out of reach. I didn't think I had a chance."

Ashley's stomach churned at his oil-slick charm. She wondered what she had ever seen in him.

"What if I'd told you that you did?" she whispered seductively. "What about Ashley? What would you have done?"

Leaning in for the kiss he obviously expected now, he said exactly the wrong thing. "No contest. She couldn't hold a candle to you."

"Wanna bet?" Ashley snapped, swinging her arm up and around with lightning speed. Taking him totally by surprise, her fist connected with his jaw, sending him tottering backward off the top step. His eyes widened comically, and for a moment he seemed to catch his balance then lost it completely. His arms windmilled as he teetered then tumbled clumsily down the steps.

Ashley rubbed her hand, sure she'd broken every bone in her fingers. This was much easier in books than in real life, she realized, making a mental note of how it felt when the fragile bones of your hand connected with a man's jaw. She'd use it in the next book.

A blur of motion took her mind off her throbbing fist as Rick suddenly appeared out of nowhere. In her novels, the hero always arrived in the nick of time to save the day. If this were a novel, however, Rick Orlando would be arriving one page too late.

She rubbed her throbbing fist. *Better late than never.*

* * * * *

Rick had worked himself into a jealous rage thinking about The Sapphire Man on the drive to Lace's house. When he pulled to the curb and saw her framed in the doorway struggling with a man, a blind rage washed over him. He jumped from the car and ran to the porch just as the man tumbled backward toward him. For a moment they were caught in a tangle of arms and legs, and it seemed as if they'd both end up sprawled on the sidewalk.

When Lace's attacker broke free and headed back toward the doorway, Rick grabbed the back of his coat, pulling him off the steps and shaking him until he could almost hear the man's teeth rattling in his head.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

The man held his hands up in surrender and shook his head from side to side. "You've got this all wrong," he whimpered. "*She attacked me!*"

Rick clutched a fistful of collar and tightened it around the man's neck. "It didn't look that way to me, buddy." He turned and glanced at Lace over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. Really." She shot a warning glance at the man as Rick released him with a rough push. "Don't come back here, Steve," she said. "And by the way, Lexi doesn't live here anymore."

Rick looked from Lace to the man beside him, not sure who Lexi was or why the man looked as if he'd just been dashed with cold water. There seemed to be more to this conversation than he was hearing.

"Let him go, Rick," Lace called from the doorway. "He won't be back." She shot another warning glance at the man cowering on the sidewalk. "Will you, Steve?"

Steve mumbled something under his breath and turned away. Rick grabbed him and spun him around. "I don't think the lady heard your apology."

Steve stared from Lace to Rick, then back to Lace. "I'm sorry for the, uh, misunderstanding," he said.

Lace nodded then turned to Rick. "Go back and close your car door before coming inside, Rick," she said.

He watched her turn and step inside. The man she'd called Steve made a hurried escape. Rick stood alone on the sidewalk, not sure what to do with the adrenaline still pumping through his body. He shook his head. What was happening to him lately? He wasn't a fighting man, but this was twice today he'd wanted to pound someone into the ground. And at least one of those men could have turned him into a bowl of Cream of Wheat.

It was Lace. She brought out a protective streak in him he hadn't realized was there. He wanted to joust for her, duel for her, tie her scarf to his lance and ride off on a white steed to fight battles in her honor.

He closed the car door he'd left open in his haste to defend his maiden and followed her inside.

Chapter Twelve

Ashley didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A flurry of emotions rippled through her, the most overriding one being disappointment. Disappointment in people who made judgments based on outward appearances, and disappointment in herself for not taking a stand long ago. She'd taken the path of least resistance all her life, content to be the dreamer and giving Lexi permission to be the warrior.

No more. Driving her fist into that lowlife's jaw was her announcement to the world and herself that Ashley Kincaid was not a doormat. She was a force to be reckoned with. Maybe she wasn't Lexi. But she didn't want to be. She just wanted to be a stronger version of herself.

She chuckled softly. The look on Steve's face had been priceless. She stifled a giggle. Her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter, threatening to erupt into hysteria if she didn't get it under control.

Rick stood quietly in the doorway watching Lace. She was really upset. Her back was to him, her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. He wanted to reach out and cradle her in his arms and protect her from the world. He'd never felt like this about anyone before.

"Lace?" In three quick strides he was at her side, pulling her into his arms. "Are you sure you're all right? What did he do to you?"

Her voice was soft and serious. "He opened my eyes," she said, shaking her head in dismissal before pulling herself together with an obvious effort. "And yes, I'm fine. Really."

Her smile was less convincing than she probably thought, but Rick didn't push. He felt her trembling and wanted to hold her close in the shelter of his arms, but she pulled away. He watched whatever vulnerability she was feeling suddenly disappear as she straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eye.

"Did you want to talk to me about something?"

He did, but for some reason he couldn't remember exactly what it was. Was it to tell her how beautiful she looked in red? Was it to admit he couldn't stop thinking of her night and day? Was it to tell her he was falling in love with her despite his best efforts not to?

"Rick?" she prodded.

He shook his head to clear it. He couldn't think straight when he was looking into her eyes. Nothing made sense and yet somehow everything made sense, all at the same time. He felt as if he'd been dropped into the middle of a romance novel and his destiny was already written, beyond his control.

A romance novel. That was it!

"I came to apologize," he said. "You were right about my close-minded attitude."

"Really?"

He realized she wasn't letting him off the hook that easily. "Yes. And you were right about the article too. It was biased, a tongue-in-cheek satire. I'm ashamed of that and I intend to correct it. With your help."

Ashley stared into his eyes, gauging his sincerity.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

She wondered if he was just saying what he thought she wanted to hear, or whether her arguments had actually gotten through to him. Maybe she'd been a little too hard on him anyway. He wasn't the first person she'd met with a built-in bias against romance novels and the people who wrote them.

She softened. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know why you write. What do you feel? Do you laugh and cry with your characters? What are your dreams, your fears? What's your favorite color?"

"Whoa," Ashley chuckled. "All that for the article?"

"No. Not all of it." He smiled, looking like a little boy offering an apple to his favorite teacher. She half expected him to draw an imaginary line in the dirt with his toe and say, "Aw, shucks." Instead he said, "I want to know everything there is to know about you."

He stared deeply into her eyes for a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity. She felt as if a flurry of butterflies was suddenly let loose in her chest. When she finally found her voice, its softness surprised her.

"Why don't you make a pot of coffee while I change?" She handed him the coffee canister and pointed to the glass percolator on the stove. "Coffee takes a little longer to make this way, but I think it's worth the wait. Do you know how to use a percolator?"

He grinned. "Yes, and that's the way I like it too. See how much we have in common?"

Ashley headed for the bedroom. "I'll be right back," she called over her shoulder.

"Wait," he said.

She stopped and turned, expecting him to ask her to stay in the sexy, siren-red, come-to-me-lover dress while they talked.

But instead he asked, "Do you have any cinnamon? You know if you sprinkle cinnamon over the coffee grounds it cuts the bitterness."

She smiled. "The spice rack is on the door of the cabinet to your right."

He found the cinnamon and held it up triumphantly. She stood and watched him for a few minutes, realizing how comfortable it felt having him putter about in her kitchen, then turned to change into something more comfortable.

Ashley almost hated taking off the red dress. It was her talisman. Without it she was afraid she'd go back to being a spineless wimp. The old Ashley Kincaid would never have stood up to Steve like she had tonight. It had to be the dress.

She changed into a T-shirt and jeans, stood up straight and stared at herself in the mirror. There was a new aura about her reflection, a new attitude. Ashley realized it wasn't the dress after all. The change came from inside.

When she returned to the kitchen, the coffee bubbled a cappella and an aromatic cloud of sugar and cinnamon filled the room.

"I hope you don't mind," Rick said, piling a plate with triangles of hot cinnamon toast from the toaster oven. "I got hungry."

"Make yourself at home," she said with a smile.

She reached for two cups in the cabinet beside him and their arms brushed. The casual touch sent a thrill coursing through her body.

"You look great, by the way," he said, carrying the plate to the table.

She cocked an amused eyebrow at him. "It's not sequins."

"Nope. But you know what?"

"What?"

He poured coffee into the waiting cups and lingered a moment before answering. "I like you better in jeans than sequins. Don't get me wrong. You looked gorgeous in the dress. But when you're relaxed like this, it's as if the real Lace Kincaid emerges."

He stopped as if weighing his words, then rushed ahead. "I like that Lace. This Lace. I like her a lot."

Ashley was grateful when he carried the cups to the table. She wasn't sure if her trembling hands could manage it. What was he saying? It was almost as if he preferred her to Lexi. But that was silly. He didn't know they were two different people. At least not consciously. But maybe on some level he sensed it. Not only sensed it, but actually liked her better than her sister! Could it be? She didn't want to admit how much she wanted to believe that.

She nibbled a triangle of cinnamon toast as they talked. Once in a while he scribbled something in his notebook, but only if it was a name or reference he needed to check for the article. The rest of the time he stared intently at her, really listening, and asking questions that made her realize he heard and understood everything she said.

By the time he asked her about *A Little Piece of Heaven*, she was so relaxed and comfortable with him that the words tumbled out of her like a waterfall as she summarized the story. He listened, smiling in all the right places and urging her to continue when she paused, afraid she was boring him.

She brought him up to the point where she was right now, then outlined her ideas for the climax. His frown of concentration confirmed her suspicions. The ending fell flat.

After a few minutes of thoughtful silence, he looked up. "Why don't you move the rodeo scene to the very end?"

She shook her head. "No, because by then the heroine already knows what the hero's been hiding. It doesn't work."

"What if she doesn't know yet? That's where the emotional impact is. What if she finds out right after he gets thrown from the horse?"

Ashley thought about that, chewing on her lower lip. It meant rearranging some scenes, but maybe he was right. Suddenly the entire climax fell into place. It *could* work. Yes. Now that she thought about it, the whole ending would be more powerful that way.

The scene played out in her mind, and she started describing it to him as it unfolded in her imagination. She felt the dramatic impact it had. Her enthusiasm was catching and the ideas bounced rapidly back and forth as they brainstormed. They seemed to be reading each other's minds as one story thread followed the next, weaving in and out before tying up neatly at the final scene.

Rick passed his notebook and pen to her and watched as she scribbled, stopping to chew her thumbnail and stare off into space for a moment before returning with quiet concentration back to the page.

He couldn't take his eyes off her. He loved the way her mind worked, how she took the barest suggestion he made and turned it into a full-blown scene. It was like watching an alchemist transform tin into gold. He was overcome with shame at how little credit he'd given to her talent with his flip remarks.

The pages filled rapidly with notes. He'd never seen her so animated or alive. This was the real Lace Kincaid—the woman he was falling in love with. He watched her expressive face reveal every emotion. She wasn't just writing the story—she was living every moment of it. This was the picture of Lace Kincaid he wanted to paint for his article.

Tears misted her vision as Ashley wrote the final line. Perfect. She dropped the pen and stood up to stretch, then grinned at Rick. "We did it."

He stood and held out his hand. "*You* did it," he corrected her. "But I like the way that sounds." He rolled the word smoothly off his tongue. "*We*. Say it again."

"We did it," she repeated, a tremor in her voice. And without knowing how or why, she was in his arms and nothing had ever felt quite so right.

He brushed her cheek with the back of his hand then turned it to cup her face. "You're amazing," he said.

"You're not so bad yourself," she countered. The flippant remark came out differently as she realized how true it was.

His eyes were serious when he replied, "We make a pretty good team, don't we?"

"Yes," she breathed, the syllable captured by his lips as he kissed her so tenderly she felt the air turn liquid and warm around them.

This time she didn't pull away. She couldn't even if she wanted to. His lips brushed gently against hers, then more insistently. She leaned into him, every inch of her body yearning hungrily for more. When his tongue nudged her with soft insistence, she parted her lips and returned the pressure with her own.

She ran her fingers through his hair, feeling the dark tendrils curl around her fingers like silken bands. She pulled him closer, deepening the kiss. His breath was wild and hot on her lips. His heartbeat threatened to drown out her own. She felt her control slipping further away as she sank deeper and deeper into the passionate play of tongues and lips and soft, urgent moans.

When he released her mouth with a strangled gasp and stared into her eyes, the last of her control slipped away.

"I've never wanted a woman as much as I want you," he whispered, running his hands down the small of her back before pulling her tight against his body.

"Yes," she breathed. The word was half sigh, half moan.

She tipped her head back as he trailed warm kisses to the hollow of her neck, his tongue fluttering along her skin and setting it on fire. Every nerve tingled and her body seemed to expand outward as if to enfold him into her very soul.

"Yes, yes, yes!" She sighed, clutching his shoulders and guiding him downward until she felt his warm breath caressing the curve of her breasts. Her nipples tightened and pushed forward, begging to be touched. He answered the plea, capturing her in the warmth of his mouth, teasing her through the soft cotton of her T-shirt, flicking and tightening and releasing until she lost herself completely in erotic sensations.

She arched forward, gasping as he pressed against her. A jolt of pleasure shot through her body. A strangled moan escaped his lips, sending a current of heat from her nipples to her center. She thrust forward again, holding herself tight against him, wanting him, needing him.

"Rick," she whispered, regretting it when he pulled away from her breasts to look into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, his eyes soft and pleading.

"No, oh God, no," she said, realizing he was afraid he'd gone too fast. She placed her hand over his mouth to stop his apologies. "I need you," she said, watching his eyes. All the answer she needed was there.

He growled, lifted her with one sure movement, and carried her to the bedroom with a gentle strength she knew she could depend on for the rest of her life.

She wanted to tear off their clothes to release the wild urgency inside. He set her gently on her feet next to the bed and stared deeply into her eyes.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She knew he would stop right now if her answer was no. But she didn't want him to stop. She was sure of this. Sure of him.

"Yes," she assured him. "I'm very sure."

His hands went to her waist, and the way he caressed her with such tenderness made her feel like the most treasured and desired woman in the world.

He slowly lifted her T-shirt over her head, smoothing her hair down as he stared into her eyes. His gaze never left hers as he cupped her breasts in his warm, strong hands, letting his thumbs graze lightly across her nipples. She trembled with desire, her knees threatening to buckle beneath her.

Then his hands were at her waist again. His fingers fumbled with the zipper of her jeans before slipping under the waistband, guiding them over her hips. They slid maddeningly slowly down her thighs, her knees, her calves. She lifted one foot, then the other, stepping out of them and standing nearly naked before him. She was glad she'd chosen the lacy lingerie rather than her usual utilitarian undergarments.

He hesitated, as if afraid to breach these final, delicate barriers. Ashley reached behind her back to unfasten her bra, holding it against her breast for just a moment before letting it fall. Slowly she removed the final bit of lace, revealing herself completely to him.

He stared at her and caught his breath. "My God, you're beautiful."

How much more of this sweet torture could she stand? She wanted him now. This moment. She couldn't wait any longer.

With a burning she'd never experienced before, she tore at his clothes. Her need fueled his and she felt his control slip away. He shrugged out of his clothes impatiently, devouring her with his eyes, teasing her with his hands, clutching and tugging and entering her, his fingers demanding and insistent and sure.

He drove her higher and higher, teasing and tormenting her before finally lowering her to the bed with a tenderness that captured her heart.

She felt him press against her and rose up to meet him, her body hot and ready. He held himself poised over her, their eyes locked in a soundless exchange. Slowly, so slowly, he entered her, opening and filling her. She thought she'd scream with the need to be taken.

He laced his fingers through hers, raising her arms over her head. He leaned down, his lips demanding, and she gasped as he thrust his tongue deep within her mouth then plunged quick and hard into her, taking her deeper than she'd ever felt before. Deep and hard and wild. She rocked with him, meeting his every thrust with her own, their breath ragged and hoarse, their bodies slick with the heat of passion.

She felt herself poised for an eternity at the brink of mind-shattering release. Their bodies moved in perfect rhythm. Quickening. Quivering. His lips were at her throat, his hands releasing hers and slipping beneath her, lifting her, clutching, pulling her tighter around him.

A low moan escaped her throat as her body expanded to take him deeper still, deeper than she'd ever thought possible, touching her very soul. With one final heated thrust they tumbled deliriously over the edge together, clutching each other tightly.

She cried out his name over and over until it was branded on her heart. It was only afterward that she realized her name had been on his lips at that very moment, too. But he'd called her Lace. Not Ashley, but Lace.

As she drifted to sleep cradled in his arms, she vowed that the next time he made love to her, the name he'd cry out would be her own.

Chapter Thirteen

Ashley spent the next morning working with a smile on her face. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, fleshing out the scenes, using the notes she'd scribbled last night.

Last night. She smiled again, a dreamy, satisfied smile. When she'd awakened alone in her bed this morning she'd been afraid Rick had left. She could still feel the warmth from his body beside her. But before the disappointment took hold, he came and stood in the doorway carrying a tray laden with coffee and rolls.

"I couldn't bear to wake you," he'd said with a smile. "You looked like an angel sleeping there."

Her heart pulsed double-time in her chest. When he slipped back under the covers with her, she knew she never wanted to wake up alone again.

They ate hungrily, feeding each other bites of sweet rolls and fruit. It was as if she'd never tasted food before. All of her senses were enhanced—sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. Then they'd made love again. Slowly, tenderly, their bodies glowing in the soft morning light from her bedroom window.

When they finally forced themselves apart after languishing in the warm afterglow of lovemaking, he'd kissed her and told her he'd be counting the seconds until they were together again tonight.

She'd dressed quickly and rushed to the computer, more determined than ever to finish the manuscript. It was the first step to declaring her independence. Once this loose end was tied up and the convention over, she'd explain to Lexi that she needed more. She needed her life. Her whole life. Not just a part of it.

Surely Lexi would understand. Wouldn't she?

Ashley shook her head. She couldn't worry about that now. The words flowed with a life of their own. She chuckled to herself. What was that phrase Lexi had used? A *white-hot burst of creativity*. Maybe her sister wasn't that far off in her description after all.

Rick worked just as feverishly rewriting the article about Lace Kincaid with a whole new slant. His outlook had taken a drastic turn from the time he'd first started it. He checked his watch for the hundredth time. It seemed like an eternity before he'd see Lace again. He'd only left her a couple hours ago and couldn't believe how much he missed her already. He wasn't sure he could wait until tonight to see her again, to hold her, to touch her.

He was supposed to pick her up for the banquet at her suite at seven o'clock, but that seemed so far away. He straightened the pages of his article, wondering if Lace

would like to see the new version. Maybe he'd pop over there early and show it to her. Yes, he decided. He'd do just that. They could have some private time together before the banquet. And he had an idea what they might do to fill that private time.

Just thinking of her made his body respond instantly. How could he possibly keep his hands off her now? He hoped he'd be able to drag her away from her adoring fans early. He wanted to spend the night with her in his arms again. Tonight and every night for the rest of their lives.

He wanted tonight to be special. He remembered seeing a whirlpool tub in the bathroom of her suite. He smiled, thinking of the possibilities. Candles. They'd need candles. And champagne. He started making a list. Shopping would help pass the time, and wouldn't Lace be surprised when he arrived with all the accessories they needed for a sexy, romantic interlude in the bath? Including some luscious bath oils and lotions.

Now, what was that fancy bath place Penny was always raving about? He dialed Penny's number, pencil ready. Tonight would be incredible. He'd make sure of that.

When Penny answered and gave him the name of the store that sold those special bath products she loved so much, he avoided her not-so-subtle interrogation.

"Do you know if they carry something with a cinnamon scent?"

"Yeah, I'm sure they do. Why?"

"Just getting a head start on my Christmas shopping," he answered.

"In July?" It was obvious she wasn't buying it.

"Yes. By the way, which is *your* favorite scent?" Rick asked, hoping to divert her attention.

"Pineapple," she replied. "And since you're working so hard to distract me, I need lotion and conditioner and body spray. Oh, and shower gel too. Don't forget the shower gel."

"I won't, dear. Bye."

"Leaving so soon? Slam, bam, thank you ma'am? I feel so used."

"I'll make it up to you, I promise. I'll buy you two shower gels."

Her laughter over the telephone receiver brought a smile to his face. But then, everything brought a smile to his face today. He hung up the phone and headed out the door, intent on giving his credit card a good workout in anticipation of his date with Lace tonight.

* * * * *

Lexi had almost made her escape before Donna Devora snaked her way to the table, her pinched-up face looking as if it would crack if a smile crossed it. *Maybe she should spend less time writing about sex and more time practicing it*, Lexi thought.

"Darling," Donna said, extending her hand as if she expected Lexi to kiss it. "We're so, so very proud of you, love."

It was her first acknowledgment of the award nomination, Lexi realized, and Donna made it sound as if she were personally responsible for Lace's success.

"Thank you, Donna." Lexi was determined to be gracious. She made introductions around the table. "You know Phyllis and Gerald from Putley Publishing, right? And my editor, Rita Ffaz."

Of course you do, Lexi thought, or you wouldn't be over here sticking your nose into my business, you dried up little biddy.

"And of course you all know Donna Devora." They nodded. Lexi pointed to a chair, inviting Donna to join them. It didn't matter now. Their business was done and Lexi was about to make her excuses and leave.

"You must be so excited, Lace," Donna said, taking a seat. "This is your first nomination, right?"

Lexi fumed. *Oh, so subtle.*

Without waiting for a reply, Donna continued. "Why, I remember the first time I received a Book of the Year Award. I could barely remember my name."

Hot-n-Lusty Wench? Lexi bit her tongue to keep the remark from slipping out. She'd almost said it out loud.

Donna turned her attention to the publishers in an obvious attempt to dig up any dirt on whatever negotiations might have taken place. "So, will you be working with our Lace now?" she asked. "I've always thought her work was perfectly suited to the Sapphire line. Now more than ever."

Lexi resisted the urge to kick her under the table and wipe that lascivious smile right off her face. She was relieved at Gerald's diplomatic reply. "We have great respect for Lace's work and would be proud to have her represent any of our lines." Lexi didn't think she imagined the special emphasis on the word "respect".

Gerald glanced pointedly at his watch and made an excuse to leave. Rita stood with the publishers as they said their goodbyes and walked to the door with them.

When they were alone, Donna leaned forward with a conspiratorial wink. "So, Lace. Rumor has it there's a six-figure hardcover deal with Putley. I've heard the word 'mini-series' bandied about too. Are you going to share or do I have to read about it in the trade papers?"

Lexi could barely keep herself from gloating now that the deal was closed. "You heard right," she said, refusing to share any details.

"And movie rights?"

"Well," Lexi shrugged coyly. "I don't want to jinx it, but yes, it's a possibility."

She watched Donna's teeth grinding behind lips drawn into a tight, thin line. *Eat your heart out.* She let her gnaw on that for a moment before asking sweetly, "Whatever did you mean with that Sapphire remark, Donna?"

Donna feigned innocence. "Oh, I didn't mean anything lewd. But darling, it's hardly a secret, is it? Why, even that nosy photographer was asking questions about you and that gorgeous Sapphire Man."

"Oh? And what did you tell her?" Lexi wasn't surprised. She'd seen Rick's friend Penny snooping around all week. Apparently she'd found the perfect gossipmonger willing to spill. Damn, she'd have to head the photographer off before she got to Rick and ruined everything.

"Don't worry, darling." Donna dripped with cloying sweetness. "Your little secret is safe with me." She patted Lexi's hand as if including herself in some deep, dark conspiracy. Lexi wanted to smack that smug grin from her face once and for all.

One more day, she reminded herself, taking a deep breath. One more day and she wouldn't have to worry about hiding anything. All she had to do was get through this convention and their lives would return to normal—whatever that was.

Donna walked with her from the restaurant to the atrium of the hotel. Lexi nearly choked when she glanced across the room and saw her sister entering the lobby. Her heart tripped and tumbled. What was Ashley doing here? They couldn't be seen in the same place at the same time! Not now.

She distracted Donna and caught Ashley's eye. Ashley signaled that she was going upstairs. Lexi nodded quickly, keeping her sister out of Donna's line of sight.

By the time she'd managed to shake Donna off and make her way to the suite, her heart was pounding. What a day. And she still had the banquet to get through tonight.

Ashley paced the suite waiting for Lexi. She wished she'd had a camera with her. The look on her sister's face when she'd seen her come in had been priceless.

She didn't care, though. Maybe her carelessness was a sign of how much she welcomed the thought of coming out in the open, despite her conviction to wait until the convention was over.

Lexi stormed in, her face a mask of disbelief. "What are you doing here? Are you crazy?" She locked the door behind her. "And I was with Donna Devora, too! What if she'd seen you?"

Ashley giggled. "You'd have convinced her she'd had too much to drink—again—and that she was seeing double."

Lexi rolled her eyes, smiling. "That would have worked. Everyone knows she has a hollow leg when it comes to her gin and tonics. So, what are you doing here?"

Ashley held out the manuscript box. "I couldn't wait. It's done."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. Not kidding." Ashley smiled, handing over the box. "I wrote the final line this morning. And I have Rick Orlando to thank for that. He sat up brainstorming with me last night. I whipped off the final chapters today in one of your famous 'white-hot bursts of creativity'. You know the kind I'm talking about, right?"

Lexi laughed and hugged her tight. "I knew you'd do it. And I knew Rick Orlando would be good for you. The minute I met him I thought he was exactly right for you, just like the hero in one of your novels."

Ashley sighed. "You don't know how right you are." She felt herself blush. The knowing glance from her sister told her Lexi had noticed it too.

"You've fallen in love with him, haven't you?"

"Yes," Ashley admitted. "Madly, passionately, deeply in love with him." She sighed. "There's only one problem. He thinks I'm you, or you're me, or we're Lace Kincaid. I can't wait for this convention to be over so we can explain."

"One more day, Ashley. That's all we need. Rita and I hammered out the final details of the deal with Putley over lunch. All that's left is to sign the contract. But we can't let a hint of scandal spoil this. They're very conservative at Putley. Which reminds me, there's one other little problem."

"What's that?"

Lexi led Ashley to the couch. "That photographer friend of Rick's—Penny? Apparently she's been snooping around. Asking questions about me and The Sapphire Man. Questions our dear Donna Devora was more than willing to answer, I'm sure."

Ashley nodded. "That explains her attitude yesterday. I thought she was going to bite my head off at the picnic."

"How was the picnic? Isn't Rick's mother a doll? I knew you'd fit right in there."

"Yes. His whole family is wonderful. I had a great time until the little misunderstanding with Rick."

"Misunderstanding? What happened?"

Ashley waved a hand in dismissal. "It was nothing. Besides, we straightened it all out last night."

"If your smile means what I think it does," Lexi said, "he made it up to you in more ways than one."

Ashley blushed.

"No wonder you seem different today."

"Different? How?"

"I don't know. More self-assured. In control."

"More like you?"

Lexi stopped and thought a minute. "Yes," she said thoughtfully. "More like me."

"And this is a good thing?" Ashley giggled.

"Damn straight it is," Lexi said with mock fierceness.

They hugged and laughed, but both sisters realized something had changed. There was a balance now neither had felt before. And it was good.

A gentle rap on the door made Ashley catch her breath. She held a finger to her lips. "Don't answer it. It might be Rick."

"No," Lexi said. "I know that knock." She opened the door and The Sapphire Man slipped inside. He kissed Lexi and smiled at Ashley.

"It's amazing," he said, inspecting them side by side for the first time.

Ashley recognized the teasing tone in her sister's voice when she looked at him and asked, "How do you know you kissed the right sister?"

He smiled and gazed deeply into Lexi's eyes. "There's no doubt in my mind. You may be identical twins, but when I look into your eyes I see my future, when I touch you my heart flips inside out and I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, which sister is mine." He punctuated his statement by drawing Lexi into his arms and kissing her tenderly.

Ashley watched Lexi melt at his words and wondered if Rick would ever say the same thing to her.

"I think I'll leave you two alone now," Ashley said.

"No, don't leave." Lexi said.

Ashley smiled. "I only came over to drop off the manuscript. You two have fun." She kissed her sister and stepped to the door, realizing she wasn't the only one who had fallen in love. It was obvious to her that Lexi had fallen too.

"Oh," Ashley called over her shoulder. "Don't forget that Rick is picking you up at seven o'clock to bring you to the banquet."

Ashley saw Sapphie raise a questioning eyebrow. She knew exactly how he felt. But there was only one more night of this charade.

After tonight she would be the only woman on Rick Orlando's arm.

Chapter Fourteen

Lexi stretched out on the couch across from Sapphie, her bare feet nestled in his lap. She sighed as he massaged each foot between his strong, warm hands, lightly stroking across the soles before working upward with gentle pressure along the knuckles of each toe.

"I love how you touch me."

"That makes two of us, darlin'," he replied, enclosing her entire foot between his hands and rocking it back and forth, stretching and relaxing the tendons of her calves.

"So," he said, never easing the pressure on her feet. "That reporter is escorting you to the banquet tonight?"

"Yes. One more night. Then we can put this all behind us."

"Why wait? Why not put it behind you right now?"

"Because." She frowned. "This is important to Ashley and her career."

"Hasn't Rick become important to her, too? Perhaps more important than continuing with this ruse?"

"Yes. But it's only one more night. Tomorrow we'll tell Rick. Then, after the contracts are signed and the convention is behind us, maybe we'll end it for good."

He raised a questioning eyebrow. "For good?"

Lexi nibbled her lower lip, finally giving voice to something she'd been feeling for quite some time now. "I've wanted to for a long time, but Ashley needed me. She's a wonderful writer, but I never thought she could handle the business side on her own."

"I don't think you give your sister enough credit."

"Oh, I don't mean she's not strong enough, but she would rather concentrate on her writing, while I love the promotional end of it. That's why we made such a good team."

"And now?" He picked up a bottle of frosted coral nail polish from the coffee table and began painting her toenails.

"Now." She sighed, luxuriating under his attention. "Now I'm tired of pretending to be something I'm not. I'm just so afraid of letting Ashley down."

"Maybe she's outgrown this arrangement too. Maybe it's time both of you move on and follow your own separate dreams."

Lexi brightened. "I think you're right. Ashley seemed different today. More in control. And you know, I really love publishing. I love the wheeling and dealing, but I want to do it under my own name, with my own business. I want to make a name for myself."

"No more pretending to be Lace Kincaid, darling of the romance circuit?"

"No. No more."

He smiled. "And no more pretending that we don't know each other when we're in public after tonight?"

She grinned. "Well, only if it turns you on, love."

"Darlin', everything you do turns me on."

She wriggled her toes in the palm of his hand, admiring her pedicure. "Everything?"

"Everything," he insisted, his eyes darkening with desire. To prove his point, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Neither cared that her toenails were still wet.

* * * * *

Ashley sat in her office. The house was so quiet, so lonely. She felt hollow inside, the way she always did after completing a project. She stared at the blank computer screen. There was no reason to turn it on. The book was finished and she wasn't ready to start a new one. Not yet.

She looked around at the notes that had accumulated on her desk and made a vague effort to tidy up, picking up piles of papers and deciding she had no idea what to do with them before putting them down again. It all seemed so pointless.

"I miss Rick," she said aloud, and the thought made her heart ache with longing. The house seemed too big without him, the kitchen less cozy. And the bed. Could she even bear to climb into that bed alone again?

She glanced through the open doorway to her bedroom. The covers were still rumpled from their lovemaking. Was it only this morning she'd lain in his arms?

She wanted to crawl back into bed and smell his cologne on her pillow. She wanted to close her eyes and surround herself with the memory of his touch, his taste, his voice.

She wanted him so badly. Her body was on fire for him.

Who was she kidding? She didn't have to wait any longer. The article didn't matter. The award didn't matter. Nothing mattered except finding that perfect peace she'd felt in Rick's arms. Seeing her sister so obviously in love had triggered a yearning deep inside her. She wanted to feel that same sense of completion in the arms of the man she loved. But Ashley knew that wasn't possible as long as this secret hung between them.

She had to find Rick. She had to tell him the truth. Now. Tomorrow might be too late.

* * * * *

Rick couldn't wait any longer. Tonight seemed like a lifetime away. He needed to see Lace now. Now and every moment of each day and every night—for the rest of their lives.

He drove like a madman to the hotel, his mind whirling with anticipation. The basket of bath goodies rested beside him on the seat, inspiring seductive fantasies. He pictured Lace, surrounded in a cloud of fragrant bubbles, the soft glow of candlelight reflected in her eyes, her skin pink and glistening.

By the time he arrived at the hotel he could barely think straight, he wanted her so much. Even the long, sensuous bath he'd planned would have to wait, because he knew *he* couldn't.

He pounded on the door of her suite impatiently, hoping she was here and not at her house. He pounded again. A quick scuffling sound assured him he'd been right. She was here.

His heart flipped over when she answered the door. Her face was flushed and her eyes widened into enormous glistening pools when he pushed the door open the rest of the way. He knew she was naked beneath the robe she clutched tightly around herself.

Rick moaned. He'd never wanted a woman as much as he wanted Lace Kincaid. Right here. Right now.

Without a word he crushed her to his chest. The basket he'd brought fell to the floor as he pulled her into his arms. He captured her lips with his own, smothering her gasp of surprise. The robe fell open as she raised her arms to his chest, pushing weakly at him. He lowered his face, lips grazing across velvet skin, his breath ragged in his throat as he whispered her name.

"Lace."

"Rick, wait," she murmured. "Please."

But he couldn't. He couldn't wait another moment. He lifted her and strode toward the bedroom, pushing the door open with his shoulder. With an effort, he pulled his gaze from her throat—then stopped in horror.

The bed was already occupied.

The Sapphire Man sprawled across the sheets wearing nothing but a smirk. Not bothering to cover his nakedness, he looked from one to the other with one eyebrow cocked.

Rick wanted to kill him.

He looked at Lace, who lowered her gaze. *No wonder her eyes are glistening*, he thought. *No wonder her skin is flushed*. A sharp pain tore through him at the thought of another man's hands on her body, another man's lips on her skin, another man...

He moaned, a deep, animal sound.

He set her down, ignoring the pleading in her eyes.

"Rick, let me explain. It's not what you think."

He shook his head, feeling like the biggest fool that ever walked the Earth. "No need to explain," he mumbled, turning for the door.

He wanted to hit something. Preferably the smug smile on The Sapphire Man's face. He'd never felt such rage and anger. But there was nothing here to take it out on.

There was nothing left to fight for. He'd lost. And even though he knew Lace Kincaid had used him all along, the loss was almost too much to bear.

Rick slammed the door behind him, taking little pleasure in the loud thud. What a fool he'd been. She'd lied to him from the very beginning. He should have listened to his own instincts.

Chapter Fifteen

Ashley had searched all afternoon to no avail. Rick wasn't at his apartment or his mother's house. *Ironic*, she thought. *I've finally decided to tell him the truth and he's nowhere to be found.*

She clutched a slip of paper in her hands. It was the phone number for his cabin at the lake. Carmella Orlando had given it to her, saying that if Ashley couldn't find him anywhere else, he was probably there.

For a moment Ashley considered driving there and surprising him. The way he'd talked about the cabin she could almost see it, nestled in the woods surrounded by whispering pines, the waters of the lake lapping at the shoreline, flames flickering from the outdoor barbecue pit he'd built with his grandfather when he was just a boy.

Ashley wondered what it would be like to make love under the stars at that place he loved so much. She blushed, knowing there wasn't any place in the world she wouldn't want to make love to Rick Orlando. But first she had to find him and tell him the truth.

Damn. Where was he?

* * * * *

Rick took his shirt off and draped it over the limb of a birch tree. He looked around, drinking in the sights and smells of the camp he loved so much. The sun glimmered off the surface of the lake and the smell of pine hung heavy in the air. But the serenity he'd been searching for wasn't here.

He needed to do something physical to burn off the rush of anger and adrenaline. His nerves jumped, his muscles twitched, his mind raced over images he wanted to forget. Images he knew were burned into his memory, both real and imagined. Images of Lace making those soft, sweet whimpering sounds while that hulking mountain of muscle smiled a smirking, victorious smile.

He'd grabbed the ax and attacked the pile of logs. Before long he was sweating with exertion and the heat of the sun. Now he was bare-chested, his muscles straining and bulging under a sheen of perspiration. Each thrust of the ax tore a grunt from his throat and sent splinters of wood flying through the air.

He felt a satisfying sense of accomplishment as the pile of split logs grew. *I'll build a fire tonight*, he thought. *Maybe open that bottle of brandy that's been sitting in the cabinet for a hundred years.*

To hell with the banquet. To hell with the damn article. And to hell with Lace Kincaid.

With a grunt, he slashed the ax through the air, splitting through a tough, stringy piece of poplar with ease. The weight of the ax dragged on the upswing, seemed to hang weightless for a moment, then crashed downward, splitting the air with a sharp *swoosh*.

He stopped, hearing the unmistakable sound of gravel crunching in the distance. A car was coming down the secluded, dead-end gravel road marked with a private property sign. Whoever it was had either taken a wrong turn or was looking for him.

He leaned on the ax and waited as the car wound its way closer, part of him hoping Lace had tracked him down while the other half tried to decide how to send her away if she had. It seemed to take forever. By the time the familiar car crawled to a stop and the door opened, he'd memorized a hundred different ways of saying goodbye to Lace Kincaid. He didn't need any of them.

"Well, if it isn't Paul Bunyan himself," Penny called, slamming the car door.

Rick pulled a handkerchief from the back pocket of his jeans and wiped sweat from his forehead. "What are you doing here?" His voice was colder than he meant it to be.

"Well, I was hoping for a better reception," she replied, tossing his shirt to him. "Cover up. I hear they're serving veal piccata at the banquet tonight and I don't want to lose my appetite."

"Well, you can have mine," Rick said, slipping his arms into the flannel shirt. "I'm not going."

"Oh, yes, you are."

"Oh, no, I'm not. And you didn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

Penny shrugged. "Looking for you. I saw you leaving the hotel earlier. You looked as if you wanted to kill someone. You spun out of the parking lot so fast I didn't have a chance to follow. But I figured something was wrong."

"You figured right."

"So, I tried to find you. When I couldn't find you at home or your mother's, I figured you'd be here."

"You figured right again," Rick snarled. "So what do you want, a gold star?"

"Hey, Mr. Sourpuss," Penny scolded, punching his arm. "Don't use that tone of voice with me. I'm not the enemy, remember? I'm your friend, whether you deserve me or not."

Rick grimaced. "Nice jab. Did you ever think of going in the ring?"

"What? And risk hurting this face? Not on your life. I prefer to pick on people who don't dare hit me back."

Rick felt a flicker of amusement. Penny was right. She didn't deserve the brunt of his anger.

Inside, the phone rang. Rick stared toward the cabin.

"You gonna answer it or just stand there looking like an idiot?" Penny asked.

"No. Let it ring."

"You want to talk about it, Rick?"

"No."

"It's Lace, isn't it?"

"Which part of the word 'no' don't you understand?"

"The stubborn part."

"Me? Stubborn? You're the most stubborn, exasperating, headstrong, obstinate, bullheaded—"

"Okay, okay." Penny laughed. "I get the point. You can put away your thesaurus now."

The phone rang again. Both of them stared at the cabin. Rick hadn't realized he was holding his breath until it exploded from his lungs with a *whoosh* when the ringing finally stopped.

Penny stared at him. "It's Lace, isn't it?"

Rick nodded, hoping the pain he felt didn't show on his face. Just the sound of her name wrenched his heart. He still couldn't believe the woman he'd held so tenderly in his arms just this morning could have deceived him so easily. In a matter of hours she'd hopped from his arms into another man's bed without blinking an eye. How could he have been so wrong about her?

He turned to Penny. "I caught her with The Sapphire Man."

She nodded. He saw anger cross her face. Anger and something that was a combination of protectiveness and pity. But that was all. She didn't seem the least bit surprised.

"You knew, didn't you?"

"Oh, Rick," Penny said, clasping him in a warm hug that made him want to cry on her shoulder. "I didn't know for sure, but I had some pretty strong suspicions. I didn't want to tell you unless I was convinced it was true. I didn't want you to be hurt."

"It's too late for that," he said with a grimace.

"I'm so sorry. God, I could wring her neck for doing this to you. I warned her."

"Warned her? When?"

Penny shrugged. "At the picnic. She promised me she was going to talk to you. She begged me not to say anything yet."

"Yet?" His laugh was cold and humorless. "Yet!? You mean not until the article was finished, right? She was only using me, using the article to further her precious career. That's really all that matters to Lace Kincaid."

Penny seemed at a loss for words, a first as far as Rick could remember. "You don't have to say anything," he told her. "I know what a fool I was. Well, she'll get her damn article. You can be sure of that."

He reached for the ax and swung, pouring all the anger and betrayal he felt into the down stroke, fueling each wrenching blow with the blazing pain in his heart.

He jerked at the sound of the phone ringing again, tearing his concentration from what he was doing. His mind screamed, *Stop it! Stop calling here. I don't want to talk to you or see you ever again.*

He chopped harder, hoping to drown out the sound. The ax sliced through the air, thrashing downward, suddenly changing weight as the sound of Penny's screams mingled with the blaring of the telephone. He watched the spray of scarlet droplets arc upward, his mind a whirlpool of confusion, not understanding where the blood was coming from or why.

Not until the pain hit.

* * * * *

Ashley put down the receiver. She knew he was there. He had to be. He just wasn't answering her calls. Now she knew why. When she'd gotten home there'd been a frantic message from Lex on her machine.

Ashley knew what Rick had seen—and what he thought. Damn Lexi for not being more careful! This was exactly what Ashley had feared would happen. But Lexi wasn't the only one to blame. Ashley knew the whole misunderstanding could have been avoided if she'd stopped the bluff the moment she realized she was falling in love with Rick. Her heart plummeted when she thought of how hurt he must feel after seeing the woman he thought was *her* in bed with another man.

If only Rick had given Lexi a chance to explain before rushing away. If only she had found him first and told him everything. All her reasons for waiting seemed so silly now. She should have been honest from the start, then none of this would have happened. Now it was too late.

She stared at the red dress hanging from the closet. Or was it? Maybe there was still a chance.

She glanced at the clock, a plan forming in her mind. There was plenty of time before the banquet started. Surely he'd be there. It was the culmination of the entire week, the final cap for the article. He couldn't avoid her forever. Despite the hurt and anger she knew he must be feeling, Ashley also knew Rick wouldn't let his personal feelings keep him from finishing the job he'd started. He'd be there, she was sure of it.

And so would she. She made up her mind, slipping the dress off the hook and laying it across her bed. Her heart caught in her throat. *Their* bed. She'd always think of it that way now. She had to get him back. Had to make him see. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter Sixteen

Ashley strode through the lobby, her head held high. She didn't care who saw her. Maybe it was the killer red dress that gave her confidence. Maybe it was her new determination. But as far as she was concerned, the charade was over now. All she had to do was tell Lexi.

There were people entering the banquet room already, but Ashley knew her sister wouldn't be there yet. Lexi was always fashionably late. She liked making an entrance.

Ashley headed for the elevator. It might be better to deal with Lexi in private. She punched the elevator button, tapping her foot impatiently. When the elevator didn't jump at her command, she jabbed the button again. And again.

Finally the doors slid open and she stood face to face with Donna Devora in scarlet taffeta and matching feather boa. Great, just what she needed right now.

"Oh," Donna said, her voice dripping icily. "You decided to wear red?" Donna looked pointedly at Ashley's auburn hair. "It's not an easy color for a redhead to carry off," she sniffed. "Perhaps you should change into something black."

"I think I've pulled it off quite well, thank you. Perhaps *you* should change into something black."

Ashley pushed her way past Donna into the elevator and pressed the button, ignoring Donna's stunned look as the doors closed in front of her face.

"Witch," Ashley muttered as the elevator rose. She realized it was people like Donna Devora that Lexi had sheltered her from all these years. *Well, she thought, I'm a big girl now. I can handle Donna Devora myself and anything she can throw at me.*

When the elevator reached Lexi's floor, Ashley scrambled through her purse, looking for the key to the suite. Finally fishing it out, she unlocked the door.

"Lexi? You here?"

But there was no answer in the quiet room. It was dark and empty. Ashley slumped to a chair in disappointment. Leave it to Lexi to be on time for an event for the first time in her life.

She took a deep breath and froze. The adrenaline rush that had gotten her here suddenly drained from her and she couldn't move, no longer sure what she was doing or why. Suddenly she didn't think she could do this. What was it their father had always said? "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Well, nothing was broken here. Things were going just fine until Rick Orlando came along. Was he worth the risk of splitting up an award-winning team?

She knew she should leave now, but moving seemed like too much trouble. It was easier to do nothing and let fate take its course. Lexi was already downstairs at the

awards ceremony, soaking up the attention she lived for. Ashley rocked back and forth, curling her arms around one of the sofa pillows and trying to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Hide, she thought. Just hide here until it's over with. Why rock the boat now?

Her foot hit something beside the chair and a pink bottle rolled across the floor. She leaned over and noticed an overturned basket. Bottles of bath gel and lotion had rolled under the chair. Bath crystals sprinkled the floor like powdered sugar.

A note was tucked beneath a terrycloth bath towel. Ashley read it, her heart catching in her throat. It was from Rick. He must have brought this when he interrupted Lexi's little tryst. She plucked a folded note from the basket.

Lace, I can't think of anything sexier than sharing a bubble bath – and the rest of my life – with you. Rick.

Ashley read it over and over until tears clouded her vision and she could no longer make out the words. But by then she had already memorized them.

Lexi wound her way through the crowded banquet hall. The numbers on the tables didn't seem to follow any logical order and she was sure she'd never find her seat for the ceremony. She'd just wander around all night, shaking hands and telling people that yes, she was so very excited, and yes, it was such an honor, and yes, her new book would be out soon, and how kind of you to say that.

When she finally found her assigned table, she wished she hadn't. It was empty.

What an honor, Lexi smirked. *I get to sit all alone.* She checked the place cards. Rick and Penny were supposed to be there, but after today's fiasco she doubted he'd make an appearance. And if Rick didn't come, neither would his sidekick photographer. There was a place card for Donna Devora. *Her, I can live without,* Lexi thought. There was a spot for Sapphie too, but she knew he was working the awards ceremony and wouldn't have time to sit.

She sighed. It looked as if the guest of honor would be conspicuously alone tonight. She wished Ashley was with her. The worst part of their arrangement was not being able to have fun together at these events. Although they bickered, they'd always had the best time when they were together. They had a special bond people didn't quite understand, sometimes finishing each other's sentences. One glance and they'd erupt into giggles, always knowing exactly what the other was thinking.

While she was trying to decide whether to mingle or sit down and make the best of being alone, Lexi saw Rick and Penny winding their way across the room.

He came!

She felt an enormous weight lift from her shoulders. She'd be able to explain to Rick and clear this all up before Ashley got hurt. She waved and they headed toward the table. As they got closer, Lexi noticed how handsome Rick looked. His black tuxedo set

off his dark hair. The only things spoiling the look were a bandage wound around his right hand and the obvious effort he was making not to meet her eyes.

When they reached the table, Lexi made a move toward Rick, but Penny positioned herself between them like a shield.

"You came," Lexi said.

Rick nodded. "We still have an article to finish, right? Nothing's changed that."

"Rick, I have to talk to you." Lexi tried to pull him aside, but just then Donna arrived, rustling in scarlet taffeta with an outrageous feather boa fluttering around her neck.

"Lace, darling!" Donna cried, embracing Lexi and kissing the air beside each of her cheeks. She eyed Lexi from head to toe, making her wonder if perhaps the black lace dress she'd decided on was too understated. But then, anything without sequins, rhinestones or feathers was understated as far as Donna was concerned. She was a walking parody.

"I'm so glad you took my advice and changed your outfit," Donna said. "Black is so much more...slimming."

Lexi ignored Penny's smirk at the catty remark, too concerned about the hurt in Rick's eyes to wonder what Donna was talking about.

Donna turned her spotlight on Rick, not even bothering to acknowledge Penny at their table. "And Rick, darling. How is that little article about our Lace coming?" She took his bandaged hand in hers, causing a grimace of pain on his face. "What happened? Did she bite you?"

Donna turned an approving glance toward Penny when she giggled at her remark.

"Rick, please?" Lexi whispered.

"Hush," Donna commanded as the lights dimmed. "They're about to start. You don't want to miss your grand moment now, do you? You can talk to the handsome reporter later, dearie."

Lexi realized she was fighting a losing battle. Even without Penny and Donna interfering, it was obvious Rick didn't want to talk to her. Donna was right. There'd be time to straighten this out later. Assuming it wasn't already too late.

Ashley burned with impatience. The ride down took longer than the ride up. The elevator stopped at nearly every floor as women got on to find their way to the banquet hall.

Soon the elevator car was filled with glittering women, hair perfectly coifed, makeup artistically applied and perfume more expensive than liquid gold mingling in the claustrophobic confines of the car. Ashley was wedged toward the back of the elevator, Rick's note clutched in her hand. "Please," she prayed. "Please, please be there."

The elevator crawled, stopping finally at the second floor. As the doors opened, a man dressed in golfing attire stood frozen to the spot. His jaw dropped as he stared into the packed car of the elevator.

The women at the front shifted to make room for him. Finally he found his voice and entered the cab. He grinned. "You know, I've had dreams that started out just like this."

A flurry of giggles set Ashley's nerves on edge. When they reached the lobby, the man held the elevator doors as the women filed out. He nodded to each one, a huge smile on his face. "Ladies," he said. "Thank you for showing me a little piece of heaven."

They blushed and giggled and Ashley's heart flipped over. She didn't believe in portents, but those words coming from a stranger seemed like an omen. *A Little Piece of Heaven*. She felt an intense tug of pride. Her book. Her vision. Her dream.

She straightened her shoulders with determination and stepped out of the elevator, beaming a grateful smile at the man whose casual remark had given her the final push she needed to fight for what was hers.

Rick answered Donna's questions, explaining how the head of the ax had flown off, bouncing off the log and striking his hand.

"It's not that bad," he assured her. "A few stitches, that's all."

"Twenty-four to be exact, Mr. Understatement," Penny interjected with a shudder. "I thought his whole hand had come off. Luckily there wasn't any serious damage, just a whole lot of blood."

Donna shivered. "Poor dear. You should be careful handling big, dangerous things like axes."

Rick was only half listening to the two women chattering beside him. He regretted coming. The article was just an excuse. He had more than enough material to finish it, and being at the banquet wasn't really necessary.

The truth was he wanted to be here. Despite everything, he wanted to watch Lace accept her award. There was no question in his mind that she would win, and he wanted to share this moment with her.

He glanced up and caught her eyes. She seemed to be pleading with him. *She's probably hoping I don't make a scene*, he thought. He avoided her gaze then felt guilty when her shoulders sagged. This was her day. Yes, he was hurt, but it was cruel of him to spoil this evening for her.

He cleared his throat. "Lace?"

She seemed to be waiting expectantly for him, but before he could say anything, the emcee began the presentation of the Crystal Quill Award. The opportunity passed as everyone focused on the stage. After reading a brief biography of each of the nominees, the emcee paused dramatically.

"And the Crystal Quill Award goes to..."

Rick held his breath, waiting for the winner to be announced.

"...Lace Kincaid!"

A spotlight shifted, lighting up their table. Lace stood and Rick saw The Sapphire Man heading toward them to escort her to the stage. Without thinking, he stood. He couldn't let her accept the award without telling her how proud he was. He couldn't let her stand up there thinking he didn't care, no matter what had happened between them personally. His professional opinion hadn't changed.

Swallowing his hurt pride, Rick leaned forward and whispered, "Despite what happened, I know how much this means to you. Congratulations." Then he kissed her cheek and took his place again before The Sapphire Man held out his arm to escort her to the stage.

"They make a lovely couple, don't they?" Donna asked pointedly.

"Yes," Rick agreed, his shoulders sagging. "They do."

Penny squeezed his good hand and they watched Lace take her place behind the podium. From where he was sitting, Rick could see The Sapphire Man wink before leaning down and kissing her, a kiss more intimate than his own congratulatory one had been. The Sapphire Man draped her over his arm in his trademark cover pose, eyes blazing into hers.

To the audience it must have looked staged, a parody of one of her covers, but Rick knew otherwise. He was grateful he was sitting because his knees went weak when the audience cheered wildly. There was no denying the chemistry between Lace Kincaid and The Sapphire Man. Rick could have kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. But then, they'd taken great pains not to be seen together all week, hadn't they?

Rick noticed Donna's face. It was a study in jealousy and resentment. He hoped the pain he was feeling wasn't as evident on his own.

Ashley stood outside the banquet hall. She'd scanned the room hoping to see either her sister or Rick. Then the spotlight swung around, capturing them both in its glow. Ashley held her breath when Rick kissed Lexi's cheek.

No, she wanted to scream. She's not Lace. I am!

Then Lexi was on the stage, and the audience clapped and whistled as she played up to them with The Sapphire Man. Ashley rested her forehead against the cool wall, gripping the edge of the door. Lexi was so good at this.

But that didn't mean she was the only woman for the job, did it? Ashley stood frozen with indecision. She almost laughed. They'd been so worried, so careful not to be seen in the same place. And here they were together, yet Ashley felt totally invisible. No one even noticed her. All that worrying had been for nothing.

Just like that silly poem. *He wasn't here again today, oh how I wish he'd go away.*

"No!" This time she said it out loud. *No. I'm tired of being invisible.* It was time right now to stand up and fight for what belonged to her. Her work. Her award. Her man.

It didn't matter that the scandal could destroy Lace Kincaid forever. She could write under another name. She could start again. But not without Rick. Nothing mattered if he couldn't be in her life.

I'm tired of being the little man who isn't there, she realized. No one will wish me away. I'm here and I'm staying.

Ashley pushed herself away from the wall and stepped into the ballroom.

Lexi's heart raced. She couldn't believe Sapphie had kissed her like that in public, right in front of everyone. She felt her face flush as he held her gaze, as if daring her to make a joke out of this.

When he stepped behind her on the stage, she could still feel his eyes on her. She could feel that magnetic pull between them, like a physical bond holding them together.

"Well," she said, tapping the microphone. "For some reason I can't remember a single word of my carefully prepared speech."

The audience laughed, giving her a few minutes to try to pull her rehearsed lines out of thin air.

That's when she saw Ashley striding toward her, carefully weaving her way between the tables. A little wave of surprised gasps followed in her wake as people looked from one twin to the other, their jaws dropping.

Lexi looked from her sister's steely determination to Rick's slumped shoulders and back again. Time seemed to stand still. She suddenly knew what she was going to say, and it wasn't anything she'd rehearsed.

She cleared her throat. "I have a confession to make." As the audience looked on with stunned disbelief, Lexi continued. "I wish I could accept this award, but I'm afraid I don't deserve it. You see, I didn't write this book."

* * * * *

Rick couldn't believe his ears. What did she mean she didn't write the book?

Why should I be surprised? he thought, suddenly overcome with an overwhelming sense of disappointment. How many more deceptions and lies? He might as well throw the article in the trash and pretend none of this ever happened.

"Well, well, well," Donna chuckled, rubbing her hands together as if about to enjoy an incredible feast. "Isn't this an interesting development?"

The audience held a collective breath waiting for Lace to continue.

The microphone amplified the nervous quiver in her voice. "Not only did I not write *this* book, but I didn't write any of the others either," she continued. "And my name isn't Lace Kincaid."

Rick noticed The Sapphire Man nodding with approval behind Lace—or whatever her name was. Obviously, this was no surprise to him. Whatever the scam was, he was in on it. *As usual, I'm the last one to know*, Rick thought bitterly.

Donna Devora ate up each announcement with gloating glee. Penny, for once in her life, sat in stunned silence. Time seemed to stretch like warm taffy for Rick as he waited for more revelations.

"My name," she said, "is Alexis Kincaid. But you can call me Lexi." She chuckled nervously. "Ever since that TV show, I've hated being called Alexis. But I'm babbling, aren't I?"

Rick heard an odd murmur from the crowd but was too riveted on Lace—*Alexis*, he corrected himself—to turn and see what the commotion was about. *How*, he wondered, *could I have been so totally and completely fooled by a woman?*

Lexi cleared her throat. "Anyway," she continued. "There is no Lace Kincaid. It's a pen name my sister and I use. See, my sister is the writer. I'm just the window dressing. My sister's a little shy, so I've been posing as Lace Kincaid. But Ashley wrote every word you all love so much, every word you're honoring tonight. Ashley is the one who deserves your applause. Not me."

Lexi held out her arm to the crowd. "So please help me welcome my sister, Ashley Kincaid, as she accepts this year's Crystal Quill Award."

Rick caught sight of a flash of red through the crowd. He recognized that dress, that enticing wiggle, that tumble of auburn hair. As Ashley Kincaid made her way to the stage and turned to the audience, his breath caught in his throat.

"My God," he muttered, staring at the identical women standing side by side. He turned to Penny, but she was already at the foot of the stage, camera in hand, rapidly snapping pictures for the article.

Rick stared from one twin to the other as the crowd roared. The Sapphire Man took Ashley's hand and gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. It was nothing like the fiercely passionate kiss he'd given Lexi. There was no spark, no chemistry, no fire. It was obvious to Rick that The Sapphire Man had eyes for only one of the sisters.

While he, on the other hand, was flooded with emotions as he watched the other. When Ashley glanced his way he felt an invisible tug at his soul. She smiled and his heart took a nosedive, tumbling to his stomach and back. This was the feeling he'd been missing when he was with the wrong sister. This was why he'd been so confused.

No wonder he'd felt as if he were courting two separate women. He *had* been. And he knew without a doubt that he was in love with one of them and always had been. Now he knew her name. It was Ashley.

Watching the three of them on stage, he realized too that she hadn't betrayed him with The Sapphire Man after all. Those beefy hands had never touched her. It was Lexi he'd interrupted today. There was no doubt in his mind.

A wave of relief washed over him. Relief so great that tears clouded his vision.

"Well, well, well," Donna clucked, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Isn't this a creative little publicity stunt to cap off the ceremony?"

Rick glared at her. "Why don't you just shut the hell up?"

She stared at him in stunned surprise before flinging her boa over her shoulder and stomping off.

Ashley had never been so frightened in her life. She stared out at the sea of expectant faces, wondering what she'd say.

Lexi squeezed her hand encouragingly and smiled. "I'm so proud of you, Sis."

The Sapphire Man put his arm around Lexi and took the microphone, smoothly covering the awkward moment. "I hope you enjoyed the little surprise we planned for you tonight," he said, gesturing toward Ashley and Lexi. "Have you ever seen two more beautiful and talented women in your life?"

Ashley looked over at Rick. He nodded and she saw understanding in his eyes. And more. So much more. Understanding and love and pride. That, more than anything, gave her the strength she needed to address the audience.

"Thank you. Thank you so much." Her voice cracked with emotion. "I'd like to take a moment to explain how this arrangement came about." She looked pointedly at Rick. "I promise we never set out to hurt anyone."

A flurry of emotions rippled through her, not the least of which was stage fright. She cleared her throat and continued. "At first it was a simple matter of each of us doing what we did best. Lexi handled the marketing while I wrote. After awhile, Lexi took on more and more of the outside responsibilities, leaving me free to write. I suppose it wasn't fair of me, but Lexi has always been the one to protect me from the big bad world."

She grinned at her sister and squeezed her hand. "I guess it's time I went out and faced that world on my own, but not before thanking my sister for all she's done. Thank you, Lexi, for your support and encouragement and for all your hard work. Thank you for always being there when I thought I couldn't write another word. For being a buffer between me and the world. Most of all, thank you for being my sister and my best friend."

As they embraced, Lexi whispered, "If you make me ruin my mascara, I'll kill you." The microphone picked up the words and a wave of laughter rippled through the crowd.

Ashley picked up the Crystal Quill trophy. It was heavy and solid in her hands, a physical tribute to the years of work that went into her writing. But she found she didn't need this symbol of achievement to prove her self-worth. It was all there inside her. All she'd had to do was look for it.

As she thanked the members of the voting committee and the readers, Ashley found her gaze going back to Rick. She wondered if she'd have taken this step without

him. Would she have been content to let things continue as they were if she hadn't decided to fight for him?

Maybe. Maybe not. But looking into his eyes, she knew she'd made the right decision.

She finished her speech and, through glistening tears, noticed Rick standing to applaud. The audience followed his lead, rising to their feet and cheering wildly.

"Damn it," Lexi grumbled. "There goes my mascara."

* * * * *

As Ashley left the stage, Rick fought his way through the crowd to meet her halfway. He wasn't taking any chances on anyone else escorting her or standing between them. Not now or ever again.

Taking her in his arms, he was overcome with how right she felt there, how perfectly they fit. He cut off her apology with a kiss. Maybe he wasn't a cover model, but what he lacked in brawn he more than made up for in sincerity.

He brushed his lips lightly over hers at first, then pressed harder, more demanding as she responded and his body remembered the way she went soft and pliant in his arms, the little whimpering sounds she made when he loved her. How could he ever have mistaken this woman for anyone else? He'd been a fool, but looking back now, he realized his heart had known all along. He'd simply been too blind to see the truth.

Ashley leaned into his embrace, losing herself in his tender kiss and forgetting that a crowd of people surrounded them. Everything else faded into insignificance as Rick held her. It was just the two of them, alone in their own private little piece of heaven.

She wished she could capture this moment forever, this moment when her world swung into perfect balanced harmony, so right and so perfect.

She reached up to caress his cheek, staring deeply into his eyes. Everything she needed to know was there. She didn't need words to express all the love threatening to overflow her heart.

"Ashley," he whispered.

Hearing him speak her name for the first time made her heart soar.

"Yes," she murmured. And that was all the answer either of them needed.

Yes.

* * * * *

The crowd had thinned to just a few stragglers who stopped by the table to gawk and offer congratulations. Lexi had ordered another bottle of her favorite champagne to toast the evening and the five of them sat around the table, candlelight glittering off the Crystal Quill trophy in front of Ashley.

"Where did Miss Lemon Face go?" Penny asked, giggling. She'd been giggling ever since her fourth glass of champagne.

"Um, she left after I told her to shut the hell up," Rick said.

Ashley and Lexi stared at him, open-mouthed. "You told Donna Devora to shut up?" they asked in unison.

"No," Penny corrected. "He told her to shut *the hell* up." She took another sip of champagne and giggled again.

"Yeah," Rick grinned. "You think maybe she took offense?"

Lexi leaned against The Sapphire Man's broad chest and smiled. "It's about damn time someone put her in her place."

"I love it when you talk dirty, darlin'," The Sapphire Man chuckled.

"So," Penny said, trying hard to stifle another giggle. "Am I in the way here? Do you four lovebirds want to be alone?"

"No," Rick said. "We have all the time in the world to be alone." He looked at Ashley. "Right?"

She shrugged, trying to keep her voice serious. "I don't know. Why would I want to be alone with a man who can't even tell me apart from my sister?"

Penny sprayed a mouthful of champagne into her hand with laughter. "You go, girl!"

"I can too!" Rick insisted. "I just didn't know there were two of you. I didn't know you were twins, I just thought you were nuts. Hell, I fell in love with you...I don't even *like* your sister!"

"What do you mean you don't like my sister?"

"Hey!" Lexi cried. "You don't like me?"

"Well, it's not...I mean..."

Penny grinned. "Let him squirm."

"You kissed her," Ashley said, pouting.

"But I thought it was you!"

Ashley had all she could do to keep teasing him, seeing the serious frown on his face. That didn't stop her, though. "Like I said, why would I want to be with a man who can't even tell me from my sister?" she repeated triumphantly.

"I think I like this girl," Penny mumbled.

"That's not fair," Rick argued. "You two went out of your way to convince me you were the same woman. And of course I like your sister. But I don't love her. I love *you*."

Ashley knew the warmth suddenly diffusing her entire body wasn't entirely due to the champagne. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you. I love you, Ashley whatever-your-middle-name-is Kincaid."

"Marie."

He brought her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss into her palm. "I love you, Ashley Marie Kincaid."

Lexi held out her hand. "My middle name is Marie, too."

"What a surprise," Penny giggled.

Rick took Lexi's hand. "And I *do* like you, Alexis Marie Kincaid, sister of the woman I love."

"Okay," Lexi said. "You're forgiven."

Rick turned to Ashley, whose palm was still cradled against his face. "What about you? Can you forgive me?"

She smiled. "There's nothing to forgive. I knew exactly what you meant."

"And?" He waited, holding his breath.

"And she loves you too, you big dope!" Penny shouted. "What? Are you blind?"

Rick grinned. "No, but I need to hear it from her. And no more champagne for you, Penny." He turned to Ashley expectantly.

"I love you too, you big dope," she said, mimicking Penny.

He rolled his eyes and shrugged with exasperation. "That's it. You're *all* cut off."

Ashley leaned forward, capturing his lips with hers before whispering softly, "I do, Rick. I love you, too."

"Awww," Penny cooed. "Isn't that sweet?" She pretended to gag. "I think I'm gonna be sick now."

"Penny? Shut the hell up." Ashley's smile took the sting out of the words.

Penny collapsed in giggles, then high-fived Ashley. "Now I *know* I like you! Rick, if you know what's good for you, you'll hang onto this one."

"Oh, I intend to," he agreed.

Epilogue

Rick stood beside Sapphie at the altar. It dawned on him that he still had no idea what The Sapphire Man's real name was. They'd all picked up Lexi's habit of calling him Sapphie. He imagined the minister intoning, "Do you, The Sapphire Man, take this woman, Lace Kincaid, also known as Alexis Marie Kincaid, to be your wife?"

Rick smiled at the thought. He reached out to adjust the rosebud boutonniere on Sapphie's tuxedo. "You okay?"

"Nervous. You?"

"I'm fine," Rick said, moving to his place on the other side of the altar.

And he thought he was, too. Until the organ swelled and he looked down the aisle. Then his heart tumbled and his knees went weak. He'd never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Accompanied by both parents, who'd flown in for the wedding, Ashley and Alexis walked side by side down the aisle, draped in identical lace bridal gowns. Rick caught his breath and heard the same inhalation of awe beside him as he and Sapphie watched their stunning brides walk together down the aisle for the double ceremony.

As the sisters took their place at the altar, Rick looked at Sapphie and grinned. The grooms shook their heads, not fooled for a minute, and changed places. Even beneath the diaphanous veils, there was no disguising which bride belonged to whom.

Ashley smiled and looked into Rick's eyes, knowing she'd never again have to worry about mistaken identity where her husband was concerned.

My husband. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of hearing those words. It had taken some convincing but she'd stood firm with her publishers. There would be no more books written under the name Lace Kincaid. *A Little Piece of Heaven* would be published with the name Ashley Orlando on the cover. And every book after that for the rest of her life.

She stared into her groom's eyes, seeing her future there. Her concentration was broken by the words of the minister.

"Do you, Ernest Kozlowski, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife..."

Ernie Kozlowski? Before Ashley realized the minister was addressing Sapphie and Lexi, he'd already pronounced them man and wife and it was her turn.

She turned to her groom and whispered the words she'd waited her whole life to say. "I do."

And before the minister pronounced, "You may kiss your bride," Rick enclosed her in his arms. He lifted her chin, his thumb tracing the outline of her lips, and leaned so

close she could feel the warmth of his sweet breath washing over her. She stared deeply into his eyes, feeling tears well up in her own.

Then his lips grazed hers so tenderly she thought her heart would break. "I love you, my precious wife," he whispered against her lips as he cradled her face gently in his hands.

She brought her arms up around his neck, pressing herself tight to her new husband until she couldn't tell where she began and he ended, losing herself in this perfect kiss.

Neither one heard the minister clear his throat. They were lost in each other, lost in their first kiss as man and wife.

Lost in their own little piece of heaven.

About the Author

Linda began her writing career publishing short fiction for women's magazines. Since then, she's completed several award-winning novels in a variety of genres, from rib-tickling comedy to bone-chilling suspense. Reviewers have hailed her work as unique, original, and impossible to put down.

Linda is the proud recipient of the EPPIE Award, the Dream Realm Award, the Dorothy Parker Reviewers Choice Award, and several readers' choice awards. She resides in upstate New York with her husband of over thirty years, where she splits her time between writing, remodeling, and starting a new diet each and every Monday.

Linda welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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