

MONICA'S MANHUNT

by

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT
MONICA'S MANHUNT

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this book to my friends and colleagues
Shari Dare and Debi Wilder. Thank you for all your help.

Chapter 1

Matt Shepard walked up to *Spice* with all the grim determination of a man approaching a firing squad. Squirring Monica Landers out for dinner and conversation would be boring as hell but it was for the best. A little boredom would take the edge off his frustration. It'd been three months since he'd gotten laid; a record for him. To say he was tense was an understatement.

Working overtime to finish contracts and free Will up for his honeymoon had put a severe crimp in his social life. It was the least he could do as his brother's best man. Now he and Monica, April's maid of honor, had the bachelor party and bridal shower to plan. As far as he was concerned, a keg of beer and a stripper in Red's back room would suffice for the guys, but he had a feeling the mystery woman he was taking on this duty date wouldn't agree. It still didn't make sense to him that the wallflower he'd barely noticed in high school would own *Spice*, a shop that specialized in marital aids and slinky lingerie.

Sunset glittered off the plate glass window, showing off the lacy lingerie on display. Personally, he preferred bare skin to satin and lace, less to get in the way of his goal. It was the way he preferred his hook-ups these days; short and hot, with no strings attached. He wasn't walking into that minefield again.

An overhead bell tinkled as he opened the door. He forced himself to go inside. He'd never set foot in the place before, mainly because his kid sister Courtney worked here as a designer, much to his displeasure. Ms. Landers *would* insist on being picked up here, he only hoped she wouldn't prove as obstinate when planning the pre-wedding festivities. At least her shop was empty at closing time. In fact, he didn't see his date anywhere. Not that he expected to recognize her. She was three years older than him, and they'd never moved in the same social circles. He'd been into sports, fast cars, and girls. To the best of his recollection, she'd been into the library and home economics.

He approached the counter, his sex-starved gaze lingering as it passed over the sexy delights—lingerie, massage oils, and a wide array of sex toys. His eyes widened while his manhood stirred in reaction; the stimulation was enough to jump-start him into a hard-on. The swing on display in the corner caught his eye; it was just like the one in April's barn, a place he'd steered clear of. He quickly looked away. Thinking about his brother's possible love life wasn't something he'd do. Ignoring the toys and lubes, Matt's gaze strayed to the lingerie hanging on a rack nearby. Soft, shimmering in a rainbow of colors, tempting him to reach out and touch to see if they were as soft as they looked, it almost made him change his mind about preferring his lovers nude.

A quick footfall made Matt spin around in time to see a woman rush out of the back room carrying a big box. This had to be his date. What had April called her...*Modest Monica*? Matt stood there transfixed by her intensity as she moved at breakneck speed in stiletto heels. She was beautiful, with tip-tilted green eyes. Honest to Pete, they

were as green as the clovers growing wild in his paddock. He stared at her, entranced, having never seen anything quite like their color before. Her mouth was generous and sensual, ripe for kissing; her chestnut brown hair swept up in a twist. It left her swanlike neck bare tempting him to lean in and taste her sexy nape.

Her perfume, something light and floral, tantalized him, and he indulged in a deep whiff. She was dressed in a formfitting red dress with a row of small pearl buttons down the front. It enhanced her full curves; and it sent a jolt directly to his groin. He'd been celibate too damned long. His gaze drifted down her long bare legs to her feet arched in impossibly high heels.

"Whoa," Monica said with a gasp, spotting the quiet man standing in her shop at the last second before she collided with him, almost choking on the strawberry hard candy she was sucking on. Coughing, all she could do was stare at him as her heart skipped a beat. *Wow! Perfect.* He was positively the yummiest man she'd ever set eyes on, and he was staring at her with the steamiest look in his baby blue eyes. Tall, with dirty blond hair, and a dirtier smile on his handsomer-than-sin face, he brought out all her repressed desires.

Dressed in a butter-soft leather jacket and faded jeans, he looked like he'd just stepped off the pages of one of her favorite erotic romances. The Sundance Kid in the flesh. This had to be Will's kid brother Matt. Now she understood why April had urged her to add him to her manhunt list. Too bad he was too wild to be manhunt material. She stumbled, wobbling as her heels sank into the carpeting, and the box she was carrying toppled.

Sundance grabbed the box with one of his big hands and her bare arm with the other. Monica let out a startled

gasp at the heat of that seemingly innocent contact. His hands were big, work-roughened, and warm. His fingertips sensually rubbing her arm, he looked deep into her eyes, making her shiver. It was as if he could read her errant thoughts, her desires. "Yummy," she murmured.

"What?" he asked.

"You," she said studying him. He broke into a startled grin that turned him from yummy to devastating.

"Thanks. I think you're pretty scrumptious, too. Care to take a nibble?" he asked, leaning forward to kiss her.

Monica watched his irises contract as he came closer, blotting everything else out, and felt mesmerized. Her breath caught in her throat as his hot mouth slanted over hers, and her body turned to pudding. Her knees actually wobbled and she fell against him, their bodies colliding, setting off sparks inside her. He was brawny, easily supporting her weight as his hungry mouth devoured hers. Monica gasped her nipples tingling, jutting out at him through the sheer fabric of her satin bra and rayon dress. She couldn't stop her tongue from snaking out to taste his lower lip, making him groan in response, but confirming her conclusion that he was definitely edible before pulling away. He let her go with a primal growl.

She stepped back, her face flaming, and tried not to fall under his macho spell, but found it an impossible task. She couldn't deny that he set her sex-starved hormones humming. Her gaze focused on *Sweet Surrender*, the couples' role-play bondage kit hanging on the shelf behind him. Hell yeah, he could handcuff her to the bedposts any time as he had his way with her. Rejecting her errant thoughts, she jerked away, the box slipped through his fingers, and landed on the floor. Dozens of items spilled out littering the carpet at their feet. "My bunnies," she wailed as he tromped on

one with in his size thirteen cowboy boots. "Please don't step on them."

Her bunnies? Matt looked down at the vibrators strewn across the floor and felt his cock throb, while his mouth watered. He could still taste her; she tasted like strawberries. He wasn't sure what foolishness had made him claim her mouth; but he wasn't sorry he'd done it. In a rainbow of different colors, the vibrators bore the label *The Jack Rabbit*. He gazed at the red one lying across the toe of his cowboy boot and actually felt his heart race. *Good gravy.*

Suddenly his date seemed like heaven in three-inch red high heels. He looked back up at her, intrigued, and couldn't help gazing at the generous swell of her breasts for a long beat before focusing on her laughing eyes. She met his gaze with a knowing glint. She knew he was ogling her tits, but it didn't stop his hungry gaze from devouring every luscious inch of her body. When she'd pressed against him, he'd felt her stiff nipples, and now he couldn't help focusing on them, beaded against her red dress. They were two ripe berries waiting for his attention, probably tasted like strawberries, and he was happy to oblige.

"Well, I guess we broke the ice and settled the yummy question once and for all, didn't we, Matthew?"

Her melodious voice only made him harder as he looked back up at her eyes. "That's Matt, darlin'. And what's the decision?" He watched her nibble her lower lip, and felt his pulse race. He had a better use for those luscious lips. Her sultry gaze swept over him focusing for a long minute on his crotch. Oh yeah, she was checking him out. It made his cock strain against his zipper to get at her. He wanted her with an intensity that surprised him, and it went way beyond craving a piece of ass. It was weird, but he felt an instant connection.

"I'll tell you later. It's a good thing for you it's restocking night, or you'd have missed me. Now if you can keep those cowboy boots off the merchandise I'll get on with it." She crouched down to pick up her vibrators.

"Huh?" Her teasing, semi-scolding tone caught him off-guard. Matt crouched down to do the same, wincing as his tight jeans compressed his burgeoning erection. He helped her scoop them up, then stood and picked up the box despite her protest. He wasn't going to let her break her neck again. "Where do you want them?"

"I need to hang them on the wall display before I count down the till."

"I'll do it while you finish up." Matt insisted, almost surprised at himself. Any excuse to stay near her and extend the sensual buzz, he was suddenly a sucker for erotic punishment. He couldn't help it; he found her irresistible. She wasn't a girl, but a grown woman who knew her own mind, a definite challenge.

"Okay," she said after a moment. "I'll ring out then go get my bag so we can slip out the back."

Matt hung the vibrators on the display racks, ultra aware of her movements, and the hot glances she kept shooting his way as she closed out the register. Their gazes met and she actually blushed. Matt groaned under his breath as she scurried off into the backroom. She didn't have to act like she was afraid he was going to jump her bones. Maybe he'd misread her interest, the thought made him depressed. He went back to work, restocking her vibrators. He sure as hell had never handled one before. They were veined and semi-lifelike, if you didn't count the day-glow color, and they had another small protuberance. Intrigued, he found himself reading the package spiel—*The Jack Rabbit Elite features a triple-tongued clitoral tickler and a*

realistic six-inch shaft for her pleasure. He let out a groan, and stopped reading before he did himself permanent damage. Some guys might find it intimidating; he didn't. He couldn't stop himself from thinking about all the sexual possibilities it presented if he used it on her. Hell, this whole store gave him ideas. Maybe she was right to keep her distance. He'd been celibate too long. What was taking her so long?

* * * *

Monica Landers stood in the back room, eyes closed, breathing hard, her whole body trembling in reaction. He was handling her bunnies like he was amused by them, not threatened, as most men would be. Something about a woman's sex toy wielded by a confident male made her weak in the knees. Matt Shepard was positively the hottest man she'd ever set eyes on, much less kissed. It was enough to make her drool.

More than his good looks attracted her; there was a sensual essence to the man, it told her he knew how a woman craved to be touched. Heck-fire, she wouldn't even need her vibrator with him around. Her nipples were still tingling points, her pussy growing dewy with need.

She'd been very selective since her divorce—maybe too selective if a hunk's kiss had her trembling on the brink of orgasm—but being badly burned could do that to a woman's confidence. April's upcoming nuptials had been like a slap to the side to the head, vividly reminding her that her biological clock was ticking. And while she rejoiced in April's happiness, she couldn't help being a wee bit envious. It was high time she found a reliable mate, so she'd gone about it in her usual methodical way; she'd decided to go on a manhunt. Luckily, the other bridesmaids were in the same boat so they'd joined forces.

Together, they'd compiled lists of prospective mates with April acting as an advisor. With her success in actually bagging Will, she was a fount of informative manhunt tips. Only problem was, April had been dead wrong about Matt, yummy yes, manhunt material no. He was a well-known player. Hadn't he just stolen a kiss without permission? The fact that she'd gleefully kissed him back, she chose to ignore. It was a good thing she'd resisted April's urging to put Matt Shepard on her list. Her raging hormones would probably win out over her head if he were on it. He'd do her like a stud, but leave her empty and wanting more, she couldn't risk it. Letting out a cleansing breath, she succeeded in stamping down the remnants of her lingering physical reaction. With her pulse slowing to near normal, she picked up her tote bag, and then went back out to face Matt.

He'd finished hanging up the vibrators and had moved on to browse through one of her favorite lingerie displays. He was examining an emerald green silk teddy she'd personally designed. She watched him stroke it, his big workman's hands gently running over the silk, and bit back a sigh as she imagined him stroking her inside the slinky garment.

Something about him brought out all her forbidden desires. She couldn't help focusing on the prominent bulge in his jeans. Oh yeah, he had what it took to satisfy a woman. No bunnies needed with him around. He'd dressed with care in what looked like new jeans, boots, and a western shirt, and it touched her that he'd gone to so much trouble. "Ready?" she asked.

He turned to look at her and his smile widened. "Always."

There were two ways to take that and she studiously went for the clean one. Given half a chance, she'd tumble into his arms like a ripe plum but it wasn't going to happen. He didn't fit the bill. Heading for the back door, she couldn't help walking faster as he fell into step behind her. Her knees shook as his scent wrapped around her, something musky, and all man.

Dizzy with sensory overload, her knees quivered and her high heels wobbled on the carpeting. Matt reached out to steady her, wrapping one of his big work-roughened hands around her bare arm. She gasped, the tantalizing contact making her burn, her body overheating again. Ripe for the picking, she found him hard to resist, but she couldn't pick him if she wanted to find Mr. Right. She wanted it all this time, a husband, kids, stability; and the hunk clinging to her arm didn't add up to husband material. "Thanks," she said, pulling away.

"My pleasure, darlin'."

She loved the way he called her *darlin'*. The way his honeyed voice washed over her body, made her face flush, as she turned to lock the shop's back door behind them.

"This way to my truck," he said, steering her toward a black pickup.

Monica let him seat her, thinking about pulling out and taking her Volvo instead. But how would that look? Something told her he'd take it as a challenge. It'd probably be like waving a red cape before a charging bull. She smiled at the image because it fit him, and smoothed her dress out on her legs, tugging it down to cover her bared thighs. Clicking her seatbelt closed, she inched toward the door. He got in and slanted a sly grin at her, like he knew what she was feeling. He probably did, something told her he could read women very well.

"I don't bite."

"I don't believe that for a minute," she shot back at him with a wry smile, as the temperature around her shot up. She had a feeling it had more to do with Matt than the balmy evening air. "I believe you said you made reservations at *Finnegan's Supper Club*."

"Right, darlin', unless you'd rather just chuck it all and go to *Red's*."

The cheerfully voiced suggestion told her all she needed to know. He might be fun to toy with but he was too wild to be husband material. "No, thanks." She took her duty as April's maid of honor seriously, even if he didn't value his role as best man as much.

"Right you are, we've got cupid's work to do, don't we, darlin'?" He gunned the engine. "Hold tight and we'll be there in two shakes."

"Cupid's work?" she parroted back, startled by the sensitive phrase coming out of his *made to kiss* mouth. Maybe he'd gotten it off a Hallmark card. She slanted an assessing gaze his way. The final bright rays of the setting sun highlighted his handsome face, turned his hair to honey and frosted the plains of his powerfully toned body with gold. He had the kind of silhouette made for a woman's delight. He worked with his hands, and they were work-roughened and big, she knew from brief personal contact. She watched them thrust the keys into the ignition as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world and, at the moment, it was. She couldn't help being powerfully sexually aware of him.

He was looking her over just as curiously. The very air seemed filled with passionate promise, one she shouldn't keep if she was serious about finding Mr. Right instead of Mr. Right Now. Still he was alluring, his broad shoulders seemed to almost brush hers in the pickup's cab. She

watched his long, thick fingers on the steering wheel and couldn't keep from thinking about them caressing her, slipping inside her as he kissed her until she couldn't think straight. Her lips tingled as she focused on his.

He grinned at her. "I'm not all beer and pool, darlin'. I want to make sure that this one's a keeper."

"April is." She instantly shot to her friend's defense, but his tone hadn't been accusatory, just cautionary. It made her wonder why. What made him so gun-shy about women?

"Calm down, I didn't mean it that way. I don't doubt it for a minute that they're made for each other. Kind of nice, those two finding each other."

"Magical," she said with a nod. At least they agreed on one point. Maybe they would mesh, perhaps he should be on her manhunt list.

"Not that I think every guy should be married," he said under his breath.

She let out a sigh, mentally scratching his name off the list. "It made me think," Monica said, pretending she hadn't heard him.

"About what?" he asked.

"Getting married," she said and instantly felt him tense beside her. That cooled his ardor, darn it. Maybe it was for the best.

"You're engaged?" His gaze shot to her bare left hand. "You aren't wearing a ring."

She glanced at her left hand, that was true. The white line from her wedding band had faded away two years ago. "No. I'm not engaged."

"Engaged to be engaged then?" he asked in a curious tone.

“No. I don’t even have a lover.” She felt his interest pick up when she said the *L* word and decided to give him a cold shower and cool it permanently for her own good. “I’m on a manhunt to find a husband.” She was both relieved and heartsick when he didn’t say anything in response. It was for the best, so why did she still feel like seeing him naked?

Chapter 2

Matt was still trying to come up with a response when he escorted Monica into the supper club. *She was on a manhunt to find a husband!* He felt like a marked man for the steamy things he'd fantasized about doing with her. Her taste, and the feel of her soft lips pressed against his still haunted him. He wanted to taste her all over, despite her warning that she was marriage minded. Taking her arm as he ushered her inside, he felt her tremble in response to his touch and it only made him hotter, hornier. At least he had the pleasure of knowing she was just as attuned to him.

She was pissed at him because of his automatic negative reaction to the subject of marriage, he could tell, and she was turned on by their sexual chemistry at the same time. He knew the telltale symbols of a woman's arousal, her sneak peeks at him, her quick breaths, the way she licked her luscious lips and damned near ate him up with her hungry eyes. He reciprocated; but he was going to come out of this limping if he didn't find some way to turn off his body's natural reaction to her. Going around with a permanent hard-on wasn't healthy for a man of his age. What the hell was a dyed in the wool bachelor like him supposed to say to the news that she was *husband hunting*?

When he saw Carrie Summers working at the restaurant's hostess station, he wanted to turn around and steer Monica in the other direction. Blond, petite, and

twenty-two, she'd been his last date, kind of. He'd been so bored after an hour, that he took her home early, saying he was sick.

"Reservations for Shepard," he said, hoping she wouldn't remember him. Her eyes narrowed with irritation, as she looked him over, and he knew his luck had run out.

"Reservations, you say?" She arched one plucked brow.

"Yes," he murmured, relieved. At least she wasn't giving him a hard time. Maybe he'd come out of this unscathed. Carrie ignored him and instead gave Monica a curious once-over.

"Fancy you actually called for reservations, Shepard. I thought your phone didn't work. After all, you never called me back like you said you would."

Crap. Matt heard Monica chuckle at his side and stiffened, she was definitely enjoying his discomfort. Famous last words he couldn't live down, *I'll call you sometime, Carrie.* He'd said it to soothe her ruffled pride after he'd dropped her at her door without a good night kiss, not that he could tell her that now. Who'd o' thought that women couldn't read between the lines? Monica definitely would have gotten the message, but Monica was worlds apart from Carrie. Still, standing there on the spot, he scrambled for a way out. "About that, after our fizzled date I figured..."

"Yeah, it did end badly." She glanced down at his crotch and shrugged. "Thanks for reminding me."

Matt wanted to sink into the ground. Now Monica no doubt thought he couldn't get it up. Nothing could be further from the truth, he was just dog-tired that night, and sick of one-night stands.

"Follow me," Carrie said, picking up menus and leading them to their table.

With all other options fading, Matt bit back his comeback that he *could so get it up*, and followed. What did it matter? Monica wasn't on the menu for the evening; so correcting her wrong impression didn't matter. Glancing around the supper club, he noticed several pairs of curious eyes on them, especially from three of the guys at the bar. Then he realized they weren't really focused on him, they were ogling his date. If he'd reconciled himself to the fact that Monica couldn't be his, why did the fact that none of the single guys at the bar could take their eyes off her bother him? It was a question he didn't want to answer, so he decided to concentrate on the competition instead.

Slowing, he scowled back at them. The worst offenders looked away. When he pulled Monica's chair out to seat her, he could tell that she was surprised at his attempt at gallantry, but she slipped into her seat giving him an assessing look.

Matt's hands brushed against her sides as he slid her chair ahead. The sensation of warm silk, and even warmer woman, made him groan under his breath. She was so enticing; she made him swell with need. He felt her hot gaze on him as he walked around the table and sat down. He was most definitely still on the make, he couldn't help it, and it was as natural as breathing to him. He watched her pick up her menu but didn't touch his. Just looking at her made him hungry, and he was suddenly overwhelmed with the need to correct things. "I don't have a problem with..."

"Don't worry, it happens to most guys, you were probably just tired."

His mouth snapped shut as she rushed in to save his supposedly wounded male pride. After taking a deep

cleansing breath, like the Yoga tape April had lent him taught him to do, he pinned Monica with a steady look. Her violet eyes were soft with sympathy, and it made him frustrated. "Listen, lady, I've never had any complaints in bed."

"Um, right." Her doubtful gaze drifted back to Carrie who stood at the hostess station staring at them.

He turned his back on Carrie making steady eye contact with Monica instead. "I just told her that to get rid of her."

"I'm sure you did."

He knew pity when he heard it, and it made him crazy. How in the hell could he prove he could still get it up? He racked his brain for a clean way that wouldn't embarrass her. Gazing at her soft lips, he remembered the kiss. He'd shot from stiff to rampant as she'd pressed against him. "Need I remind you of my yummy factor?" he asked, and watched her telltale reaction. Her cheeks turned a fetching rose as she blushed.

"Right, funny me, forgetting a little thing like that."

"Little," he groused, and then saw the teasing twinkle in her eyes. "Tell me about your manhunt, darlin'."

"Why?"

"Curiosity." He watched her nibble her bottom lip and his blood heated, while his cock throbbed. "Maybe I can give you a few pointers, one player to another."

"So that's what you think I am, a player?"

To his surprise, she almost sounded hurt. "Yeah. A babe that owns a sex-toy shop and goes after things directly. I'd call you a player."

"You'd be wrong then."

Her downcast expression startled him. "Sorry. It was meant as a compliment, I didn't mean anything bad by that."

It's refreshing to meet a woman who lays all her cards on the table and doesn't try to trap a man under false pretenses."

"From your grim tone, it sounds like you've got personal experience at that one."

He felt her interest and it made him tense. She really seemed to care about the details of his love life, but he couldn't discuss that now, hadn't been able to since he'd dragged his beaten ass back home. "My mamma always told me a gentleman never kisses and tells."

"Smart mamma," she said with a grin.

"Right." Her open smile made his tension roll away. He reached out to touch her hand. "I'm sorry. I never intended to insult you by calling you a player."

She squeezed his hand before pulling away. "Don't worry about bruising my tender feelings. I should be used to it by now. Most guys assume I'm swinging off the chandeliers, throwing wild orgies. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nice guys never ask me out, and frankly, I frequently have to fend off jerks. It's been three years since I..."

"Hush now," he cut in her admission, making him feel for her. And he thought three months without sex was a long dry spell.

Monica blushed. "I don't know why I blurted that out, how embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it."

"It's not that I haven't had any offers; it's just that they weren't the right kind. Maybe you're right, a player who owns a sex-toy shop, how likely am I to find a mate?"

"I don't think that," he said, meaning every word. She'd make an ideal playmate for the right guy. He scowled at the three guys who were watching them from the bar

again. Two looked away, but one just kept on staring. Ted Miller. Matt recognized the tall and chunky former high school football star. The guy was starting to run to fat, as the spare tire around his middle under his red polo shirt showed. He'd heard of the guy and what he'd heard wasn't good. Arrogant and a card cheat, and he had a bad reputation as a sneaky bastard with the good old boys who hung out at *Red's*.

Suppressing an overwhelming need to go punch him out, Matt instead turned back to Monica. She was blushing again, even though her eyes were twinkling. A modest, sometimes bawdy, sex goddess, it boggled his mind, and threatened to drive him crazy. "There's an innocence about you that shines through, *darlin'*."

She leaned forward, looking deep into his eyes. "Where'd that come from?"

Matt felt like he was on top of the world, as she seemed to hang on every word he said. The feeling was mutual, but a rational part of his mind said to beware. Still he had to know what she was thinking. "Damned if I know. So spill it, tell me about your manhunt."

Her hand clutched the tote bag she used as a purse. "You want to see it?"

"It?" He watched her open the bag and paw through the cluttered contents—lipstick, powder, strawberry-shaped candies, and a tube of something. "You mean you've got it down on paper?"

"Of course." She pulled out a red, leather bound planner and opened it, handing it over with a flourish. "Maybe you can give me a few suggestions. You know the men around these parts."

He looked down at the list of pro's and con's written in an elegant script and raised a brow. "Wow, nerd alert."

"Yeah, I tend to be a bit analytical," she agreed with a wry smile. "It's what makes me a good businesswoman."

Relieved that she hadn't taken offense, he glanced back down at the planner.

"Pro. Having love and companionship. Con. Opening myself up to pain."

"Pro. My biological clock is ticking. Con. Might not be a good mother."

He looked back up at her. She was watching him in anticipation, seeming to really care what he thought, her head tilted, her lips parted, a worried gleam in her eyes. He couldn't help warming himself on her playful, joyful essence for a moment before he said, "You'll be a good mom, Monica."

She smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Pro. Being sexually satisfied. Con. What if he can't perform?"

He'd already settled the performance issue, and it was true he never had any complaints. But she wasn't talking about him, she was talking about some nameless jerk who'd be her mate. His gut clenched, did he really want to read more? He had to know what he was up against. Without comment, he turned to the next page. "Hmm, let's take a look at the qualifications your baby's daddy will need."

"He's got to be gainfully employed," he read.

"I want a man with ambition," she said with a nod.

"He needs to make as much money as I do."

"Right, I don't want a man whose ego is threatened by my business."

"He must be settled and dependable."

"Right," she said emphatically.

"Hmm." Matt looked up at her flushed face. "Do you mean boring?"

“No. I mean I don’t want a man who’ll get distracted by the next pair of tits that comes along.”

He gazed at her ample cleavage. “Somehow I doubt that could happen.”

“Thanks,” she said with a laugh. “You’re good for my ego, Junior.”

Junior! He scowled at her. “What’s with the Junior business? I’m only three years younger than you.”

“Ah yes, but women mature much faster than men.”

He didn’t like where this was heading. “Which means I’m not steady and dependable.”

“Right, so relax, you’re not on the list.”

He scowled and turned the page. He should have been happy about that, but he wasn’t. He gazed at the list, there had to be twenty names on it. Damn. Some of them were actually decent guys, not that he was going to tell her that. And then his gaze strayed to number six—Ted Miller, and he tensed. She sure as hell didn’t know what she was doing, to have jerk-wad Ted on the list of candidates. How could he knock him off without sounding like a jealous ass? “Do they know they’re contenders for matrimony?”

“Heavens no. They’d probably run in the other direction if they did. It’s all arranged. I’m going to go on a series of casual dates and put them to the test.”

“Dates?”

“Right, starting tomorrow night with number one. Who knows? Maybe I’ll find someone special to be my date for the wedding reception.”

The waitress walked up to their table carrying a frosty drink on a tray. “For you, Monica. Compliments of the gentleman at the bar.” She set the drink in front of Monica with a flourish, handed her a note, and then gave Matt a wink. “Sorry, stud, he didn’t send anything for you.”

Matt scowled back at the waitress's sassy smile. "I'm not giving you a tip."

She smiled back at him. "I already got it."

Monica took a sip of the margarita then turned to smile at the man standing at the bar who'd sent it.

"Who the hell sent that?" Matt grumbled, already knowing the answer.

"Number six," she said distracted. "Ted Miller, orthodontist. He has a thriving practice in Center City."

Matt glared up at Ted. "He drinks and cheats at cards."

"Who?"

"Miller there, lurking at the bar." Matt pinned the asshole with a glare. Only the lowest kind of jerk tried to poach from another man while he was on a date. Miller's face was flushed as he joked with his buddies at the bar.

"And I should care that he cheats at cards, why?"

Matt took his watchful gaze off his rival to glance at Monica. "A man who cheats at cards can't be trusted." She nodded, seemed to digest that for a moment, but he could feel her doubt. He had to use more persuasive tactics. "Now about these other jokers..."

"If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go freshen up." Monica quickly got to her feet, picked up her tote bag, and slipped her planner into it.

Matt watched her retreat to the ladies' room and came to a decision. She didn't know what she was doing; he had to save her from the list.

Monica stood in the bathroom running cold water on her wrists to cool down. She'd known she had to get away when Matt adopted that scolding tone and started demolishing her list. Getting lost in Matt's sexy blue eyes wasn't going to get her married. She'd had a ladies' man before; she didn't want another one. Although, to lump

Matt in with a loser like her ex-husband Gary wasn't fair. Gary was verbally abusive, along with being a crook and a cheat. Through luck and a tenacious will to survive, she'd taken the small gift shop her parents left her and turned it into *Spice* during the turmoil of her divorce. Without it, she might have drowned in the sea of his debts. Instead, she'd been able to make restitution to those he'd bilked and build a life for herself. And now it was time to find someone to share it with.

Matt Shepard, while being dreamy, wasn't a marrying man. He'd been direct about it. She winced, remembering his blunt statement about marriage not being for him. Drying her hands, she went out to meet him. Maybe she'd at least get a good-bye kiss out of the evening; another taste of magic before she settled down with boring Mr. Right.

She walked down the shadowy hall back to the dining room, when a hand grabbed her from behind. She let out a squeak of alarm when she was hauled backwards against a doughy body that reeked of alcohol and cologne. She didn't even have to look to know who it was; Matt had been right about him. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She scowled up at Ted. He was leering down at her.

"What's the matter, baby," he said with a cool smile. "Doesn't my drink at least get me a kiss and a cuddle?"

Monica scowled and brought her stiletto heel down on his instep. He howled with pain and let her go.

"You bitch!" he yelled, hopping on one foot, drawing back his hand to slap her. "Gary was right, you are a cold-hearted witch."

Gary! The name hit her like a chilling blast. She knew her ex had long tentacles as proved by his threatening letters from prison, but this was totally unexpected. While the sickening revelation that she'd added a friend of Gary's to

her manhunt sunk in, Monica bobbed away, adopting a fighting stance. She hadn't studied self-defense for nothing. Number six was about to get his ass kicked. Ted froze instead of striking out at her, and looked at a spot beyond her. She let out a sigh of relief. *Matt!* Even as she thought it, she knew. She turned to see Matt standing quietly behind her. His protective gaze flicked over her for a millisecond.

"You okay, darlin'?"

She nodded. "I am now. Thanks for the backup."

"My pleasure." His gaze slammed back to Ted Miller.

Miller sneered at Matt for a moment, before dropping his gaze and backing off, muttering, "Slut like her ain't worth the trouble, buddy."

Matt growled and tried to step around her.

"No." She grabbed his hand to stop him. Although the name wasn't pleasant, she was used to it. She'd been called worse and she didn't want Matt to get in trouble.

Monica let out the breath she'd been holding when Matt obeyed and cradled her in his arms instead. She sagged against him as he rubbed her tight shoulders.

"I was worried about you," Matt murmured into her ear.

Monica trembled against him, secure in his strength. "I guess you were right about him."

"Than you'll—"

"Cross him off the list," she completed with an emphatic nod. She smiled when he wrapped his arms tighter around her. A man who could intimidate an aggressor without saying a word, now that was impressive.

"Let's get out of here, babe."

She took a calming breath reveling in his strength surrounding her, drawing in his essence, and felt her serenity restored. "I'm with you, babe."

"Babe?" he asked, raising a brow.

"I'm just trying it out. I should come up with some cutesy name for you if I'm darlin' and babe. How about Mr. Amazing?"

"Sounds like I should be wearing a cape and tights," he said with a chuckle.

"You're not the tights type," she said as they headed out the door. "How about snuggle bunny then?"

"Good gravy," he muttered, opening her pickup truck door and helping her in.

She laughed out loud at his outraged glower. "How about sweetie pie?" she said as he started the truck and pulled away. His grin told her he didn't mind that. "Okay, sweetie pie it is," looking at him in the moon glow, she whispered, "and sometimes, Sundance." That's how she'd think of him when she fantasized about him—and she would fantasize about him. No man had ever come to her rescue before, and she couldn't quite wrap her mind around it. He was almost too good to be true and she had him at least for tonight. When he dropped her off, she was going to give him a good night kiss that would knock his socks off.

Chapter 3

Monica couldn't take her eyes off Matt as he drove them along the lake. Her senses were simmering. The soft feel of his lips on hers lingered. She wanted to kiss him again harder—deeper. He was Mr. Wrong, but tonight, he was Mr. Amazing. His chiseled profile in the moonlight tempted her to reach out and touch it. Run her fingers down his cheek, trace his sensual mouth, make him pull over and kiss her until she couldn't think straight.

He slanted a quick sidelong glance at her. "Pencil me in."

"What?" she watched his lips move but could hardly believe the words coming out of his hunky mouth. He couldn't really want to be on the manhunt list.

"You heard me," he said, his focus snapping back to the road ahead.

His determined tone made her shiver with delight, even though she knew it was a pipe dream. "Calm down, Matt, it's just your raging testosterone talking. Almost getting in a fight will do that to a man."

"Know that firsthand, do ya?" he asked dryly.

Unfortunately, she did, not that she was going to tell him that. Her ex's favorite pastime was picking fights with any man he even thought was looking her way. It was one of his favorite tactics for keeping her off balance so she wouldn't notice he was robbing her blind, not to mention

cheating on her. Then she'd been young and foolish enough to be manipulated. Now she was a grown woman who knew her own mind. How could she boil that down into one simple sentence? She simply shrugged.

"*Darlin'*, I was defending your honor, not looking for a fight. Anyhow, Ted Miller ran like a scared rabbit."

"I noticed." It was true he'd intimidated Ted without throwing a punch. Still she knew in the morning he'd change his mind about being on the manhunt list. Maybe giving him a knockdown, curl-his-toes good night kiss wasn't such a good idea. "Thanks for the offer, it's sweet of you, but my advice is to go home and take a cold shower. As for me, when I use my bunny, I'll think of you, if that helps." She watched his hands tighten on the truck's steering wheel.

"Thanks for the case of blue balls, lady. Oh yeah, that just does it for me."

Monica winced in sympathy—she understood frustrated desire better than most. It wasn't easy running *Spice* and not having anyone to try her sexy wares with. A nice quiet husband would solve that problem. "When you find some little nymph to pleasure you, you can think of me. Maybe ask Carrie out again; she's about your age." Even as she said it, the image of him with another woman made her sick at heart.

"For your information, Carrie is a twenty-two year old twit," he said dryly, turning down a country lane. "I'm a grown man, in case you hadn't noticed."

She definitely noticed. Monica held her breath as she became aware of the lane they were traveling down, she guessed exactly where they were going—lover's lane. She hadn't been out here since she watched the submarine races in high school. It tickled her; she had to give him an A for

action. She couldn't help inching closer as she murmured, "I noticed, sweetie pie." She heard him say something soft and sweet under his breath.

"That does it," he said, pulling off into a secluded overlook. The city lights twinkled below. "How about I give you a demonstration of my eagerness? A free sample to prove that I can perform so you'll put me on the list."

Monica smiled despite her better judgment as she gazed at his intent expression in the moonlight. She was glad they had the parking spot all to themselves. "You've got to be kidding, I know you really don't want to be on the list."

"Does this seem like a joke?" He leaned forward and kissed her, his mouth slanting hungrily across hers.

She went into his arms with a sigh of surrender, aching to kiss him. She needed to taste him again. His mouth molded hers; and it was even better than she remembered. She sighed, her lips parting under his, and put her arms around him. She heard her seatbelt unsnap as he unfastened it and pulled her to him. It thrilled her to hear him growl deep in his throat as he deepened the kiss. Monica burned, her whole body heating up. Her nipples stiffened, rubbing against her satin bra, tingling, her pussy was wet. More than wet—aching, needy. She whimpered, pressing tight to him.

"That's it, babe, burn for me." He cupped one of her breasts with his big hand, and squeezed, pressing firmly against her nipple.

Monica gasped at the pleasure that simple but profound contact brought. He had magic hands. When he started unbuttoning the front buttons of her dress, she let him, craving his touch no matter what. Opening the top of her dress, Matt's hot gaze lingered on her breasts cupped in the red satin bra she wore, and Monica trembled. Never had

she felt sexier, more desirable. Always full breasted, they now seemed swollen with need, her nipples tingling.

“*Darlin’*, you’re so beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she murmured embarrassed. Nobody had ever called her beautiful in that reverential tone before, certainly not her ex.

He bent to take her nipple in his mouth lapping at it through her bra. It was the most erotic thing she’d ever experienced. She whimpered, turning into a puddle of desire against him, and arched toward that teasing tongue. It’d been so long since she’d been touched. Her hands found their way inside his shirt, running along his hot body. Firm and resilient, it was like touching hot satin; he arched into her touch, like a big cat.

Matt pulled her tighter to him, his hand slipping under her dress to cup her mound. “You’re so hot, babe.”

Monica pulsed in his hot hand as he cupped her needy sex, and she felt like she’d died and gone to heaven. It felt so good to be held like that, his palm applying gentle pressure that made her pant. “You have no idea,” she gasped, nibbling his ear, her tongue flicking at it. She hissed with pleasure when he stroked her through her panties his finger tracing her pussy’s cleft teasingly. “Oh please,” she whimpered when he drew a slow circle around her love-swollen clit.

“Don’t worry,” he said with a growl, simultaneously slipping his hand inside her panties while he captured her nipple in his mouth. Monica cried out with ecstasy, shudders of pleasure rocking her. His thick fingers filled her pussy, he found her clit with his thumb, and she came. Clinging to him, she shuddered, crying out his name as she convulsed around those teasing digits.

"That's it, darlin', come for me," he growled, tweaking her clit again.

And she did, exploding again, as he milked another orgasm out of her. He kissed her as she slowly drifted back to earth. She reached for his zipper; time to take things in hand. She opened his jeans to find that he wasn't wearing underwear. Amused and a bit startled to see him going commando, she smiled as his cock sprang out hot, hard, and huge into her hand, and he let out a groan.

She could only stare at it for a moment impressed. He put her rabbits to shame. Monica stroked him teasingly from his cock's red tip, moist with a drop of pre-cum, down his long veined shaft, to cup his turgid balls. He'd mentioned blue balls but they didn't look that hue to her. She looked at him, about to ask about it, and thought better of it. Some things about male anatomy, a woman just didn't need to know.

He groaned, pressing into her hands. It was then that she remembered the free sample of Good Head Gel in her tote bag. She was going to use it to lube her screen door but why not use it for its real purpose? It was a chance to put her merchandise to the test. She pulled the small tube out of her bag. He gave her a questioning look.

"What is that?"

"Just sit back and enjoy it, Sundance." She opened the tube, swirling gel on his rampant cock, and he hissed in pleasure. She knew it went on cool. The sweet aroma of strawberries filled the cab of his truck. She bent to lick him, and he let out a groan. Flicking her tongue around the head of his cock, she tasted strawberries and him. With a sigh of surrender, she took him into her mouth. It made her bold and crazy to pleasure him this way. She'd never really done this before, but he didn't have to know that. He grew hot

and harder in her mouth as she bobbed up and down, her pussy throbbed along with her strokes.

“Darlin’, enough, or I won’t be able to control myself.” He gently pulled her up and kissed her.

Monica kissed him back in rapture, lost in the feeling of his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Now she knew what she’d been denying herself. All thought went away as he cupped her breasts, teasing the nipples into tingling points. Then one of his hands drifted down to find the heat between her legs again. She trembled as his finger traced her cleft behind her panties and unerringly found her swollen clit. He bent to kiss her. Monica moaned, her eyes closed.

A blare from a car horn cut through her haze of passion and she stiffened. Matt let out a growl and tucked her back into the shadows. She turned to see two carloads of teens now parked next to them. She quickly pulled her dress closed, shrinking away from Matt. Good grief, they’d almost been caught in the act.

“Lord, give me strength,” Matt hissed as he zipped his pants up.

Monica winced in sympathy knowing it wasn’t easy to tuck that monster away, and he had to be hurting. “Sorry, Sundance.”

“Not half as sorry as I am, darlin’,” he said, starting the truck and driving away.

Was he sorry he didn’t get laid, or was he regretting his insistence about being added to her manhunt?

Matt’s arousal level was banked but still high as he drove back to town with Monica at his side. He wasn’t quite sure what had happened to him, but in one short night, she’d managed to wrap herself around his heart. A glance to the side showed her hands trembling as she

fastened the last button on her dress, and he was lost in fantasy.

The mingled scents of her perfume and strawberries tempted him to pull off into the bushes and finish what they'd started. He'd never eat a strawberry again without thinking about making love to her. Knowing it would probably shock her if he stopped and took her, he kept on driving, replaying in his mind the moment her sweet lips had closed over his cock. He stifled a groan as his hard-on jump-started back into rampant. She was worth the pain. Just imagining the image of Monica in his bed, her hair spread out on his pillow, her lips parted in ecstasy as he took her, made him crazy.

"Drive back to *Spice*, okay?" she said.

"Okay." Hell yeah, that was fine with him. There were a few goodies there he'd like to use on her. He'd rub the cinnamon massage oil all over her and take his time licking it off. The windows of her shop were dark as he approached the building.

"Around the back, please."

His arousal simmered as he pulled into the parking lot behind *Spice*, turned off the key, and turned to look at her in the moonlight. *God, she was beautiful.* Matt reached out to cup her soft cheek and she leaned into his caress, her eyes shining.

"You don't..."

He bent to kiss her, cutting off her words and she melted in his arms, going all fluid on him. He groaned as she pressed against him, his body throbbing in response, and pulled away before he made love to her right there. He had to make it inside so they'd have privacy and he could pleasure her properly. Jerking his driver's side door open,

he got out and sprinted around to open hers. She was sitting there motionless, watching him, a dazed look in her eyes.

He gently tugged her to him, stepping between her legs as she turned to get out. "Come here, darlin'." He leaned in to kiss her, his lips brushing gently over her soft tremulous ones. God, she tasted good. Edging closer, her dress rode up so that her bare legs were straddling him. On fire, he ran his hand up the inside of her thigh. The sound of a throat being cleared made him freeze, his hand inches from her pussy, his lips still locked with hers. Monica stiffened for a moment before pulling away.

"I've got guests waiting for me."

He rested his forehead on hers, his thudding heartbeat slowing, as he heard female voices behind him. One of them he recognized as his sister's. "Where?"

"My house is behind the parking lot."

"Who's there?"

"April and the bridesmaids."

He turned to see several women clustered around the front porch of the small bungalow beyond *Spice's* driveway. April and Courtney he recognized, and Toni, a local deputy sheriff still in uniform. Two others were strangers to him. They all sat around a wicker patio set and he could see refreshments set up.

"Hey, you two, break it up," Courtney said with a smile, gazing at the clinch.

Matt reluctantly disengaged from Monica, scowling at his kid sister who wasn't cowed in the least. The other females clustered on Monica's porch all eyed him with various stages of amusement and suspicion. Damn. He growled which made Monica chuckle ruefully.

"Sorry, Sundance," she said behind him.

Matt forced himself to back off, help her out of the truck, and let her go. "Later," he said with a promise as she kissed him on the cheek and turned away. It felt like the hardest thing he'd ever done as he let her go. He watched her walk away toward the party on her deck, then got in his pickup and drove off.

Monica went up to face the inquisition she knew was coming as Matt drove away. She couldn't help gazing at his retreating taillights forlornly. She'd just lost what promised to be the best night of her life, which meant her love life sucked. Sighing, she turned to face her friends, who were lounging on the wicker patio furniture on her front porch, sipping iced tea and munching on snacks. It was their usual Thursday night Manhunter's Club Meeting and for once, she had something to report; only she didn't want to.

They'd formed the support group shortly after April's engagement because they were all at loose ends. Courtney and Amber, the youngest of the group, had recently broken up with their boyfriends. Both bubbly blonds, they'd probably have no trouble once they got back in the dating world. Emily, a buttoned-up librarian with her sandy brown hair in a bun and dowdy clothes, needed a makeover more than anything else. Toni, a petite redheaded cop just needed to be disarmed. Monica had been the most hopeless of them all. The manhunt had seemed like a good idea at the time, now she wasn't so sure. Ted Miller would have been a complete disaster.

Who the heck had suggested him anyway? she wondered, gazing at her would be dating mavens. She couldn't think right, much less walk a straight line with her body still simmering from the hunk who'd almost made love to her. Her body still sensitized, her heart still racing, her steps faltered as she approached her wraparound front porch.

Her friends had her best interests at heart, but Matt wasn't a subject she wanted to discuss.

"Tell," Courtney insisted, pouring her a glass of iced tea from the pitcher sitting on the coffee table.

"What?"

"About the bridal shower, of course," April said with a smile.

Monica blushed. "We didn't exactly get that far," she admitted.

"Told ya," Courtney told April to the tune of several high fives.

"Want me to run a background check on him?" Toni offered.

"He's dating her, not trying to get a job," Brandi said.

Emily frowned. "If he's on the list, we need to do it."

April and Courtney looked at each other and frowned. "We know everything about him. No background check is needed, thank you."

"Yeah, but you weren't here all the time, April, and then there was the two years he lived in Las Vegas, Courtney."

"What happens in Vegas..." April started with a grin.

"He only moved out there because there was a construction boom," Courtney cut in. "Besides, he's my brother, I'd know if he had a secret baby or a gambling problem or something."

"Sorry," Toni said. "You know I tend to be..."

"Paranoid," Courtney cut in with an indulgent smile.

She shrugged, not taking offense. "Proactive."

Monica smiled. "Ladies, let's keep this civilized. Let's just say he's a good man and leave it at that."

April smiled. "See, I told ya. It's a good thing he's on the list."

“Who says he’s on the list?” Monica cut in as they all talked around her.

“Isn’t he?”

She felt all eyes on her and blushed. “By a mere technicality.”

“Still counts,” Courtney said.

“Well at least we finally got her laid,” Toni said.

“You did not.”

Chapter 4

Monica punched her pillow for the fifth time and rolled over trying to go back to sleep. *Was it even possible for women to have wet dreams?* she wondered sleepily. *Whatever hers were, they were certainly erotic.* Groaning, she squeezed her eyes shut and drifted into a half sleep. She and a shadowy figure were walking down an aisle and church bells were ringing—and ringing—and ringing. Her eyes popped open, the stupid doorbell. Yawning, she stumbled out of bed and stomped toward the front door just as some idiot started pounding on it. If it was a salesman, he was dead meat. She jerked open the door prepared to give him a piece of her mind, and sputtered to a halt.

Matt stood there holding two Styrofoam cups of coffee and a bag from *Henderson's Bakery*. He looked like a dawn sex god. The rising sun's rays highlighted his hair and sultry smile as he looked her over. She peered at him through blurry eyes, he had to be some kind of mirage; maybe she was still dreaming. She pinched herself and gave a little yelp. "You're real," she gasped.

"In the flesh," he said bending to brush a brief kiss on her lips. "And you're adorable." He smiled as he looked down at her nightshirt. "Teddy bears?"

"What can I say, I like bears." She could hardly believe he was here, commenting on her pajamas, at what time was it? The sun was just rising. "What time is it?"

"Six in the morning, I couldn't sleep."

"So you decided I shouldn't sleep either?" she said with little heat in her complaint. She hadn't slept well either, fantasies of him kept getting in the way of slumber.

"A peace offering." Stepping across her threshold, he handed her a Styrofoam cup.

She wrapped her hand around the warm cup, finding his gaze even warmer as she stepped back to allow him admittance. He gave her sleepwear an amused once over. A ratty sleep-t, hardly the height of fashion for a lingerie designer, but sleeping alone, she'd opted for comfort. Although the appreciative look in his eye as he swept up the length of her bared thighs told her he liked what he saw. Standing there half-naked in front of the man she wanted to see all naked, it was all she could do not to wrestle him to the ground and demand that he do her. Instead, she gripped her cup tighter.

Thankfully, the coffee's tantalizing aroma brought her back to planet Earth. Crazy? Yeah, she had to admit that she was bonkers about him, it was a good thing he didn't know her vulnerability. She smiled up at him. "You're forgiven this time."

"So coffee's the way to your heart?"

"It's the way into my house at six in the morning," she admitted, then turned to walk into the kitchen. She heard his footsteps trailing after her and shivered with delight. Sundance here in the flesh made her weak in the knees. They could do it in her bed, or on her chaise lounge, maybe her plush chair-and-a-half. Would her bedroom rafters support a sex swing? Her knees trembled as the thought zinged around her errant brain.

"Steady there, darlin'." He grasped her elbow to steady her.

Monica moaned when his warm hand closed over her bare arm, she couldn't help it. A brush fire started inside her, ignited where he touched her arm. His grip lightened, his fingers caressing her needy flesh. She pulled away, trying to refocus. Putting her cup on the counter, she went to the fridge to get out the cream.

"Don't bother, darlin'. Cream and two sugars."

She looked over her shoulder at him. He was leaning against the cupboards in her cozy kitchen, watching her like she was about to be dessert. "You remembered how I take my coffee."

"I remember lots of things. Like this." He bent to brush a brief teasing kiss on her lips.

Monica was turning to pudding when he pulled away. She was left wanting more. Instead, he opened the bag and pulled out a still warm strawberry Danish. Her stomach growled. "For my lady," he said, feeding her a bite. She ate the pastry, the strawberry jam bursting on her tongue, while her eyes ate him up.

The Good Head Gel was still in her bag from last night's sensual encounter in his pickup. Even as she thought it, he was reaching for her. She fell into his arms with a sigh of surrender. Monica kissed him back with all the burning passion she'd suppressed. She'd done nothing but dream about him all night, and hadn't even reached for her bunny once. A taste of the real thing had spoiled her for the imitation.

Matt's hands stroked down her back shaping her form, and squeezed her bottom. She gasped into his mouth, all but catching fire. "Oh please," she whispered when he pulled back.

"I will, darlin'." He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the dinette, collapsing onto a chair as she kissed him back.

She wound up astride him, her bare pussy pressed against his soft washed jeans. Her swollen clit bumped up against his bulging crotch, her budding nipples tingling as they rubbed against his chest. She whimpered, unable to stop herself from rolling her hips to increase the exquisite pressure. She hissed at the waves of pleasure building in her, zinging through her sensitized clit, and gazed deep into his eyes. He was watching her, enjoying her enjoying him. It undid her last bit of restraint. "What are you doing to me, Sundance?" she murmured, on fire for his touch.

"Proving my worth," he said, leaning forward to nibble her nape as his arms wrapped around her.

Monica trembled, sagging against him, her hands clutching his shoulders because he made her feel dizzy with desire. He was growing bigger, harder against her sensitive pussy, making her tremble. "Oh, honey, you don't have to. I know the genuine article when I feel it." She rolled her hips again, gasping at the pure pleasure as her bare pubes pressed against his soft washed jeans, and the throbbing hard-on inside them. She watched his eyes darken in response.

He smiled, his hands slipping down to grip her bare bottom, holding her still against him. "So did you fantasize about me, too?"

"Yes," she blurted out, burned by the fire in his eyes. So he'd ached for her as well, it was a balm for her raging hormones. He was just barely keeping it under control. His cock growing stiffer against her, beads of sweat breaking out on his brow. She leaned forward to lap at the steady pulse beat in his throat, tasting his salty skin, hearing him

groan, she murmured her confession against him, "I never even used my bunny once. I think you've spoiled it for me, Sundance."

His sexy chuckle drove her crazy on two points, it made her fantasize about what else she could do to cause him to make that sound again, and it pissed her off at the same time. "It's not funny," she grumbled, nipping at his earlobe. "This is my livelihood."

He laughed. "Don't fear, darlin', I'm pretty sure we can think of ways to spice up the bunny experience."

She smiled at him and snuggled closer, his erection rubbing against her sensitive mound, and sizzled in response. "You are too good to be true, cowboy."

"Babe, the feeling's mutual." He tugged her sleep-t over her head, effortlessly stripping it off her.

Monica sat there nude, straddling him and trying not to whimper with desire as his eyes ate her up. "Maybe you should take me to bed," she started to say as his hand found the sweet spot between her legs again. "Yes," she said, with a sigh of passion, her head rolling back, her eyes closed. He took advantage of the situation to nibble her ear, suck on her neck and then drop down to capture her nipple in his hot mouth. "Oh my," she said as he drew hard on it while teasing her clit with his rough fingertip. Her body started to spasm.

"That's it, babe, go wild for me," he groaned.

She reached down to unzip his pants with trembling fingers and gasped when he sprang out hard and ready against her. Commando again, it was enough to drive her into another orgasm as his hot cock thumped against her quivering pussy. "Nice."

“My thoughts exactly,” he said, picking her up so that she was perched atop his hard-on. “Yes,” he asked for permission.

Monica trembled, as she looked deep into his passion-filled dark eyes. “Oh yes. Take me, cowboy,” she whimpered as he eased her onto his erection, sinking inch by inch onto his rampant cock until he filled her completely. When they were fully joined, she sighed with pleasure, her heart racing even though so far, he was doing all the work. “You’re so big and you feel so good inside me.” He groaned like her admission pained him and she gazed deep into his eyes. “Happy to oblige, darlin’,” he gritted out.

Frantic for more, she arched her hips, taking him deeper, her passion-swollen clit pressing against him, and cried out in pleasure. He was holding back, trying to be gentle, but she wanted all his wild passion.

“Easy, baby,” he said, holding her tight to him as he thrust deeper up into her.

Impaled, she could only sob out her pleasure as he controlled the thrusts. She was amazed at the strength that took as he held her pressed to him and thrust up into her again and again. “Oh my,” she said, clutching his shoulders tight. She kissed him then, their mouths as joined as their bodies. Matt’s tongue thrust into her mouth in tandem with his cock’s thrusts into her pussy and she dissolved around him into a puddle of need. His shaft rubbed against her G-spot and she started to quiver, waves of orgasm starting as a ripple and then completely overtaking her.

He stiffened, his thrusts harder, fiercer, and came high and hard inside her. Monica clung to him as she came back to Earth and then snuggled against him. Matt smoothed a hand up and down her spine, then held her tight. Wrapped

in the warm cocoon of his arms, she closed her eyes, feeling sated and protected, a sleepless night caught up with her.

Matt listened to a gentle snoring come from the woman wrapped around him and smiled. A guy might think he'd bored her to sleep, but he knew better. He held her tight, feeling dazzled. How could he have lived in the same town with her and missed her? He didn't know, but he was bidden by the strongest urge to hold on tight. He leaned his head against hers, still joined intimately with her.

* * * *

The alarm clock beeping roused Monica from her slumber. She opened her eyes, her face pressed against a warm male one. She raised her head, her cheek brushing against his stubble-covered chin and looked into Matt's twinkling blue eyes.

"Good morning, beautiful."

She blushed. *Good morning, indeed.* His cock was still inside her, her pussy moist from their joining, the heady smell of sex in the air mixed with his intoxicating aroma, and she'd fallen asleep. "How long have I been..."

"Sleeping? About two hours." He smiled. "You talk in your sleep."

"When I'm overtired, yeah," she murmured, wondering what she'd said. "I'm sorry for falling asleep on you."

"I'm not, it was a pleasure holding you."

"Thanks," she said, more than flustered. "I have to shower and get ready for work."

He picked her up by the waist, disengaging their bodies, and stood her on her feet. She couldn't help staring as he stood and pulled up his pants. Just the fact that a

rampantly endowed man was strutting his stuff around her place was astounding. "I could wash your back."

"No thanks, something tells me I'd be late for work." She backed him toward the front door.

He stopped to look at her, his hand coming up to gently cup and caress her cheek. "Come out to dinner with me tonight, darlin'."

She gazed up at him, yes on the tip of her tongue, but she had date number one lined up for tonight. It was a blind date; she couldn't break it if she wanted to. Besides, just the inclination she had to chuck her manhunt and settle for a torrid affair was troubling. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I have a date." She waited for the usual possessive glare that used to accompany Gary's demands, but it didn't come. Instead, he nodded and dropped his hand.

"Which guy is it?"

She didn't miss the shrewd look in Matt's eye. He wasn't a jerk like her ex but boys didn't like to share their toys, which to him, she no doubt was. "Never you mind."

He shrugged. "But we never discussed the shower."

The reminder reinforced the girls' comments about them being too into each other to get down to business last night. "I know. Maybe we could do it over the phone or you could email me."

He shook his head. "How about lunch?"

He wouldn't be easy to shake and deep down, she was glad of it. She did have extra help in the shop today so she could get away, but could he? She didn't want him to put a construction site on hold just to have lunch with her.

"Don't you have to work?"

"I can juggle things. Well?"

“Swing by *Spice* at noon and we can walk over to the diner for a quick bite to eat. And I might suggest that you compile a list of ideas.”

He glanced at her tote bag sitting on the entry table. “Yeah, about the list.”

“See you at noon,” she said, quickly shutting the door before he could ask about it. She leaned against the door breathing hard. Explaining why she hadn’t added him yet wasn’t something she wanted to get into. Why hadn’t she—fear? With a groan, she pulled out her notebook and reached for a pencil. “Pencil him in,” he’d said, and that’s just what she’d do. But there was nothing to say that he couldn’t be erased if he broke her heart.

Chapter 5

Matt turned into a parking spot behind Spice at quarter to twelve. One glance at Monica's house had him recalling their morning tryst. He'd never known complete passion before. He could still taste her, feel her wrapped around him, and he wanted more. Swelling with need, he closed his eyes, and willed his burgeoning erection down. Yeah, right, there wasn't much chance of that. Will had known something was up the minute he'd limped onto the jobsite this morning. But Matt hadn't admitted a thing. Their passion was too new and precious to share, even with his brother.

He got out of his pickup and walked up to the back door. There were three other vehicles in the parking lot, one of which was his kid sister's. For once, he was glad she worked here, she freed Monica up to go away with him. He walked inside, taking off his shades, and letting his eyes adjust to the light. There were several shoppers, but he only had eyes for his woman. After their morning delight, he thought of her that way. She was waiting on a customer, so he leaned back against the wall to watch her. She was wearing a green silk blouse that matched her eyes, a black skirt, and another pair of those stilettos that made him so horny.

“Still sticking around the next day,” Courtney said with a laugh from somewhere behind him. “That’s got to be a record for you, big brother.”

Matt cast a disgruntled look her way as she moved around in front of him while straightening out a rack of lingerie. Blond and bubbly with laughing blue eyes, his kid sister delighted in needling him. Trouble was, she spoke the truth. He was in trouble if a taste of Monica had him wanting more, but somehow, he didn’t care. Shit, maybe Vegas hadn’t taught him a thing. Caution no longer seemed to be part of his vocabulary. He took a deep breath and waited for the pain that usually accompanied thinking about Tanya, but it didn’t come, just a rueful acknowledgement that he’d been stupid. Definite progress and he had Monica to thank for it. “We’re going out for lunch to discuss the shower.”

She smoothed out a pink nightgown. “Yeah, I heard you were too busy to do that last night.”

Lord, he hoped nothing else about last night had been revealed. From Courtney’s nosy tone, he could tell she was fishing for information. When she finished her task and turned to face him, he decided the trick was to appease her without revealing anything compromising. Still, having a sister on the inside of the manhunt might help him battle his way to the top of Monica’s list. “Tell me who she’s going out with tonight.”

Courtney tilted her head as she studied him, then glanced over at Monica. “If she didn’t tell you, I’m not sure I should.”

He slipped his hands in his pockets trying to look non-jealous. “Why, what do you think I’m gonna do, punch the guy out?”

“No, maybe get your pal Dwain to give him a ticket.”

His eyes narrowed at his sister's perceptive statement. He'd thought of it and about ten other dirty tricks to break up her date, but he'd rejected them all. He didn't want to win her that way. "I just want to make sure she's okay," he said

meaning every word. Ted Miller's attack last night should have made Monica cautious; trouble was he didn't think it had.

"Yeah, she told us about number six's violent behavior last night. Damn the lowlife jerk anyway," Courtney said, worrying her lower lip. She slowly looked him over. "Thanks for saving my boss."

Matt looked down at his shoes feeling ill at ease. It'd been a natural reaction; he was no hero, just a man defending his lady. "I should have clobbered the arrogant prick."

"You turned out to be even more of a hero because you didn't have to punch him out."

He shrugged, it was the same thing Monica said and it still didn't figure. Apparently, women appreciated non-violent men. Hell, he'd be a pacifist if it worked. "So give, who's she seeing tonight? I want to make sure he's okay."

"Some guy named Don Ormond, one of the customers set her up on a blind date."

"I saw him on the list. The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't place him. What do you now about him?"

She shrugged. "Not much. Toni checked him out and he's clean. I do know that Monica wanted to start slow, get her feet wet, so to speak. That's why she put him at the top."

Matt tried to wipe the jealous look off his face but from Courtney's wry grin, he knew she wasn't buying it.

"So the playboy's finally getting a taste of his own medicine," she said with a sad shake of her head.

His first reaction was to give her hell but she was a casualty in the dating wars too, after breaking up with her long-term boyfriend a month back. His brotherly advice

then that she was better off without the crumb hadn't been well received. Now the roles were reversed and he was the one who

was in need of her help. "I know I didn't say it earlier, but I'm sorry about you and Robert breaking up." When tears sprang to his sister's eyes, he was bitten by the urge to track rotten Rob down and break him. Instead, he reached out to hug her.

"Thanks," Courtney said, pulling back with a sniff. "I've wasted enough tears on that loser. I guess Dad was right not to trust him."

He smiled, admiring her resilience. "I learned the hard way that we Shepards are keen judges of people when we listen to our instincts, and I can tell that you're gonna be okay."

"Yeah, I am, thanks." Courtney glanced at Monica, who was ringing up a sale. "Now as for your sorry love life, don't worry, I'll keep you in the loop."

He nodded and watched Monica coming their way, poetry in motion, but there was apprehension in her eyes. He could practically feel her pulling away from him; it was as if this morning's sexual surrender hadn't happened. Body tensing, he waited for some sign that she wasn't regretting it, that she still wanted him.

She licked her lip. "Mr. Shepard, you're right on time for our business luncheon."

Mr. Shepard—business luncheon? With his emotions so raw, he frowned back at her. Why the formal act? He wasn't about to let her build a wall between them. Holding her eye contact, Matt pushed away from the wall and sauntered over to her. He watched her eyes widen, heard her quick intake of breath, and knew she hadn't forgotten

about this morning any more than he had. It was imprinted on her body and soul, too. He saw her gaze drift down to his stirring cock and relaxed as his hopeful guess was confirmed. "Ready, Miss Landers?" He touched her arm and felt a tremor go through her. *Ditto, babe*, he thought, touching her was enough to rock him back on his heels, too. Giving her a little squeeze of reassurance, he let go.

"Let me grab my bag and we can go."

He reluctantly let go of her arm and waited for her to scoop up her tote bag and come back to him. He escorted her the two blocks to the café, reveling in his position at her side. It felt right to be walking together. She smiled as he opened the door for her and he felt his pride swell along with his cock. One look from her had him primed and ready for action.

Once they were seated in a back booth, he eased back and looked deep into her eyes. She looked a bit tired despite the catnap she'd caught on his lap this morning. He felt pretty much the same, but the hot sex had helped lift him. At least she didn't have that regretful look in her eyes anymore. "You look tired, babe, you should go home and rest after lunch." He watched her blush, dart a glance at the mirror behind the counter, and winced wanting to call back the comment. He'd only mentioned it because he was concerned about her.

"Good grief. Do I really look that bad?"

Smooth, Shepard, he told himself. "No you look beautiful as always, it's just that I know you didn't get much sleep. Except for two hours this morning, that is."

She fanned her face with the menu and gave him a wry smile. "Ah yes, but they were very restful. Don't worry about me, stud, I'm okay."

He nodded as a weight lifted from his shoulders; at least she was acknowledging that their tryst this morning had happened. "Fine."

"Let's talk about the shower, okay?"

Matt watched, with focused interest, her pull the red leather planner out of her bag. Did she carry it everywhere? What he wouldn't give to take his time pawing through it and learn all her secrets. Something told him pigs would fly first, because it never left her side. Matt pulled his wadded up list out of his shirt pocket. "Want to trade?" To his shock, she actually took him up on the offer, sliding her planner over and reaching for his list. She smoothed out the crumpled paper. He watched her arch a perfect brow as she read his short list.

"You want us to plan a couple's shower?"

He shrugged, a bit insulted by her shock. Her low evaluation of his sophistication level stung, hitting a little too close to home. It reminded him of Tanya's parting words, that she'd rather sip champagne with his boss Joe Falcon than drink beer with him, as he lay broken in the street after Falcon's goons roughed him up. At the time, it was just insult added to the injury of his professional and personal demise. Now to hear something similar coming from Monica stung, even though he knew she didn't intend it as a put-down. He wasn't completely tasteless, even if he worked with his hands. "Why not? It's the latest thing, isn't it?"

"Well yes, but not around here. I didn't think construction workers would want to party with the ladies."

"We're not all Neanderthals."

"Besides, I figured you'd want a stripper at *Red's*."

He knew that jab was aimed mostly at him, but the idea of a stripper didn't do anything for him anymore. Tame

stuff compared to the sultry woman across from him.

"Who, me?"

She shrugged. "Okay, a couple's shower it is. We can have separate bridal shower and bachelor party, too."

"Sure, I'm easy." He leaned back and smiled at her.

She gave him a wry look. "Well, that was fast. See what we can do when other things don't get in the way?"

"So did you add me?"

Monica froze, the abrupt question catching her by surprise. First, she'd unintentionally hurt his feelings with her comments about the couple's shower. She could see it in the way he'd frozen up and acted distracted, as if he wasn't really with her anymore. And now he wanted to know his place in her life when she really didn't know herself. The need to protect herself ran too deep to be hasty. "Um, yeah, in a way," she stammered, stalling.

Her heart skipped a beat when he flipped a few pages to look. His name was there all right, but scrawled across the bottom in pencil. The fact that she'd erased him twice only to reenter him was obvious from the smears. How would he take it? She stared at him, noting that he'd grown silent and stiff like he was bracing for battle.

"What gives? I'm only written in pencil."

"Well you did say 'pencil me in.'" The fact that he seemed more disappointed than angry broke through her defenses like nothing else could. He was unlike any other man she'd known and she simply didn't know how to handle him.

"You're right I did, but you didn't have to take me so literally."

The urge to chuck her manhunt and fall completely under his spell was so strong, she could barely control it. Only the memory of how foolish she'd been when she let

her heart lead before kept her from acting on it. Matt was worlds away from Gary but he was still a player. "I'm sorry, Matthew, I never meant to hurt your feelings."

He shrugged, brushing off her mention of his ruffled feathers. "Tell me about your date tonight."

Monica went still, giving him a wary glance. She'd had a feeling the subject would come up. "Why do you want to know?" She watched him smile, trying to come off more like a friend than a jealous lover, but she didn't buy it. Boys did not like to share their toys.

"I'm just looking out for you, darlin'," he said with a frown. "You can't have a replay of last night's assault."

Nonplussed, she took in Matt's repressive frown in an annoyed glance. Didn't her moves last night prove she could protect herself in his eyes? She'd handled Ted Miller, admittedly with a little backup from Matt, but she could have done him in herself if she had to. She'd been studying martial arts since Gary had been imprisoned, for just such an occasion. "I haven't needed a babysitter since I was six. I fended that loser off just like I will the next one. Since when are you my bodyguard, Shepard?"

"Maybe since I saved your ass and slept with you."

The calmly stated words threw her so bad that she could only gape at him for a moment, hardly believing they'd come out of his sensual mouth. The fact that she knew it was true only made it worse. His solid presence, his big hand enfolding hers, gave her no way to deny that they were involved. She wanted to climb over the table and curl up in his lap, but instead, she had to reassert her independence. "I took care of the last guy and I'll take care of the next. I don't need you or any other man to do it for me." She pulled her hand out from under his. "No man's ever going to have the power to threaten me again."

He frowned. "Who's threatened you?" When she remained silent, he frowned. "I'm worried about you, not trying to boss you around. Yes, you might have gotten away unscathed, but think about the next time, babe. I shudder to think what might happen."

His confession defused the situation and she let out a sigh. It felt good to know that he cared, even if she didn't want to be owned. "Don't worry about me, we've come up with an early warning system if I should have any trouble."

"We? Who else is in on this mess?"

She didn't much like the way he said mess, but she decided to overlook it. "My posse, the Bridesmaid Manhunter's Club."

"Good lord." He groaned and closed his eyes. "What's the plan?"

She licked her lip, hesitating as she watched him, then sighed. "I'm going to carry my cell phone at all times. Courtney will call me at eight and I can come up with an excuse to leave the date early if he turns out to be boring or worse. Also, if I get into trouble I can send text messages my friends. Don't forget I've got a friend on the force. Toni's been vetting my dates and we haven't dug up any dirt on number one, yet."

"That's it." He frowned. "Toni's fairly new on the force and while she might be good at her job, it's not enough backup in case of trouble. Care for a chauffeur?"

"No! There's no way you're coming along. You'd probably drop the poor guy off in the woods and take me parking instead."

"Sounds like an excellent idea," he said with a grin.

"Down, boy," she said, smiling ruefully back at him. "It's not going to happen."

"If not me, take Toni. She can probably get the night off and the sight of her is liable to cool his jets."

"Hey, I resent that. Toni is very pretty."

"Yeah, if you go in for redheaded elves who carry guns."

"She's not an elf, she's just petite. And she's very fond of that gun, and a crack shot to boot."

"So, all the more reason to take her along. The guy could be an ax murderer for all you know."

She rolled her eyes, because there was no reasoning with him. "First of all, I expect the evening to go off without a hitch as it's my first real foray into manhunting. Second, if anything should go wrong, I've got my mace—if all else fails."

He closed his eyes and slumped back in his seat. "Good god."

Chapter 6

Monica smoothed the wrinkles out of her cream linen skirt and slipped on her lightweight pink cashmere twin set, hoping to look presentable but unavailable, as she got ready for her date. Matt's words of warning still rang in her ears from their lunch this afternoon. He was making her paranoid, a state she was quite familiar with because of Gary, who'd robbed her, and been verbally abusive during their short marriage. But he hadn't actually laid a hand on her until their last confrontation. When he realized she'd turned him in, he snapped and damned near choked the life out of her before he was hauled away. She was strong and prepared now so it could never happen again.

She checked the tote bag to make sure her cell phone and mace were in place. It didn't pay to take any chances. The manhunt would continue, but under her terms. Number one was due to pick her up any minute, and he had quite a few hurdles to cross over before he even got to hold her hand. This morning's crazy love liaison determinedly thrust into the back of her mind, she would return to the task of finding a husband.

Don sounded perfect on paper, a former classmate, she remembered him as the sweet, quiet type of guy, who was said to be a successful CPA. He'd just recently moved back home so there weren't any local entanglements to get in the way. A customer who was a friend of a friend had set up

this blind date and she only hoped it would meet with success. Anything to take her mind off Sundance, and refocus it on her goals.

Matt was only penciled in for a reason; she expected to have to erase him soon. He wasn't really marriage minded. As soon as he tired of the chase, he'd move on to his next conquest and drop her. The fact that the thought made her crazy was demoralizing. She'd been through tough times before; she just had to stay strong.

She heard Don's car pull into her driveway and grabbed her tote. The bell rang and she opened the door to see Don on her doorstep. He looked pretty much like she remembered from high school, only older. His brown hair was starting to recede, his light blue eyes were lined with crow's feet in his ultra-tanned face, but his smile was friendly. But it was his outfit that stopped her short, a checked sports jacket with pinstriped pants. She couldn't help staring; it was a designer's nightmare. Shorter than Matt, he was at her eye level. Great, now she'd taken to comparing others to Matt. *Get back in the game girl*, she told herself. "Hi."

"Ready to go, Mo?"

She tried not to cringe at the hated nickname. "I sure am." She locked her door and walked beside him to his SUV. When he reached for her elbow, she flinched away, gun-shy, but luckily, he didn't comment. She couldn't help noticing that he didn't open her door. Ever the liberated woman, she didn't comment, just tugged open her door and got in. "Where to?"

He turned to smile at her as he started the vehicle. "I was thinking dinner and a movie. How about Italian?"

"Sounds good to me, I love Italian."

* * * *

Matt stood at the bar at *Red's* waiting for his table's drink order, unable to think about anything but Monica out with another man. He was jealous; it was a revelation to him. Since when did "love them and leave them" him get hooked that bad? Since he'd met Monica, of course. It wasn't just jealousy, he felt a healthy dose of concern as well. He'd done some digging about this Don Ormond guy, and hadn't been able to dig up anything either. In a small town like Landis Falls, where everyone knows everyone else's business, that was saying something. He picked up the tray of beverages and carried it over to the table where Courtney, April and Will were eating pizza. He handed Courtney her diet cola, planning to stick like glue to her side as a way to keep tabs on Monica. It was his only way to make sure she was safe.

Someone passed him a piece of pizza, but he didn't touch it. Instead, he looked at the clock. Only quarter to eight. "Why don't you call her?" he said to Courtney.

"It's not time yet. Boy you've got it bad." Courtney said with a chuckle.

"Lay off," Will scolded, then turned to Matt asking, "So did you find out anything about the guy?"

"Zilch, not so much as a parking ticket."

Courtney nodded. "That's what Toni said."

"I don't like it." Matt frowned and looked at the clock.

"That's also what Toni said, but then she tends to shoot first and ask questions later."

* * * *

Monica picked at her lasagna as Don wolfed down his, then started in on his glass of Chianti. So far, their date had been as exciting as watching paint dry. Still, she owed it to him to get to know him better before she rejected him out

of hand. She put down her fork. "So tell me about your life, Don. We kind of lost touch since high school."

He set down his empty wine glass and gazed at her cleavage. "Not much to tell really. I got my MBA and joined an accounting firm, and then a few months ago, I decided to move back home."

She couldn't help noticing the way his gaze stayed locked on her breasts instead of her face and bristled. *You aren't getting any of this, pal, so put your googly eyes back in your head.* "So you never settled down with someone special," she said, making small talk and seeing his gaze dull. *Obviously, talk of love and marriage wasn't in his vocabulary. Time to move onto number two, fast.*

"Well, as a matter of fact, I've been married, but it didn't work out."

She was almost surprised to hear that a guy as icky as him had found someone to marry him. "Oh, sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, things were tough for a while, but they're better now that I'm living with my mother."

Now the mismatched clothes made sense, mom must be doing his laundry. Only a mom would pair checks and stripes. She tried not to cringe. "You moved back home with mom."

"Sure, it's perfect. She's got someone to fuss over and I don't have to hire a housekeeper. It works for me. If I want to get cozy with a woman, I go to her place."

Monica didn't miss his leer when he said *get cozy*. Repulsed, she frowned back at him but he didn't seem to notice because he was staring at her breasts. Did all men think her a slut? All but Matt, was the answer. Her phone rang, and she couldn't help noticing Don's irritated scowl as she fished it out of her tote bag. Bad form maybe, but it

could be her saving grace. "Sorry, this could be business related. I'll just take it in the foyer."

"Take your time, toots, I'm not going anywhere."

Wincing, she knew she was stuck with him as she slipped out of the dining room, flipped open her phone, and made tracks for the empty hostess section. "Hi."

"How goes it?" Courtney asked.

"Not very good," she murmured. But was she really giving him a fair chance? *What man could live up to Matt?* "But not that bad either."

"So you don't need me to send in the cavalry?"

Monica closed her eyes picturing her manhunter's club descending on them en masse. Don would move back in with mom and never come out. He might be icky, but she couldn't do that to him, even if he was dull as dishwater. "I don't think so. If he's hard to shake and I need to cut things short, I'll text-message you to ring me back, okay?"

"You sure about this? I can be there in five minutes."

"I'm sure, just because he isn't the man of my dreams doesn't mean I should be impolite." Listening to the jangle of a jukebox and a certain male voice in the background, Monica had a falling feeling. She sank into the nearest chair. "He's there, isn't he?"

"Yeah, were all here at *Red's* eating pizza. He's not trying to be a pest, he's just worried about you."

"And possessive, too," Monica murmured into the phone.

"That, too. You're not mad, are you?" she asked worried.

Monica sighed, clutching the phone tight. *Mad? Yes—also frustrated, bedazzled, and ready to tell Don to take a hike and climb through the phone to get to Matt.* "No, I know it's genuine."

"He's the real deal all right. I guess my big brother is hard to live up to, huh?"

What an understatement. "I'm afraid so." She was touched by the fact that he was trying to look out for her, even though it meant he didn't believe she could take care of herself. "Tell him not to worry, okay. Don might bore me to death, but he's perfectly harmless." She sighed, hung up, and made her way back to the table. Don set down a glass of wine at her approach.

"Is everything okay?"

"It's fine, just a question about inventory."

"Ready to go?" he asked, standing up.

"Sure," she said, her hopes lifting. Soon she'd be home, tucked into bed alone, and able to dream about Matt.

He took her elbow and weaved her toward the door.

"If you want to bag the movie and go check on things, I wouldn't mind, Mo. It'd give me a chance to check the place out. What I've heard sounds intriguing." He wagged his brow at her as he led her out into the parking lot.

She cringed at the thought, but thankfully, the valet pulled up with Don's SUV and she was spared the task of dousing his ardor. He went around to the driver's side door leaving her alone. She opened her own door and got in, grateful this date was almost over. "No thanks. In fact, I've got a headache. I'd like to go home."

He grinned and gunned the engine, taking off. "I get the message. Sure, toots, we'll go back to your place."

The aroma of stale wine wafted through the car as he spoke. How many glasses had he downed while she was on the phone? Too many if it gave him this much liquid courage. "I don't think you should drive."

"Bullshit. I'm fine," he grumbled, turning onto the highway.

She sat there in stunned silence as he turned from pathetic mamma's boy to abusive drunk driver. It was too late to stop him or leap out without hurting herself. She fished her cell phone out of her bag and pushed Courtney's number on speed dial.

"Hey," he snarled, taking a wild swipe at her phone but missing, "No cell phones in my car. I've got to think of my insurance, stupid broad."

She shrunk back, pulled her phone out of his line of sight, and hung up just as Courtney answered. "Okay. Now how about you pull over and let me drive?"

"Sorry," he said with a chuckle. "No broad drives my car, toots. But don't worry, I got something else you can drive later."

Eww! She eased over a little farther and keeping her cell phone hidden, sent out a text message. "Come on, Don, you're drunk, pull over and let me drive."

"No way, now you sound like my ex-wife." He swiveled his head to scowl at her, the car swerving. "I didn't think you'd be that kind of tight-assed bitch."

Monica gasped as the car skittered toward the ditch and reached for her mace. She had to stop him or he was going to kill somebody. Just then, a siren went off behind them and lights flashed. Her shoulders sagged with relief, *Toni to the rescue.*

"God damn it," Don grumbled as he straightened out the swerve and pulled to the shoulder of the road, stopping the vehicle. "Keep your mouth shut, woman, and I'll get us out of this."

She quickly unfastened her seatbelt preparing to bolt. No way would she spend another second in his obnoxious presence. She looked over her shoulder to see Dwain Carter bearing down on them. Six foot four of surly police

officer, he was no one to mess with. She almost felt sorry for Don. Almost. There was a tap on her window. She turned to see Toni hunkered down at her side, spiky red hair poking out from her police cap, and felt a vast sense of relief. She opened her door and bailed.

"You okay?" Toni asked.

"I am now." She squeezed Toni's hand.

"Hey, where ya going?" Don called out.

Dwain pinned them with a serious gaze over the hood of the car. "She okay, partner?"

Toni nodded.

Partner? Monica mouthed with surprise, and grinned when hard-edged Toni actually blushed.

Dwain looked back down at Don. "License and registration, sir."

"But I haven't done anything wrong, officer," Don whined. "Don't listen to the crazy broad, I'm not drunk."

"Come on," Toni urged her back to the squad car. "We don't need a front row seat for this."

Monica trailed after her feeling like an idiot for her bad taste in men, *except for Matt* a little voice in her head said. Two possible mates shot down in two days. She stood by Toni's side watching Don take a Breathalyzer test and wanted to scream. The past two days had been an emotional roller coaster. It was embarrassing as cars slowed to gawk. The radio started to squawk and Toni leaned in to answer it. She came out grimfaced a moment later, muttering, "He's got priors, with an alias from another state. Damn, why didn't I pick up on it?"

Monica watched her walk toward Dwain to tell him. She stepped back and a moment later, Don was sprawled over the hood of his car, and handcuffed.

Toni came back frowning. "He's being taken in for three DWIs in a year under another name, and he's got priors for being in nonsupport from out of state. It seems there are two ex-wives looking for him."

"Oh lord." It was even worse than she thought. "And number one bites the dust, another evening shot to hell."

Toni looked over her shoulder. "Maybe not."

Monica was startled by the amusement in her friend's voice; there was nothing remotely funny about this disaster. She turned to look and groaned. Matt was striding their way, with a pissed off glint in his eyes. He glared at Don as he was placed in the back of the squad car and then his concerned gaze fell on her.

"What did the dirt bag do to you? I'll kill him."

"Settle down, boy, he's being taken in for DWI and resisting arrest. You're welcome." Toni walked to the passenger side of the patrol car.

Chapter 7

Matt tried to keep his cool. He hadn't really planned to interfere with her date, just keep tabs on her through Courtney to make sure she was okay. Recalling Monica's cut-off call and then her panicked text message caused his blood to run cold, things had gone dangerously sour. Now seeing her standing, trembling on the side of the road, her arms wrapped protectively around herself, it was all he could do not to wrap her up in cotton wool and drive her back to his place. Instead, he tried to read Monica's gloomy expression. She was angry, but maybe not with him. The fact that she wasn't chewing him out gave him hope. "It looks like your first date is over."

"Yeah, we never even got to the movies, and number one is toast. It looks like the manhunt system needs revamping." She shrugged, then cast a lingering look his way. "On the plus side, you keep coming to my rescue, Sundance."

He felt like laughing when she actually smiled at him. Tension rolled off him as he stepped closer. "Hey, at least I'm good for something." He held his breath when she casually linked her arm with his, sending raw heat clear through him.

"You're good for lots of things."

He tugged her close to his side as a wrecker pulled away with Don's SUV. Her lush body pressed against his

hardening one made it hard for him to think, but he forced himself to focus. Clearing his throat, he offered, "Still want to go to the show? I'll take you."

"Actually, I've got a better idea," she murmured.

"And what's that?" he asked, gazing into her sultry eyes as her soft hand ran up his bare forearm. He watched the corners of her sexy mouth kick up in a playful grin and wanted to shout out his delight.

She licked her lip. "Well, we never did make it to bed this morning."

Heart racing, he nodded. He could hardly believe his dumb luck, but he wasn't going to question it. There had to be a wild angel looking after him to put her in his bed after this mess. "You're right, darlin'. Let's go." Taking her arm, he hurried Monica toward his truck asking, "My place, or yours?"

Monica rushed to keep up with Matt as he took her on a dead run to his pickup truck. She couldn't help being a bit surprised by his haste. Didn't he know how irresistible she found him? She was bonkers about him and even more now that he'd come to her rescue again. She'd known he was with Courtney tonight and knew he'd eventually find out about this debacle, but she hadn't actually figured on him swooping in to save her. "Which is closer?" she asked as he jerked open her truck door.

"Yours. I have a ranch out in the country."

The disclosure didn't surprise her; he was a cowboy. "Then let's go to my place," she said, starting to clamber inside. She let out a startled gasp when he picked her up by the waist and all but plopped her onto the bench seat, giving a whole new meaning to pickup. She giggled, earning a frown from him as he pushed her door shut. She watched him sprint around to the driver's side, the streetlight

highlighting his handsome face and his fluid strength as he moved.

Ogling him in admiration, she started heating up as he climbed in, gunned the engine, and drove them toward her place. Now that she had him at her side, there was no question about her holding on tight for the night. She wouldn't have the strength to let go.

Her senses were on high alert. She could actually feel the charged particles between them as she took in a deep breath of his musky all male scent and inched closer. Her hands itched to start stripping the shirt off him now. She tucked them under her legs to make them behave. Making love in her bed, now that had possibilities. They pulled into the parking space in front of her house and she stopped fantasizing. Time for the real thing, and at least for tonight, she had her Sundance. Her hands trembled as she unfastened her seat belt. Matt was already out of the pickup and had her door open as she turned toward him.

"This way to paradise, darlin'," he said, tugging her out of the vehicle.

Monica gasped as he slowly lowered her to the ground, letting her body slide down his until she was standing on wobbling heels. She slumped against him, getting wet in anticipation. Matt's nearness was making her crazy, needy, in love. Scratch that; she wouldn't think in terms of love. Pushing away before she did something crazy like strip him naked in the parking lot, she focused on pulling her keys out of her bag, making them clink because she was trembling.

"Let me." Matt's hand covered hers.

She gasped when she felt his big hand envelope hers. He took the keys out of her hand, and then brought her hand to his mouth to press a kiss to her palm. Monica

melted, getting wetter. Holding her hand, he walked her up to her front door, and quickly unlocked it.

He turned to give her back her keys, but she ignored them, kissing him instead. Matt let out a groan, leaning against her doorframe and adopting a wide stance so that she could step between his legs. Pressing against him, she deepened the kiss, her body on fire for him. She rubbed her tingling nipples against him, sighing with pleasure while he growled. Oh yeah, he had what it took to satisfy, and turn her love life around.

She half-pushed, half-urged him over the threshold, and he let out a sexy chuckle that made her kind of crazy. The fact that she couldn't hide her sexuality from him didn't bother her. Matt kicked shut the door and she pressed against him, scattering kisses over his face. Things were fast moving out of control, and for once in her life, she didn't mind a bit. Matt's arms were around her, his big hands stroking her back, cupping her ass, as he pulled her tight to his erection, letting her feel how involved he truly was.

Ablaze, she pressed kisses against his neck, his chin, feeling his body grow even harder against hers as his burgeoning cock pushed against her. He was just as turned on. Snuggling tighter, she sucked on his neck, hearing Matt's breathing grow ragged.

"Which way to the bedroom, darlin'?"

She sort of waved her hand in a direction, feeling dizzy with desire. A moment later, he scooped her up in his strong arms, which made her even dizzier. It all seemed like a wild erotic dream and she reached out to pinch him to make sure he was real.

"Hey," he said with a chuckle.

She stopped pinching and smiled up at him memorizing his face. It wasn't every day a girl got swept off her feet by a sex god. "Just checking to make sure you're real, Sundance."

"I'll prove it to you," he said, striding into her bedroom.

Still in his arms, Monica looked around her bedroom dazzled to have Matt in it. She glanced at her double bed, was he too tall? "Do you think you'll fit?"

"Like a glove." He set her on her feet with a kiss.

She didn't need to hear more. She shrugged her cashmere cardigan off and then pulled off her shell. His warm eyes eating her up emboldened her. She reached back to unzip her skirt and let it drop to the floor with a thump. Suddenly she stood there in only her bra, panties and high heels. She was so glad she'd opted for the burgundy satin when his appreciative glance swept over her. She stood there for a few seconds surveying her prize. Just looking at him made her heart beat faster.

He cocked at grin. "I await your pleasure, my Lady."

She prowled over to him, hearing his amused tone but it didn't put her off. It was time to take charge. Stepping into his personal space, anticipation surged through her. Her pussy was quivering, her nipples were tingling, and he hadn't even touched her yet. There was some kind of strange magic about him. She reached up to unbutton his shirt, her eyes met his, and she promptly got lost in their hypnotic blue depths. Forcing herself to slow down, she insisted, "I want you, Matthew, but under my conditions."

"Of course."

His instant capitulation wasn't convincing, especially considering the huge bulge in his pants and the heated look in his eyes. She knew he was patronizing her, but she was

too needy to stop. "Just so you understand." Tugging off his shirt with trembling hands, she leaned forward to nibble on his neck. His body jerked and he let out a low groan the instant her lips touched him.

"Whatever you say, lady."

Satisfied, she reached down to unzip his jeans. His cock sprang out into her hands. He was already hard and huge, and she couldn't resist giving him a little squeeze. He groaned and surged into her hands, like hot, velvet-covered steel. Just as overcome, she licked her lips. He was going commando again and she idly wondered if she could break him of it. For a lingerie designer to go with a guy who spurned underwear... "Really Shepard, don't you ever wear underwear?"

Chuckling dryly, he arched his hips, thrusting himself firmly into her hands. "Do you mind?"

"Not really." She was forced to admit it, as she felt his power. "Maybe I should design a men's line," she mused out loud, giving him another little squeeze.

He bit back a groan, saying, "Babe, if you ever need a model to measure for them, I'm your man."

"I might just hold you to that," she said with a smile. Holding the full length of his hot cock in her hand was enough to make her reach for her Good Head Gel. But then he distracted her by deftly unhooking her bra. Startled by the quick movement, she realized she wasn't completely in charge after all. A smart woman who stuck to her guns would object. After all, hadn't he just agreed to let her set the pace? Instead, she looked into his eyes and melted. She let the bra slip off, and tossed it on the floor, feeling sexy as he just stood and gazed at her for a long moment. Her nipples hardened before his very eyes and she arched toward him like a flower to the sun. They needed his

attention; she needed his attention, bad. She let out a needy whimper. "Please."

"Oh, darlin', I will," he murmured, his work-roughened fingers came up to shape and roll her sensitive nipples, tugging on them, lengthening them.

Monica closed her eyes in bliss as she leaned toward him, thrusting them out for his loving attention.

"Got anymore of the strawberry gel?"

Her eyes popped open at the unexpected question. "In my bag."

He picked up the bag from the floor and rifled through it, frowning at the planner, before pulling out the half-empty tube.

Her mouth watered in anticipation. Did he want her to go down on him again? The question was answered a moment later when he opened the tube and squeezed a dollop on her right nipple. She whimpered at the horny cold-hot feeling, then he bent to take her budded nipple into his mouth. She let out a cry as he drew her tingling strawberry peak hard into his hot mouth. Her knees went weak as she leaned against him.

Matt pressed her back against the armoire, thrust his thigh against her pussy to hold her up, and kept on sucking. Monica ground her panty-clad pussy against his hard leg, her eyes rolling back in her head at the exquisite twin sensations. He kept drawing harder on her nipple sucking and nipping, his rough tongue laving the tortured peak. From seemingly out of nowhere she felt a dollop of cold gel on her other nipple.

She let out a helpless whimper when he gave her beaded nipple a good-bye kiss and moved on to the right. She stiffened in anticipation, so on fire, she didn't know if she could handle it. Her pussy was throbbing, quivering

against his thigh, as her abdomen tightened with need. Her gel-covered nipple burned with ice as she waited for what felt like forever for him to take it in his mouth. Instead, he blew on it. "Oh," she cried as a heat wave drew it tighter, and then his mouth closed over it. Shivering, grinding against him as little mewling noises poured out of her mouth at the double arousal, empty spasms fluttered through her pussy. She stiffened, crying out as she came, and came, and came.

Moments later, Matt released her nipple with a little kiss on its tip.

Monica sagged against him spent, but not really satisfied as he held her. She closed her eyes, comforted by his strong arms. He held her tight for a few moments, then picked her up like she weighed no more than a limp rag doll. Monica wrapped herself around him, her arms around his neck, her legs wrapped around his waist, as her high heels dropped off one by one. The moment her open pussy pressed against his washboard abs, the tingling of arousal returned, and she realized this wasn't over by a long shot.

Matt's hands, cupping her ass, squeezed and she let out a little giggle.

"Are you fixing to ride me, cowboy?"

"What do you think?" Matt asked, holding her in a secure grip as he carried her to the bed. He gently laid her down, then quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes, his eyes never leaving hers.

Monica lay still on the bed watching him. Neither one of them could look away. It was as if they did, it might all disappear. He came back to the bed, his hot gaze making her burn, as he reached for her burgundy satin panties. She arched her hips off the bed as he started to slowly peel them down, feeling like a virgin sacrifice, even though she was no

innocent. Everything was new with Matthew, even the simple business of getting naked. When she was bare to his gaze, she lay exposed, basking in his obvious delight. It felt so right to have this man think she was special.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

Knowing he meant the words opened up a piece of her heart she’d kept guarded. She watched him pick up the Good Head Gel and trembled. No more nipple play, it felt good but she needed him inside her now. “Oh, please.”

His mouth kicked up in a knowing grin. Instead of aiming for her nipples, he squeezed a line of gel onto her bare pussy, putting an extra dollop on her swollen clit. Panting, Monica let out a little screech of surprise. So Good Head could be just as useful on women. It was a good promotional tip, but then all thoughts of business flew away when Matt knelt between her quivering thighs and flicked a long stroke of his rough tongue up her pussy. With a cry of delight, she arched toward that tantalizing tongue. Trembling, she lost count of the teasing strokes of his tongue. He sucked the swollen nubbin of her clit into his hot mouth. Her eyes rolled back in her head, as her pussy began to contract. “Oh yes, yes, yes!” she screamed as she came.

With a growl, he surged up her trembling body and thrust his stiff cock into her contracting pussy, simultaneously claiming her mouth with a kiss. She tasted her essence, strawberries, and him all at the same time and was hit with sensory overload. He pulled almost out of her and slammed back in to the hilt. She was ready for the sensual assault, needed it, as she snapped her hips up to meet his fevered thrusts. Kissing, loving, she felt like one big erogenous zone as her clit rubbed against his rock-hard shaft.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, trapping him to her as her body shook. Deep spasms tugged him deeper inside her as her pleasure peaked. Waves of orgasm exploded and she saw stars behind her closed eyelids. He thrust into her once more and went still, pouring out his tribute.

He rolled them over so that her limp body lay atop his and she was astride him.

Monica sighed with completion as his big hands stroked her back. Wrapped around him, she felt like she wanted to stay that way forever. A few moments later, she felt him stirring again. She looked at him surprised. "Again?"

He chuckled and picked up her bunny from the nightstand. "Look what I found."

She smiled, looking at it in his hand as he switched it on. "Just what do you think you're going to do with that?"

"How about this." He brushed it teasingly across her left nipple.

Monica cried out at the pleasure, arching her hips against him. Heavens that felt good! He moved on to the other peak, teasing it. She was trembling, moaning, when he slipped it down to buzz her clit. She lifted up a tiny bit to give him access. He kept thrusting his cock up into her and buzzing her clit, sending sparks of desire through her. "You are amazing."

He groaned, thrusting deeper. "That's it, darlin', take me."

She gasped. Her swollen clit pressed against the vibrator while his cock stretched her pussy as she sat up, impaled on his once more hard cock. Starting slow, and increasing in speed, until she was trembling, contracting around him, he made love to her. He was so big and deep

inside her. Her head fell back and she moaned, ripples of pleasure fluttered through her and she started to come.

He simultaneously grasped her hip tight with one hand, driving her down to take him completely, while pressing the vibrator to her quivering anus. She screamed, coming harder, feeling surrounded by him, taken at all sides. Matt grasped her hips, holding her tight as he thrust deep into her again and again. Monica sobbed with release as she met his fierce thrusts. Rippling spasms rocked her pussy and ass, little explosions going off deep inside her as she came like she'd never come before. Now she knew why people indulged in anal sex and she'd only had a taste of it. Clinging to him, she convulsed, all thought vanishing as her orgasm pulled him deeper, tugging at his cock as she cried out. Matt held her against him thrusting high inside, and exploding with a growl of delight.

"My darlin'," he growled.

Monica felt warmed by the claim of possession, even though it went against her rules. Bathed in the afterglow, she sprawled on top of his hard, muscular chest listening to his thundering heartbeat slow. She lifted her head and smiled at him.

"That was—"

"Amazing," she completed, cuddling close to him.

"Amazing fits, I was going to say crazy hot."

"That too. I think you found a way to spice up the bunny experience."

Chuckling, he held her tight.

Reveling in the warm feeling, she thought how right it felt to be in his arms. "This is nice."

"Just about perfect, but..."

"But what?" she asked, wrinkling her nose against his resilient chest. He was growing tense; she could feel his muscles stiffening against her cheek.

"You don't seem to agree," Matt said.

His suddenly reserved tone disturbed her almost as much as his words. Just what was he getting at? "I never said that," Monica murmured.

"Then you do consider me more than a one-night stand?"

The question shocked her and made her try to sit up in bed, but he kept hold of her. It was gentle, but it was still a restraint. The time had come for her to reluctantly reassert her independence. But then his warm hand stroked her back, soothing her, and she snuggled close to him. He was feeling insecure, she could relate. "Of course you're more than a one-night stand."

"Then we're officially..."

"Dating," she cut in before he could press her for more than she was willing to give.

"And the manhunt?"

Monica placed a kiss above his nipple, which budded on the contact. "I have a date tomorrow night." She waited for any objection. None came but there was a slight hesitation in her backrub.

"Okay. I can handle a little competition. I just want a place in your life."

Monica smiled, feeling a vast sense of relief. It was all working out. She'd have her hunk, as long as he chose to stay with her, and her manhunt. "Okay, I guess I can handle dating, as long as there are no strings attached."

Chapter 8

The next night, Monica sat next to Ed Flanagan on a blanket in the park at the city's band concert, bored to tears. At least the band kept them from carrying on a stilted one-sided conversation on auto mechanics, which happened to be Ed's passion as well as his profession. Number two was no doubt sorry he'd asked her out, and the feeling was mutual. It wasn't his fault; she simply couldn't keep her mind on him. She was too busy thinking about Matt, who she hadn't seen since he'd left her bed with a morning kiss.

What was he doing tonight? He'd said something about a business dinner and she couldn't help but wonder who he was with and where. What if he met some woman who put the moves on him? He was under no requirement to be faithful to her. After all, she was out with another man, even though nothing intimate would ever happen between Ed and her. She was the one that'd insisted on no strings attached, and now it was coming back to haunt her.

Ed applauded at the end of the music and it roused her out of her musings. They were almost as dark as the scudding clouds above. She shivered as the wind picked up and pulled her wrap snug around her shoulders. It looked like rain coming in. Sitting under an oak tree in the middle of an oncoming thunderstorm might be tempting fate. Fortunately, the concert was ending. Ed got to his feet and politely extended a hand to help her up.

As she stood, a flash of movement across the street caught her eye. Matt, dressed in faded jeans and leather jacket walked out of a café with a pretty redhead on his arm. Monica's heart sank as she watched Chandra Ellison cling to his side, laughing at something he'd said. Jealousy and despair surged through her, as she watched the pretty massage therapist, a frequent shopper at *Spice*, seem to hang on his every word. Matt smiled back at Chandra as he handed her a key. Watching the key change hands, Monica stood rooted to the spot as pain turned to outrage. All his sweet talk about wanting to be on the manhunt had been just that.

"Are you feeling okay, Monica? You look kind of green about the gills." Ed asked, looking at her curiously.

Monica watched Matt go still, and then spin to look in their direction. He frowned back at them, Chandra still at his side. Monica couldn't find her voice, couldn't seem to move as her heart shattered. She should confront him, have it out, and get it over with. A quick break was easiest, but something told her it wouldn't ever be easy with him. Just as she made her mind up to move, Matt strode toward her towing Chandra in his wake saying, "Ed, hold up a minute."

Ed let go of Monica's arm and turned to look at Matt. "Hey, Shepard, long time no see. How's it going? When you going to bring that sweet truck of yours in for a tune-up? I been dying to get my hands on her."

"How about next week?" Matt said, then turned his focus on Monica. "Darlin', I wasn't expecting to run into you here."

"Obviously not," she said, cutting a pointed look to Chandra, still clinging to Matt's arm. "It looks like we both got caught with our hands in the cooking jar." She watched his scowl deepen and wondered about it. Why the offended

look? He'd been caught red-handed, or had he? Was it possible that Chandra was his business dinner? She'd heard something about Chandra building a new spa. Confused, she tried to ignore Chandra's amused glance, but it wasn't easy. Jealousy sucked.

"Maybe one of us did, but it wouldn't be me." He tugged Chandra forward. "Meet my business dinner companion, Chandra Ellison. *Ace Builders* just finished construction on *Essence Day Spa*."

"We know each other," Chandra cut in. "Did you ever get that new shipment of teddies in, honey?"

Face flushing, Monica managed to nod awkwardly. "Sure, stop by next week and they'll be there."

"Great," Chandra said before turning to say to Matt, "Well, stud, thanks for the key. Now that we've concluded our business I think I'll be on my way." She dangled the shiny gold key from her finger. "One week early and under budget. You do good work, boyfriend." She reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek.

Monica stood there burning with chagrin and embarrassment. It was a business dinner, but the woman's familiarity still bugged her. Matt, for his part seemed unperturbed, like having women throw themselves at him was normal. Sighing, she decided that it was. He was every woman's wet dream. When they parted company, she couldn't help musing that maybe it was time to table her manhunt and play this one out.

* * * *

Matt walked up to *Spice* after five the next evening feeling tense. On the plus side, he hadn't made an ass of himself last night when he'd spied Ed holding Monica's hand. Also, he'd gotten a reaction out of Monica that told him he actually meant more to her than a casual lay. Best of

all, he'd kept his word to let her carry out her manhunt. He hadn't acted on his urge to follow her home and make love to her until she couldn't even look at another man.

Unfortunately, he hadn't expected to bump into Monica with Chandra at his side. After banging off a work list of nit-picky items she'd vacillated on for weeks, he was relieved to be finally rid of her. She might be a childhood friend, but as a client, she was a royal pain.

It was after eight, and the closed sign was hanging in the window, so he and Monica could shop for party favors for the couple's shower. He tapped on the back door and waited what felt like an eternity for her to let him in. He was more than anxious to see her. Would she be angry? He'd unintentionally showed her that two could play the field, but it might just come back to bite him in the ass. He'd know in about two seconds as he heard her high heels clicking toward the door.

His gut tightened as he waited while she undid the lock and pulled open the door. Monica stood on the other side looking good enough to eat. She was nervous, he could tell by the stiff set of her shoulders, but at least she wasn't throwing things at him. He stepped over the threshold, and she stepped back, keeping space between them. "Evening, darlin'."

"Hello."

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"No."

He watched her nervously lick her lips, and closed the distance between them. There was one sure way to knock down the wall of reserve between them. He bent to kiss her, and she let out a sigh of surrender. Matt deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping inside her mouth to taste her sweetness as he pulled her closer, molding her luscious

curves to his body. His manhood sprang into action, swelling as she pressed against him with a sigh. Groaning, he knew just how needy she felt, as each motion sent a jolt through his cock.

He pulled back before he took her then and there on the doorstep, and really screwed things up. Urging her inside, he shut the door behind him and locked it. It seemed to break her out of her sensual fever, she stepped back giving herself breathing room again. He hated it, but he didn't comment. "She really was a client. For Pete's sake, Chandra and I went to kindergarten together. She is not now, nor has she ever been, my lover. We used to play at boyfriend-girlfriend, that's all her silly comment meant."

Monica felt her last bit of tension dissolve at the disclosure. She smiled ruefully, taking in his resolute expression. It felt good to have a man she could count on. "I kind of figured that, but it's good to hear you say it. I'm sorry I overreacted."

He shrugged. "I'm not, if it helped settle things between us."

It had, and she was glad of it herself. "Ready to shop?" she asked, stepping up to the counter.

He picked up a handbasket from the stack next to the counter. "Lead me to it."

His enthusiasm bolstered hers. It was time to plan a smashing party. She picked up a few notes she'd made. "I think we should have a theme for the couple's shower, so I came up with a few, but I'd like your opinion."

"What are they?"

She handed him the list. "My top three are tropic knights, evening in Paris, and fantasy island."

He grinned. "Definitely fantasy island." He smiled at her. "I can think of a few I'd like to try."

“Down, boy,” she said, dreaming up a few of her own she’d like to try as she gazed at him amidst her bevy of sexual toys, but that would have to come later. They were still on, her heart was brimming with joy at the realization. Even if it was temporary, it was earthshaking. Not wanting to jinx it, she managed to say calmly, “We can shop for us later.” She watched him go still and rake her with an intense gaze like her capitulation really got to him.

His smile kicked up. “We can?”

She met his gaze with a steady and warm one of her own and came to a decision; manhunt or not, it was time to play this one out. “Yes. I’ve decided to give us a chance and put my manhunt on hold, that is, if you still want to.”

“Want to,” he said, tugging her into his arms.

Monica tumbled into his arms, feeling his growing cock hard against her, his heart beating faster as he hugged her. She felt exactly the same way she decided, melting against him, holding on for the ride.

Matt’s hot lips nuzzled her neck as he whispered, “I’m the only man you need, darlin’.”

Monica shivered, wrapping her arms around him, she had to agree. Just as she was heating up, he gently pushed her away, setting her back on her heels.

“Let’s get the party shopping out of the way so we can concentrate on us,” he said.

Party shopping? How could she concentrate on party shopping when she wanted to tumble him onto the floor and try the Sex Tart’s Gel on him?

He picked up a trivia game. “Hey, how about this for starters?”

She sighed, refocusing on the task at hand. “Good choice.” As she followed him down the aisle, her frustrated gaze locked on his tight buns. The man had a killer ass. At

that moment, he turned, caught her staring, and grinned. She had the grace to blush. Ogling the man wouldn't get the job done, but damn it was fun. She glanced from him to the bunnies, remembering when he'd pleased her with one.

Noting the direction of her stare, he shook his head and smiled. "No bunnies, please."

She grinned back at him, loving the fact that they were so attuned to each other's thoughts. "Right. I don't think all men are as confident as you. They might cause performance anxiety."

She led the way to a worktable in the back of the room and worked with Matt to fill gift bags with lubes, lotions, bubble bath, and multicolored party favors. Along with silk leis to bolster the fantasy island theme, they'd have the makings of a spicy couple's shower.

"Now it's our turn." Matt picked up another basket and thrust it at her. "Fill it up, darlin'. Anything you've ever wanted to try."

Monica couldn't help blushing. She'd never actually shopped for herself with a man at her side. And what a hunky man he was. The hot look in his blue eyes gave her confidence. She walked toward the front of the store, already picturing the lingerie she wanted to buy, but first the goodies. She picked up *Strip Chocolate* and saw him smile. He grinned, and tossed *52 Weeks of Naughty Nights* into the basket.

She chuckled, at least she knew what they'd be doing for the next fifty-two days. Or maybe they could accelerate it, and do it twice a day for twenty-six days. She picked up the *Karma Sutra Bedside Box* and added it to the package. Her eyes lingered on *Sweet Surrender* and she hesitated. It was a bit kinky. Would he think her a kook for finding it racy? A

furtive glance at him told her he noticed the direction of her stare. She saw sweat break out on his forehead as his mouth kicked up in a sexy grin.

He grabbed it and added it to the mix. "This is a big yes."

She smiled, her guard down. "So you want to tie your cowgirl up, do you?"

"I think I've got just the lasso to do it." He arched a brow, backing her against the counter as he took the basket out of her hand. "And tan your backside too, if you sass me."

She laughed, getting into the role-play. Instead, he stepped away and headed toward the lingerie. He walked past the satin and silk undies, to white lace and soft cotton. "This I like." He picked up the bra and panties along with stockings and garter belt. A quick look told her he guessed her sizes correctly. The man obviously had a keen eye for figures. Smiling, she pulled out one of her largest shopping bags. They'd made quite a haul and were going to have some fun. "Okay, big boy, let's bag this loot up."

"Sure, as soon as you ring it up." He handed her an item.

Even though his tone was light, she recoiled from the words. The idea of him paying her for their pleasure toys didn't sit right with her. It hit a little too close to what some sanctimonious folks called her when she decided to go into this business. She made an effort not to freeze up, but she knew he noticed her reaction by his frown. "No thanks. Consider it market research, and free samples."

He shook his head. "Nothing's free in this life, babe. I pay for what I want."

Surprised by his stubborn reaction, she stood her ground unwilling to back down. "Well, I'm not for sale."

She watched his whole body tense at the hasty remark, and wanted to call it back, but it was too late.

A nerve ticked in his jaw as he resolutely kept piling their purchases on the counter for her to ring up. Placing the *Sweet Surrender* kit on the counter, he fingered the whip, cutting her a direct gaze. "I really could tan your ass for that."

Her body heated up at the flash of fire in his eyes. She could almost feel the leather strands heating her bottom. He was just dominant enough to do it. She hadn't meant to insult him with her refusal, but it seemed that she had. Simmering down, she recognized the concern behind his anger. Was she being just as unreasonable? "I'm sorry, Matt. I guess I'm just a little sensitive on the subject."

He laid the last item on the counter and gave her a curious glance. "Why?"

"Whore was my former husband's favorite nasty name for me." The shock on Matt's face as she said it did a lot to soothe her fears.

He took a step forward. "Oh, babe, I'm sorry."

He meant it; she could feel it as he stepped closer. Still, she wasn't quite ready to fall into his arms until he understood. She inched back and saw him frown in reaction. "Don't be. It taught me to stand up for myself."

"Want me to go punch out the bastard?"

The offer actually meant a lot. "That'd be kind of hard to do seeing that he's in prison." She couldn't quite meet his gaze as he stared back at her in shock. *Smooth, Monica, that's the way to scare a potential lover off. Just tell him you've got a scamming ex in jail.* She wasn't a criminal, had done nothing wrong, but she still was muddled by the same waters, not to mention Gary's constant threats and nuisance lawsuits. A mail order course in paralegal, combined with boredom and

Gary's crooked personality, meant continued trouble. "If you want to leave, I'll understand."

He closed the distance between them, his eyes narrowed. "Now I really ought to paddle your ass. Why would you assume something so idiotic?"

"It's happened before. Having an ex who's a jailbird can cool a girl's social life, in addition to being bad for business." Also, being scammed sucked, but she wasn't going to lay any more of her troubles on Matt's broad shoulders.

"Come here, you." He pulled her into his arms.

Monica wrapped her arms around him, seeking solace and more. As his mouth brushed across her trembling lips, she let go of the painful memories forever. Matt's passion, his taste as his tongue surged into her mouth mating with her, made her weak in the knees. Leaning into him, she kissed him back, her fingers running through his hair.

He picked her up, still kissing her, and carried her to the chaise lounge in the corner. Monica sighed, letting him take control, as he sank onto the chaise with her in his lap. In the shadows, she shivered with delight as he slowly peeled down the zipper of her dress. She shrugged the straps off her shoulders, and it fell. Now this was what she needed—craved.

He cupped her breast in her silk bra. "Perfect," he whispered, bending to kiss her, while his other hand slipped between her legs to stroke her through her panties.

Monica sighed with pleasure, leaning into his touch as he caressed her until she came, her pussy shuddering with ripples. Lying against him, breathing hard, she slowly drifted back to earth. Matt's cock was rock-hard under her bottom, making her a little crazy as she wriggled against him. Groaning, he continued to gently play with her.

She slipped off his lap, ignoring his growl of disapproval. She was just too damned hungry to wait for him to set the pace, besides; two could play the teasing game. Her dress fell to the floor as she stood trembling with need in front of him. Matt sat back in the chaise, raking her with the possessive look of a lover. It only made her tremble more, but she stepped out of the puddle of her dress to seduce him. Funny how after all they'd shared she could feel shy in her undies, but she did.

Matt reached out to stroke her bare abdomen. "You're beautiful, darlin'."

She shivered with heat. "You, too." He laughed with delight at her comment and she reveled in the sexy sound. Bidden by the need to turn him on, she reached behind her and unhooked her bra, then slowly let it slip off her body. He growled low in his throat, thrilling her. When he turned her around, his hand ran over her bare ass, work rough and hot. She shivered, moaning in reaction.

Matt stood, stepping close behind her, the bulge of his crotch pressed tight to her ass as he cupped her breasts with his big hands. She moaned, feeling what he had in store for her. She trembled, leaning into his hot hands, finding it incredibly erotic. And then one of his hands drifted up to play with her breasts while the other slipped into her thong and found her clit. Her knees wobbled, and she pressed back against his hard body, moaning.

He slipped her panties off her, then gently lowered them both to the floor on their hands and knees, one hand still cupping her sex. Moaning, her stiff clit tingling as he stroked it with one finger, she heard his zipper come down. Her sex weeping, sopping wet for him, his hard cock butted against the entry to her pussy and then thrust inside. Monica wailed, pushing back to meet his stroke. He set a faster

pace, gripping her hips, filling her to the hilt, deeper and harder until skyrockets were going off behind her closed eyes. Moaning his name, her pussy tightened as waves of orgasm swept through her. She was pulling him inside her, milking him with her orgasm. He growled, surging, coming deep inside her.

“You’re mine, the past doesn’t matter.”

Chapter 9

Monica placed gift bags on a corner table in Matt's home. It was her first glimpse of his home and she was impressed. She'd half expected him to live in a rustic log home like Will's. Instead, Matt's place was a modern ranch design set in a forest by the lake, complete with a barn and paddock. It was so him, she itched to explore every inch, but that would have to come later. Right now, they had a couple's shower to host.

She glanced out at him as he lit tiki torches in the yard surrounding his flagstone terrace, growing flushed with anticipation. It was true; she just couldn't get enough of Matt Shepard. It was as if she was afraid her dream man might vaporize in a puff of smoke if she looked away. She still couldn't quite believe she'd given so much of her heart to him so fast, but it felt right. Her disastrous first marriage was at the root of her fears and she was determined to move past them. Luckily, Matt was pretty much an open book and she had nothing to fear on that account.

With the food and drink in readiness, they were seeing to the final details. His parents were coming, which gave her a little pause. Matt's mom was a dear, actually shopping at *Spice* for lingerie from time to time, and his dad was nice, but how would they feel about her dating their son? Dating, heck, she'd all but moved in yesterday, what with Matt surprising her by setting up a workroom for her in his den.

When she started to object, he'd countered it by saying it was more efficient now that she was designing her men's line around him. She'd been just bemused enough to let herself be sold that bill of goods. On the plus side, she took it as a sign that he wanted to continue their affair. Time would tell what the future would bring, and she'd just have to brazen it out like she did everything else in life.

Matt came inside and strolled her way, smiling that sultry smile that turned her knees to rubber. Her body responded, growing wet and tingly. Not now, she told herself, trying to get a grip on her overstimulated senses.

"Happy, darlin'?" he asked, walking up to her.

Nodding, she went into his arms with a happy but needy sigh. "Very. How about you? I was afraid this hen party might be dull for you guys."

He chuckled. "Not with you around."

She gazed around the room, satisfied. The fantasy island theme was complete with fresh flower leis for April and Will, tiki torches, loads of exotic blooms, and frosty tropical drinks Matt had set up outside on the patio bar. She smiled against his shoulder, appreciating his confidence in her. "Did I tell you I like your house?"

"Do you now?" He hugged her tighter. "I'm glad to hear you say that seeing that you're acting as hostess here."

Acting! The word bit at her even though she knew he didn't mean it that way. They were playing house and they both knew it. Matt hadn't even mentioned her manhunt lately, not that she wanted to bring it up. She wanted to extend the fantasy a little bit longer. As she stood in the shelter of his arms, the doorbell rang. Monica let out a sigh, bracing for the evening to come.

He let her go. "That must be April and Will."

The walked arm in arm to the door, and when Matt disengaged, she noticed, but didn't say anything. It proved that he was still commitment phobic. She opened the door to April and Will. "Aloha," she said, draping a lei around April's neck.

"It's gorgeous," April said, exclaiming over the fresh orchid lei.

"And so are you, babe." Will indulgently beamed down at her.

"Thanks, honey." April reached up on tiptoes to kiss him.

Monica and Matt exchanged amused glances. She couldn't help being a wee bit envious of their casual manner. Would she and Matt ever be that free and easy with each other? His brooding made her wonder if he was thinking along the same lines.

"Come on in, you two," Monica said to break the tension.

April and Will broke their kiss and came in.

"You get lei-ed too," Matt said, handing Will a matching lei.

April giggled, blushing. Will rolled his eyes before putting on the flower lei. "Leave it to my kid brother to put things in perspective."

April and Monica hugged, while Matt and Will exchanged greetings.

"How's it going?" April whispered.

"Fine," Monica said with a smile. She knew that April had an inkling about their love affair, even though she'd denied it at the manhunter's meeting. Frankly, she didn't feel up to discussing it yet. "I'm glad you're here early, the other guests should be here soon."

April looked around the great room and the patio beyond. "Great job, Monica. I love the decor. Everything looks beautiful."

"Hey, how about a little praise for the brute labor?" Matt said with a smile.

"How could I forget my future brother-in-law?" She hugged him. "Thanks."

"Hey, don't put the moves on my girl," Will joked.

"Wouldn't think of it," he said, pulling back. "Besides I've got one of my own." He looped his arm around Monica's waist.

Monica fell against him, startled. Maybe he wasn't as commitment phobic as she'd assumed. Now she was the one who felt conspicuously on display. Funny thing was, she didn't mind.

* * * *

An hour later, Matt was behind the bar he'd set up on the patio mixing drinks while the guests mingled. From the social chatter, he could tell that everyone was having a great time. Monica stood in the midst of it all like a tall, voluptuous traffic cop. She took the role of hostess well, so well he couldn't picture the place without her.

Will wandered up to the bar. "Hey, bro, need a hand?"

"You could salt the rims of the glasses for the next batch of margaritas."

"Sure thing," Will said, setting to work. "You and Monica seem to be getting serious."

Matt shrugged, he wished. Now he just had to convince her. "One of us might be more serious than the other," he murmured.

Will stopped salting the glasses and slanted a serious glance his way. "You might want to tread carefully, boy. Monica's been burned before and she's wary."

"Believe me, I know it." What did his brother know that he didn't? "Care to tell me exactly what happened?"

"She had an ex who was a real prick."

"This I already know. Too bad he's where I can't reach him."

Will gave him a grim smile of agreement. "I think you'd have to stand in line. She's been studying martial arts for two years. She'd kick his ass for sure."

Matt chuckled, as he cast a warm look Monica's way. "That, I'd like to see."

"Just be careful. I don't want to see April's best friend hurt."

Matt stiffened, bothered by the comment, even though he knew he had it coming. It was true he'd been the master of noncommitment. Luckily, Will didn't know more lay behind it. "I won't. This time, I'm not the gun-shy one."

"Glad to hear it. Fact is, I never thought I'd see the day you were ready to settle down again."

Again. That one word made him tense. He looked Will straight in the eye, and saw an awareness that startled him. He'd thought he'd kept it quiet. Obviously, he'd thought wrong. "You know."

"About Vegas, yeah."

"How long?"

"Since the beginning. I went looking for you and ran into..."

"Tanya," Matt said, her name a bitter taste in his mouth, but it didn't have the power to cripple him anymore. "Damn the lying bitch. I suppose she wanted to humiliate me."

"I'm here to listen when you want to talk."

"I thought I was in love. She was a showgirl. She told me she was pregnant. I offered to marry her. On what was

supposed to be our wedding day, she told me the baby wasn't mine. She was screwing around with my boss at the same time, and she was dumping me for him."

"Damn, that's cold."

"Cold enough to break it off, bro. I demanded a paternity test 'cause I wasn't taking her word for anything. That's when things turned nasty. Falcon blackballed me with the other construction companies, and turned his high-priced lawyers on me. When that didn't work, he had his boys work me over."

"And the kid?"

"There was no kid. It was just a tool she'd used to play us off one another. I didn't find out until I was getting out of the hospital and she finally decided to level with me, probably to get rid of me. She had a good laugh telling me what a fool I'd been. So I dragged my ass back here, tail between my legs."

"Hey, I needed you to help me start *Ace Builders*." He glanced at Monica and April. "The way I see it, we both won."

"I'm beginning to agree with you. Now I just have to convince her that I'm a changed man."

* * * *

Monica handed a gift bag to Matt's mother Cynthia, as she got ready to leave. "Here's a little thank you for coming, Mrs. Shepard."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," she said, looking in the bag and giggling. "I love it," she said, pulling out the red silk lei and draping it around her pink turtleneck sweater. "How do I look?"

Monica smiled at her youthful exuberance. She could see where Matt got his zest for life. "Like a dream, you'll dazzle your hubby."

Cynthia chuckled, "Can I have that in writing?"

Monica smiled. "I don't think you need it."

"True, there's still a fire in the furnace, even though there's snow on the roof."

Monica smiled, glancing out at Matt chatting with Will on the patio. They'd been talking for some time and she couldn't help wondering what they were talking about.

"Speaking of fire, how are things going with Matthew?" Mrs. Shepard asked.

Monica went still, the direct question catching her off-guard. "Fine."

She smiled. "He seems to have developed a soft spot for you, my dear, and I couldn't be happier."

Monica flushed, practically glowing under Matt's mom's approval. She hadn't really expected it. "Then you don't mind him associating with me?"

"Mind? Don't be silly. Between you and me, it's high time some woman pulled him out of his rut. I want to see all my children happily settled down."

Monica winced, even she wasn't expecting forever out of this love affair. She was going to be crushed enough if he left her, without worrying about disappointing Matt's mother too. "Whoa, slow down, Mrs. Shepard. We're just dating, that's all for now."

"For now?" Cynthia gave her a steady glance. "You're not stringing him along, are you? I don't think he could take that again."

He couldn't take it again? Just who'd done it before, which woman had made him so gun-shy? Gathering her thoughts, she pinned Matt's mother with a steady gaze. "Again? Who—" She watched Cynthia hesitate, a troubled look coming to her eyes.

"To tell the truth, honey, I don't know. All I do know is that when he moved home from Las Vegas, he was a changed man. Only one thing I know can do that to a Shepard male, and that's a woman," she said, taking the wrap from her husband and walking away.

Sighing, Monica spent the rest of the party deep in thought. Could she get him to open up? Should she even try? Was Matt hung up on another woman? Finding out that he'd given his heart to another woman would sting; but she had to know. She set her glass down.

* * * *

After the last guest left, Monica started cleaning up, putting empty glasses on a tray. At least the party had been a huge success, even if it'd stirred up some troubled thoughts in her mind. No matter the cost, she had to know Matt's heart, his secrets. Suddenly he was at her side, like her thoughts had drawn him to her. She opened her mouth to speak, and he took the tray out of her hands.

"Leave it, darlin'," he said with a sultry smile, "and come with me."

"Okay." Troubled thoughts submerged when she saw the twinkle in his eye. She let him lead her out to the patio. A warm breeze blew her skirt around her legs. Monica took a deep breath of the perfumed night air. It was enough to temporarily quiet her troubled thoughts. He'd spread a blanket out under the star-filled sky. It tugged at her heartstrings when she saw the plump pillows and a champagne bucket with a chilling bottle of bubbly inside. He couldn't love another when he treated her this tenderly. "How beautiful," she said, casting a soft glance his way. He was watching her in that masterful way that made her cream. He stalked over to her, making her quiver inside.

"I agree, darlin'," he murmured against her nape.
"How incredibly beautiful you are in the moonlight."

Monica leaned into him as his hot lips scorched a trail down her neck. She burned for him. "This place is perfect."

"The clovers match your eyes. The moment I laid eyes on you, I wanted to make love to you here."

"Were you that sure of me?" she asked.

"Not sure, hopeful," he said, pulling her into his arms.
"I think moon maids have to go nude," he whispered, unzipping her dress.

A delicious tremor rushed through her, making her heart race as her dress fell. "I agree," she said, gazing up at him in the moonlight. The look of blatant desire in his eyes took her breath away. "This is so perfect."

"You're the one who's perfect, darlin'." He pulled her to him. "I've been watching you all night, thinking about this moment."

Nothing else mattered to her either. Monica went into his arms with a needy moan. The fact that she was half-nude while he was dressed didn't faze her. They kissed, and then his mouth slipped down to nuzzle her earlobe. He nipped it, and she gasped as heat raced through her. Her hands snaked under his jacket. She pulled his shirt up in back, aching to touch his skin.

"Hold on, baby, I'll help you." He leaned back, peeled off his jacket, and undid his bolo tie. Frustrated by his slow striptease, she grabbed the edges of his shirt and yanked. Buttons popped off, flying through the air and landing on the grass.

Pushing the shirt off his shoulders, her hands were on him immediately, touching his hair-roughened chest. He groaned and leaned into her caress. His fevered reaction created a frisson of heat deep inside her.

"My turn," he growled, reaching back to unhook her bra, as he pulled her close for a deep kiss.

When he pulled away, her breasts popped free, the night breeze tickling them. Dizzy with desire, Monica gazed up at him bemused, as he slowly drank in the sight of her. Matt's finger ran across her tender peaks, making her lean into him as her nipples puckered. He ran a tentative finger along the curved slopes of her breasts.

"Oh, please."

"Baby, I will."

She gasped at his hot touch. She was so sensitive, and his large hands were warm and strong as he touched her. Her strawberry pink nipples beaded against his palms, and she moaned. All sensation was centered on the aching peaks. Matt's tender strokes felt so good. Pressing against his roughened fingertips, she whimpered at the electric sensation. Embers of passion built up inside her. "More."

"Oh, baby, you don't have to ask," he said, picking her up to lay her on the blanket. He bent to take her nipple into his hot mouth, slowly sucking on it.

Monica groaned, feeling a tug deep inside. She held him close as he moved from one to the other, sucking hard, sending pleasure rocking through her. Out of her head with pleasure as he suckled, teasing first one and then the other peak, she scraped her nails along his back, writhing on the blanket.

Matt groaned, pushing down her panties until she was nude. Monica let out a gasp when his big hand slipped down to cup her mound. She whimpered, pressing against his warm palm. She ached—she needed. Her legs thrashed on the blanket. She arched up, reveling in his fiery touch. She could feel herself growing wet and ready for him.

Throwing one of his heavy legs over hers to hold her still, Matt pressed her into the blanket. His cock was hard against her thigh and she wanted it so badly. And he wanted her just as bad as she did him. Trembling, she burned with a hunger for him. Running her hand over his rock-hard erection, she felt the heat and length of him. She fumbled with his zipper.

His fingers went right to her clit, rubbing it, pinching it, until her legs spread wide. She lifted herself off the blanket, whimpering for more.

"That's right, darlin'. Go wild for me." He slipped one, then two fingers into her wet heat.

She started to come, her spasms tugging his fingers deep inside. A fierce orgasm tore through her, tightening all her muscles. Matt eased her back and knelt between her spread legs, his cock butting against her quivering pussy, and then surged into her.

Monica cried out, clinging to him, her hips snapping up to match his thrusts. Her body shook, contractions drawing him deeper as she came, shouting his name. He came, then rolled over to have her sprawl on top of him.

Monica reveled in his closeness. She slowly drifted back to earth, feeling closer to him than ever before. "Matthew, let's talk."

"About what?"

"Us, for starters. You know so much about me, but I know very little about you."

"You know all that's important."

"Do I?" She felt him turn stiff and knew she'd run up against a brick wall. She had to know what stood between them, or at least show him she was there if he wanted to talk. "Matt, I..."

"There's something I should tell you."

She sighed and snuggled closer, even though she felt him tense. Was this where he let her down easy? "Who is she?" she asked.

"She?"

"The girl you're hung up on."

He pulled back to look at her curiously. "That'd be you."

"Me? But..."

She was so startled, she didn't know quite what to say.

"But then who've you been carrying a torch for?"

"There was someone once, but that was over long ago."

"Oh," she calmed down, deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was obviously tense about this.

"Go on."

"I almost got married, but it didn't work out."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I found out she was playing me for a sucker. I won't make the same mistake twice."

That explained his *love them and leave them* MO. But where did it leave her?

"I see," she said, not seeing at all. Would he ever be ready to take a chance on love?

* * * *

Three days later, Matt stood satisfied as he surveyed the motley crew of male models he'd assembled in *Spice's* backroom. He'd come through, and he felt like a hero when Monica had gazed at him in gratitude. It was worth the struggle. He'd begged, borrowed, and called in some favors to get a few other male models for this demo for Monica's sales clerks and distributors.

"You owe me big time for this, bro," Will said, cinching the robe tight around his middle to cover up the white boxers covered with red hearts.

“What are you complaining about? I’m the one stuck wearing these babies,” Matt said, indicating his red silk boxers. They sure as hell didn’t hide what he was packing. “Besides, she’s giving you the whole collection for your trousseau.”

Will frowned. “Yeah, what the hell is a trousseau anyway?”

“Damned if I know,” Dwain said, stalking out of the dressing room in plaid boxers and a sleeveless t-shirt.

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” Monica said, poking her head in the door.

“Do you mind? We’re still dressing,” hollered Andy.

“You mean undressing,” Dwain muttered, shooting Matt a dark look.

“Calm down guys. You all look great, and it’s nothing you don’t already show on the beach,” she said with a grin. “I’ll be waiting out front. Come out when you’re ready.”

Chapter 10

Half an hour into Will's bachelor party, Matt sidled up to him at the bar in *Red's* party room, trying to tune out the blare of the stripper Tiffany's boom box. He grabbed a ginger ale and glanced at his watch, counting the minutes until he could sneak out the back door and get back to Monica.

They'd been all but inseparable since the couple's shower two nights before and he meant to keep it that way. He'd even taken the liberty of bringing over her design supplies. She'd been bemused, only voicing a small objection that he'd countered by pointing out that it was more efficient seeing that he was acting as model for her men's line of underwear. He'd done it to keep her close, but he'd found himself delighted by being on the inside of her design process, not to mention that being measured every which way could be good for a guy's ego. He chuckled, remembering her comments and his payback when they played *Sweet Surrender* later in the bedroom. They'd both taken to the role-play BD game.

"Hey, bro," Will said in greeting, giving the stripper an absentminded glance.

Matt scanned the stag-line with front row seats around the small stage. Most of the guys had stupid grins on their faces and fistfuls of ones for her g-string, telling him the party was a big success even if it didn't feel that way to him.

Dwain, he noticed, hung back from the crowd, although he watched the stripper with interest.

Matt's disinterested gaze flicked over Tiffany for a second as he recalled Monica teasing him about hiring a stripper. The dancer's charms, while bountiful, couldn't hold a candle to what was waiting for him at home, he mused distracted. Hell, truth be told, he couldn't even spend much time away from Monica without going through withdrawal pangs. It was a worrisome thing to need a woman this bad, but his love was worth the risk.

Trying to get with the swing of the evening, Matt pasted a smile on his face and found Will watching him with a doubtful look. "Having fun yet?" Matt shouted to be heard over the raucous chatter from the other guys.

"Sure am." Will smiled, and hoisted his longneck bottle of beer.

Matt leaned back against the bar and looked at him unconvinced. Will looked just as bored. "Oh yeah? Then why aren't you down front stuffing dollar bills down Tiffany's g-string?"

Will caught Tiffany's bra when she lobbed it their way, laid it on the bar, and turned to Matt. "First thing a soon-to-be married man should know, if you've got something sweeter at home, don't fuck it up."

"Damn you're getting old," Matt teased, but he understood completely, his heart and mind weren't here either.

"Mature, yeah," he agreed, with a negligent shrug. "And you ain't fooling me none, kid. You've been edging toward the door since we got here." Will set down his beer and looked at him. "Do you want to bail?"

Matt nodded ruefully. "Yeah. I didn't know I was that easy to read. Monica's home waiting for me."

"So go, boy, don't fuck it up."

That was the plan, not doing anything to screw it up.

A feeling of relief settled over Matt. Another hurdle crossed. Still, there was a part of him that worried it could all blow up in his face. Having Monica move in with him temporarily was a heavenly fluke, but was it coming too easy? It seemed like they'd never stopped having fun exploring their love toys. Now the only problem was talking her into making things more permanent, her manhunt list be damned.

"You don't mind?"

"Hell no, of course I don't mind. You've found someone worth going home for and you're in love."

Hearing the L word said out loud was a hurdle he hadn't even crossed himself yet, but it was true. It was love, not just lust—it was raw, new, but real. Still, acknowledging it didn't do him any good. Monica was so skittish, still needing to feel in control, he couldn't help wondering why she didn't trust him enough to let go. "We haven't quite gotten that far, bro."

"You will."

"I guess I'll get going then." He looked at the guys down front enjoying the show. "Think they'll miss me?"

"Doubt it," Will said with a smile as he watched dollar bills being thrust in the stripper's g-string. "I don't even think they'll miss me when I leave in about half an hour."

"Sorry the bachelor party was such a bust."

"Nah, it was perfect. I just think we've outgrown this kid's stuff."

"Damn. Maturity, it's a sobering thought." It was true; he'd rather have a romantic time with Monica than a hot time on the town. "I'm gone."

* * * *

Matt left *Red's* back party room to pass through the bar to the tune of Will's laughter. One minute he was weaving his way through the Saturday night crowd, and the next, a drunk blundered into his path.

Matt drew to a halt, the background noise fading as he took in the scowling man's belligerent stance. Half a head shorter, with mean eyes and drunk off his ass, the guy was obviously spoiling for a fight. Frowning back at the man as the stink of stale beer wafted across the three feet that separated them, Matt let out a world-weary sigh. Damn, he didn't need this; he had a woman to get home to. "You don't want any part of this, buddy," he said, moving to step around him.

The drunk staggered to maintain his blockade, grumbling, "Hell no, you ain't walking away from me, Shepard. You'll back off my woman, asshole, if you know what's good for you."

Matt froze, staring at the drunk's ruddy face as he tried unsuccessfully to place the man, mentally running through the guys on Monica's manhunt list. "Your woman?" he asked softly, not liking the fact that half the bar suddenly seemed to be listening in. He didn't want Monica's name dragged through the mud.

"You heard me, dumb ass," the drunk said, puffing his chest out. "Don't deny it. My buddy told me what you two've been doing behind my back."

His buddy? Glancing toward the bar, Matt spotted Ted Miller standing there watching them avidly and figured it out. Too much of a coward to fight his own battles it seemed that Miller was trying to get even by stirring up trouble; although how he knew about the list, Matt didn't know. As far as he knew, he was the only man privy to that information. Right now, the whys and hows didn't matter,

he was too pissed off to care. "Damn, I should have clobbered the prick," he muttered, shouldering the drunken man aside to get to the real instigator.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" the drunk howled.

Matt ignored him, homing in on his target. He first saw awareness, and then fear in Miller's eyes as he backed away, bumping up against the bar. Suddenly Miller's gaze shifted to something behind him. Matt had an inkling of disaster an instant before a pool cue hit him. He ducked and it hit a glancing blow, making him see stars, before crashing down on his shoulder and against the bar.

Amidst the tinkle of smashing glass, screams and shouts, Matt spun around and used the drunk's momentum to throw him across the room. He crashed into the wall and slid down it, unconscious. With a growl, Matt turned to take care of Miller as Dwain and Will, followed by the rest of the bachelor party, came tearing out of the back room.

"I didn't do nothing," Miller wailed, slinking through the crowd toward the door.

Taking in the situation in a glance, Dwain grabbed Miller before Matt could get to him. "You're not going anywhere until I sort this out."

"I didn't do anything," he grumbled, flashing a glare at Matt. "He's the one who started this brawl."

The drunk moaned and rolled over starting to come to.

Dwain looked down at him and froze. "Damn, when'd they let him out?" Dwain muttered to himself. He pulled out his cell phone. "Yeah, send a black and white to *Red's*. I've got two for pick-up, I suspect one's a parole violator."

Parole violator! Matt put it all together in an instant, despite his rattled brain. This had to be Monica's jailbird ex-husband lying in a stinking heap on the floor. A cool rage

settled in his body as he took a step toward the man to take him apart.

"Don't," Dwain said, stepping between them. "He's not worth it."

Matt stopped glaring at Dwain for a moment before sanity returned. It didn't help that he still wanted to break the guy. He knew this wasn't over by a long shot; the guy would be trouble if allowed to run free. "I want him gone."

"He will be," Dwain hurried to reassure him. "Don't worry. The courts take a dim view of parole violators who start bar fights." Dwain nodded to Will. "You want to take care of your brother, and make sure he stays out of trouble?"

"Sure," Will said, pushing Matt toward the bar. "Come on, let's get you patched up."

"Patched up?" Matt said, only that moment feeling the warm trickle falling from his scalp, as Will urged him onto an empty bar stool. He noticed Red hand Will a clean bar towel, but he only had eyes for Gary as he was arrested. What was Monica holding back from him? She still held secrets he could feel it. "What'd he do to wind up in prison?" Matt asked, with a pained grimace as Will pressed the bar towel to the cut on the back of his head.

"She didn't tell you?" Will muttered.

"No." He waited while Will considered things.

"If you can believe it, he was a one-time successful investment banker. Turned out he was a crook. He took a lot of people in the area down, including Monica. When she found out about it, she turned him in, and that's when he turned nasty. The cops had to haul him off of her. But that girl is a fighter. She came out of it stronger than ever. On top of that, she pulled herself out of debt and made restitution to his victims, even though she went through far

worse. The guy's been a pain in the ass for the three years he's been incarcerated, threatening her from prison. I can't believe they let him out. You'd better make sure she's safe."

A chill went through Matt when he considered what a close call she'd had. He closed his eyes and thanked whatever wild angel had kept her at his place and out of danger. "She's at my place."

"Good, see that she stays there."

"Don't worry, I intend to," Matt said, wincing as Will stuck a Band-Aid on his wound. His head and shoulder were throbbing in tandem, but the pain helped him focus.

Dwain walked over to them, his concerned gaze flickering over Matt. "He need medical attention?"

"Nah, I'm good," Matt protested. "Red rendered some first aid. Well, what did you find out?"

Dwain scowled. "It ain't good. They let him out early for good behavior, which means he is on parole, like I figured. If you agree to press charges, we can put him back in prison for the remainder of his sentence."

"Hell yeah, I'll press charges," Matt vowed. "As far as I'm concerned, they can throw away the key. The bastard's lucky you stepped in when you did."

"I'll do my damndest to make sure we keep him locked up until his parole hearing. Funny they didn't notify Monica of his release."

Matt felt a little twinge of guilt. He'd monopolized her time and for selfish reasons. He didn't want her to go back to her manhunt, and keeping her busy loving him seemed like a good way to achieve his goal. "She hasn't been home. She's been staying at my place."

"That explains it then. You want me to break the news?"

“No, I’ll do it,” Matt said, getting to his feet. “I think it’ll be better coming from me.”

Chapter 11

Monica put French roast coffee on to brew and turned to get the last tray of chocolate chunk cookies out of the oven. She was going to surprise Matt with her domestic qualities. The mingled aromas smelled heavenly as she tidied up. Matt had said he'd try to get away early, and she intended to surprise him with a little game of *Sweet Surrender*. Her bottom heated up at the thought as her libido simmered. Playing with Matt had brought out the wild and kinky side of her she'd kept under wraps.

She heard the door open and Matt's footsteps cross the tile floor of the foyer. When he walked into the kitchen, she flung herself at him with a smile. "Welcome home, honey."

"You didn't lock the door."

His gruff tone accompanied by his stiff body set off warning bells inside her; something was wrong. Maybe he'd gotten a taste of the wild life at the bachelor party and was regretting their affair? Even as she thought it, she rejected it. He was in it for the long haul, just like she was. "Sorry, I guess I forgot. I knew you were coming home." She gave him a peck on the cheek and was rewarded with a bear hug. Gasping for breath, she managed to ask, "What's wrong, Matthew?"

Winching, he let her go saying, "I got in a little bar fight."

She pulled away far enough to take in the bandage on the back of Matt's head and his troubled expression. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

She didn't believe that for one second. "Well it must have been one hell of a fight then, because you look like someone just stole your favorite toy." His wince made her worry even more. Could he be hurt worse than she thought?

"I'm fine, Red gave me a bar towel and a Band-Aid."

That thought made her cringe, Red wasn't known for his cleanliness. She tugged him over to the dinette. "Great, you'll probably get ptomaine. Sit." She shoved him down into a chair and he toppled with an indulgent smile that made her knees wobble.

"I'm okay, babe."

"I'll be the judge of that." She peeled off the blood-soaked Band-Aid to see a bloody slice across the back of his head. "Did some guy cut you?"

"No. A drunk took a pool cue to my head."

That word picture was enough to make her shudder. "And what does he look like?"

"Not a scratch on him. He's cooling his heels in jail."

"My hero," she said, beaming down at him. It was only meant to prove his power at impressing the hell out of her. "It's just like the other night with number six," she said proudly, getting the first aid kit from under the sink.

"He was there," Matt said casually.

It was just like Ted's groping of her a few weeks back. He'd come at her from behind. What a coward. "He hit you?"

"Nah, he just instigated it. He's too chicken to fight his own battles."

That was true but what was he holding back? If Ted instigated it, that meant it was over her. The thought saddened her. She certainly never intended to be the cause of trouble. She cleaned the wound with antiseptic, and winced in sympathy as Matt stiffened. It wasn't deep, but it was still oozing blood. "I think maybe you need stitches."

"No thanks, I'll be okay."

Knowing he'd keep refusing despite her concerns, she applied gentle pressure to the wound for a few moments and the bleeding stilled. Reading between the lines, she knew that the fight had been about her. Matt, her hero, had defended her honor. It touched her, even though she hated the thought of him getting hurt. She put the bandage on saying, "All done."

"Thanks," he said. "We need to talk."

His tone worried her. "What's wrong?"

"You're ex is out of prison."

Gary back! Why hadn't she been informed? Warned? She stood there frozen as the enormity of the bombshell sunk in. He was the drunk with the pool cue who'd attacked Matt; she didn't need to be told. She really was the cause of Matt's pain and not in an indirect way. The sneak attack fit Gary's MO to a T. He'd tried to strangle her when she'd turned him in for theft. She'd tried to relegate him to ancient history, but he was pushing himself back into her life like a poison, killing everything he touched. Looking at Matt's injuries, her heart sank. "He attacked you."

"From behind, yeah. He's back in jail now. I'm pressing charges so Dwain says he's sure to serve the remainder of his sentence and..."

"He won't like that," Monica murmured, reliving the nightmare of being throttled, as Matt looked back at her with a worried expression. Gary she could handle, hell,

she'd studied martial arts just so she could kick his ass if he ever resurfaced to get even with her, but she couldn't have him laying in wait for Matt.

"Are you okay?"

Monica took a deep breath and tried not to cry as her dreams for the future went up in smoke. "I don't think so. I'm so sorry that I got you into this. I'll pack my bags and..."

"Like hell," Matt said, pulling her stiff body onto his lap.

She tried to stand up, but his arm around her waist wouldn't let her. "But I've got to. You won't be safe."

"No." Matt stood, picking her up, and cradling her to him murmuring, "He's in jail and he can't touch us."

She wasn't so sure. She'd thought he was safely put away and he wasn't. Still as Matt's soothing caress turned sensual, she let herself be lulled into a sense of security.

"Remember your code word."

Her whole body heated up, melting into him as he carried her. The crisis settled into the background as physical sensation came into play. She was so attuned to Matt's magic touch, and she was about to get a sexy spanking. She'd already had three and he knew how hot it made her. All she had to do was say 'strawberry' and he'd stop. Held tight, listening to the reassuring thud of his heartbeat, she didn't want to. The man was a dirty fighter, using her sexual wants against her.

She sighed, pressing a soft kiss to his tight jaw and felt it relax, slowly gaining strength from him. He really was too good to be true. Her homicidal ex had attacked him and he was still standing strong. Could she do any less for him? When he carried her to the bedroom, she didn't resist.

Couldn't have even if she wanted to; she wanted this, needed him.

"Time to play," he said, setting her on her feet, and peeling off her clothes while bending to kiss her.

Monica moaned as his mouth claimed hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She pressed against him on fire as the Velcro cuff wrapped around her left wrist. Her pulse and libido did a leap.

Breaking the kiss, Matt bent to nibble on her nape. "It's time for you to surrender to your man."

A little fission of excitement and alarm zinged through her. It was always like this. "So I'm your prisoner?" she murmured, as he cuffed her other wrist and bent her over the settee.

"I think that might be the other way around," he said reaching for the soft cloth whip.

Monica let out a hiss of excitement as the whip came down on her bottom. There was more heat than pain, and she was instantly aroused. Biting back a moan and trembling as he played the whip up and down her hot bottom, she got wet with desire, her pussy quivering. "Oh." She arched her hips leaning into the strokes.

"I'm not some idiot you can push away to keep me safe. Don't you forget it again," he said with a final slap of the whip.

"Yes, Sundance," she said, meaning it. She wouldn't let Gary's specter haunt her anymore. He was the past and Matt was her future. When he dropped the whip and lifted her up, she fell into his arms, overwhelmed with hunger for his touch. She kissed him as he carried her to bed. Tumbling down onto it, her hot bottom hit the cool sheets and she moaned.

He nibbled her ear. "God, you're hot, woman, and you're driving me crazy."

She laughed, amused and bedazzled. "I think I've cornered the market on crazy. Who just got spanked?"

He stilled for a moment, pulling away to look at her. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No," she insisted, tugging him down again. "I don't think that soft whip could actually hurt anyone."

He growled, rolling her over. "I'll have to pick up a paddle for next time."

She laughed at the threat. "I'd probably let you. But first..."

"You need something from me," he teased, his gaze locked with hers as his stiff cock pressed against the slick entrance of her pussy.

Monica fell into the blue depths of his eyes and couldn't look away while his cock teased her tantalizingly within reach, but not taking her. "Ah, yes. Fill me, Sundance," she said with a needy sigh as the broad head of his cock eased inside her trembling pussy. She cried out, clinging to him as he slid home. He held still for a moment, throbbing inside her as he bent to kiss her. Wrapping herself around him, she shuddered when he started to move in and out of her, faster and deeper. Her pussy rippled with waves of ecstasy.

"Come for me," he demanded, deepening the thrusts.

And she did, climaxing, her spasms clamping onto him as he came deep inside her.

Chapter 12

Monica walked back into the party room at *Finnegan's Supper Club* that she'd booked for April's shower, dejected, after learning that her entertainment had cancelled. Twenty minutes before the shower, she'd called the male revue to see why they were late, only to find out that they'd double-booked and weren't coming. What in the heck was she going to do with twenty guests and no entertainment? It was going to be a pretty ho hum bachelorette party, and she wanted so much for this to be special for April.

Coming on top of last night's fiasco, it seemed like the fates were lined up against her. What else could go wrong? Who'd believe that a flawed prison system would let Gary out early or that he'd get drunk and go after Matt? Now this was too much. Courtney and Toni looked up from the decorations they were putting up, and headed her way.

"What's the verdict?" Courtney asked.

"They're not coming," she muttered, recalling her heated argument with the male review's booking agent.

"What do you mean, they're not coming?" Toni said with a frown. "It's breach of contract. I'll sue them."

"Like that's going to do us a fat lot of good now," Monica said with a shake of her head. Seeing Toni's distress, she softened her tone, "For a hard-nosed cop, you can be awfully naive, girlfriend. Apparently they got a better offer."

"Oh, damn," Emily said. "What are we going to do? We've got a dozen wild women arriving in half an hour for the bachelorette party and no entertainment."

They all grinned because Emily never swore. "That's salty talk coming from you," Courtney said.

Toni sighed. "Anybody know a good male revue we can get at the last minute?"

Monica and Courtney looked at each other and smiled. "Actually I think maybe we do, but it's a long-shot."

"Well, go get them, girl."

Monica whipped out her phone and made her way to a quiet corner for privacy. How to talk her unsuspecting lover and his pals into stripping?

Half an hour later, she handed her male line of garments through the men's room door to her reluctant models. "You don't have to strip, guys. I'll just turn the music on and you guys can strut your stuff."

"I don't know about this," Will grumbled.

She tensed. "Guys, I owe you big time for doing this. Just remember, guys, your doing this for April." Peering through the crack, she saw a few of them nodding and stripping. Closing her eyes, she pressed back against the wall adding as a last incentive, "Look at the bright side, Will. Your bride-to-be won't be ogling a male stripper."

"Sounds like a good reason to me," Will said, adding gruffly, "All right, guys, get 'em off for my lady."

Fanning her flushed face, Monica made her way back to the party room and homed in on April, who sat smiling, surrounded by her opened gifts.

"You've all been far too generous," April said. Looking at Monica, she picked up her hot pink bunny. "Especially you."

Everyone laughed.

"You haven't seen anything yet, girlfriend," Monica said with a grin. "Wait until you see the special entertainment we've arranged." She pushed the button on the boom box down, sitting on the edge of the stage saying, "And now for your pleasure, I present the groomsmen plus one."

"Oh no," April said, with a blush and laugh.

Monica sat down next to April just as Matt walked out of the wings to hoots and whistles.

"Yum!" Toni yelled.

Monica couldn't agree more. Matt looked like heaven in his red satin boxers. "Here is Matt in midnight rendezvous."

The ladies applauded.

He winked and struck a pose.

Andy Wallace came strutting out in blue briefs. He did a few dance moves and hurried off the stage.

"And next is Andrew in electric blue."

When he walked off, Dwain, who stood on the edge, was pushed onto stage. He turned to scowl at the guys behind him, but the applause made him face the ladies. A flush stained his cheeks. Tall, with sandy hair, he had a powerful build.

Monica stifled a laugh. "Next is Dwain modeling happy holidays, a tank top worn with plaid boxers for fun."

Dwain cracked a little smile and did a turn on the stage, his gaze scanning the crowd before stopping on Toni, who giggled and looked away.

"And last but not least, Will in honeymoon hello."

Will strutted out in a short white robe over white briefs.

April laughed. "At least you didn't put him in a thong."

He chuckled and lifted up his robe to reveal two bare buns.

“Oh lord, you didn’t,” April said with a laugh.

“I always save the best for last,” Monica said with a smile.

Chapter 13

Monica made her way back home from the bachelorette party well pleased. It had all gone well and she owed Matt and her models big time. Too bad they hadn't stuck around. Still, she could understand their reason. They weren't used to being seen as sex objects.

She'd just have to make it up to Matt in bed, she thought with a wicked chuckle. She was going to show him just how devoted she was. Unfortunately, his pickup wasn't in the driveway, which meant that she beat him home. Still it would give her time to prepare. Handcuffs, whipped cream, and her paddle would make for a hot evening.

She got out of the car and let herself in to set things up. Letting herself in with his key. She thought about how far they'd come. They were living together, unofficially of course, but that didn't make it any less true. She went into the kitchen and plopped her tote bag down.

A glance at the reflective glass of the patio door showed a dark moving shape behind her. She feinted to the side, spinning around just as a wine bottle swung at her head. It smashed against the cabinet spewing red wine. Her blood ran cold when she got a look at Gary's enraged face. He was meaner and heavier, but there was no mistaking him. *How had he gotten out of jail?*

"Damn you and your boyfriend, bitch. Tell him to drop the charges, or else."

"Are you crazy? You belong in a mental ward," she hissed, going fluid as her sense had taught her. She'd studied for just this occasion and brains could beat brawn.

He started toward her. "And you belong in the ground. Guess which one of us is gonna get his wish if you don't do as I say."

"He's not here." She backed away into the open area of the great room and he followed her. Matt would be home soon, she just needed to keep stalling and she wouldn't be alone with Gary. "Leave now and I won't turn you in."

He laughed. "Yeah, right," he bit out, lunging toward her.

Monica sprang forward, grabbed his wrist and flung him over her hip. He crashed against the coffee table, cracking his head, and flopping on the ground. She jammed her stiletto heel in his groin just as the front door burst open. Matt came rushing in, followed by the police. He took one look at her and pulled her into his arms.

"Oh, babe, are you okay?"

She sagged against him. "I am now."

Dwain cuffed Gary and handed him over to the police. "Get this scum out of here."

Matt held Monica in his lap after Dwain left, feeling scared. He'd almost lost the love of his life! Stunned, he couldn't handle it. For her part, she'd gone silent, just leaning against him, as if for strength.

"I didn't know he was here. I didn't see him, except at the last minute."

"I know, babe, I'm sorry. Dwain told me he escaped and we came as quick as we could. I wasn't there for you."

"But I handled him."

"Yes, you did," he said, feeling a sense of pride. "You were magnificent."

She looked at the shattered bottle and spilled wine.
“He made a mess of your floor. I should...”

“I’ll clean it up. I think you need some care.” He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, then into the master bath. He filled up the Jacuzzi and added the jasmine bath oil she liked, then he tenderly undressed her and lowered them both into the double tub. She sighed, leaning back against him. He cradled her in the shelter of his arms, kissing the top of her head.

She sighed and then smiled. “You are good for what ails me, Sundance.”

“Happy to oblige,” he said, his cock throbbing as it grew against her soft bottom. He grabbed a sea sponge and washed her front paying particular attention to her breasts. Her nipples budded and she moaned as he scrubbed them. Monica loved the feel of his wet slick body against hers. When he turned her in the double tub, she let out a needy moan. He slanted a kiss across her lips. Monica straddled him, her mouth opening under his as Matt’s big hands sought her breasts under the water, cupping them. She pressed her breasts out, begging for his sweet attention.

He pinched the nipples, and she whimpered into his mouth. Her nipples budded, aching for him, and he bent to take one in his mouth. She rubbed her pussy against his hard cock, gasping at the pleasure that small movement brought. Monica’s hands reached for his hard cock, capturing him in a confident grip.

Matt growled, pushing himself harder into her hand. His hand left her breast to tease her pussy and she was lost in sensation. He pressed against her clit, and she moaned, gripping him even tighter. She quivered as he slid one, then two fingers into her, teasing her, testing her readiness. His

digits moved in and out of her faster as she clenched around him, and then he withdrew his fingers.

He picked her up, lifting her high so her breasts dangled like ripe fruit, suckling one and then the other nipple until they were wet and hard. He drew hungrily at the sweet, strawberry peaked globes. Squirming against him as she hovered over him, brushing tantalizingly against his manhood, she cried out. Matt slowly lowered her onto his cock, slipping deep inside her quivering pussy. She ground against him, moaning, but he held her hips, restraining her movements. She stilled for a second, but her internal ripples tugged at him.

He bent to nibble her ear while one hand pinched her nipple and she exploded, coming. When it was all over, he was still rock hard inside her. "What are you waiting for, Matt, an engraved invitation?" She nipped at his shoulder, wriggling against him.

"Be patient." He spanked her ass under water.

Monica pouted, stung but amused, despite herself. So he wanted to draw it out, did he? Cupping her ass with his hands, he started to move and Monica gasped as her fiery passion returned double fold. He set a slow, deliberate pace that gradually grew faster and faster. Monica clung to him, arching to meet his thrusts as he wrung another orgasm out of her. Sucking on his neck, she shrieked out his name as she came, her rippling spasms tugging him deeper inside her.

Matt came, pounding into her two more times, holding her to him as he buried himself to the hilt.

Monica sagged against him, comforted as Matt held her tight.

Chapter 14

Matt stood beside Will at the altar as the wedding march started to play. A quick glance at his brother told him he was holding up pretty well, despite the stiff set of Will's shoulders in the tux he was wearing. As Toni, the first bridesmaid, started down the aisle in a long lilac gown, Matt surreptitiously patted his pocket to make sure he still had the ring.

He still felt kind of raw after Monica's close call last night and he didn't want his distracted thinking to affect his brother's wedding. A glance at Dwain, who was standing as groomsman on his other side, told him the guy was watching him warily. He didn't approve of their plan to keep the attack quiet until after the wedding, but Monica had been adamant and Matt was in the mood to indulge her. The guy was back behind bars, so why did he still feel like wrapping her in cotton wool and tucking her away where nobody could touch her? Because their idyll was coming to an end. She'd agreed to table her manhunt until after the wedding, and his time to win her was almost up.

The moment Monica came down the aisle, Matt's breath caught in his throat. She was so beautiful. Her gaze passed warmly over Will to lock firmly with Matt's. He felt a little surge of heat and pride. He loved her. At the end of the ceremony, he linked arms with Monica. The time had

come to tell her how he felt, he only hoped she reciprocated his feelings.

At the reception, Monica joined Courtney, Toni, and the pack at a table in the ballroom.

"Manhunters unite! One down and only four more to go," Toni joked.

Monica rolled her tired feet and glanced across the room at Matt and Dwain talking. "Count me out."

Courtney let out an excited gasp. "Don't tell me my brother's proposed..."

"No, he hasn't," Monica cut in, feeling a little pang. "We're simply dating."

"How about me?" Emily popped in. "Anybody know any hot prospects?"

"How about Ted Miller?" Jo said.

"Oh no, not him," the others chimed in unison.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Believe me, he's bad news," Monica said, adding, "The man's all hands, besides being a drunk and a coward."

Jo winced. "Thanks for warning me."

"It's the least one manhunter can do for another," Monica said, and noticed Matt's approach. She wanted to dance with her man while she still had him. After the wedding, would she be like Cinderella turning back into a dateless pumpkin? He hadn't asked for more. As they waltzed across the floor, she noticed that Matt held her a little tighter than usual and didn't mind a bit. She leaned into his strength, loving the way his body felt pressed tight against hers.

Chapter 15

The next morning, Monica woke up alone. She reached out to Matt's pillow to find it cold and empty. Was he back to business as usual so quick? It was a demoralizing thought. Then again, maybe he was making her breakfast. Keeping that positive thought, she slipped on her robe and padded toward the kitchen.

She glanced at the kitchen, seeing it empty and her heart sank. A sound made her turn toward the great room. Matt was there sitting on the floor with a wrapped gift.

"Come here," he said, crooking his finger.

She walked up to him drawn like a moth to a flame. He was still here. She sank down on the floor next to him and took the beautifully wrapped gift he handed her. "For me?"

"Who else."

"What's the occasion?"

"It's a love gift. Open it and find out."

Love gift? Was he saying what she thought he was saying? It was too big to be an engagement ring. Tearing off the gold paper, she found a box. Opening the box, she found her planner lying in pink tissue paper. "My planner," she said surprised, and a bit let down. She'd half expected hearts and flowers, a million candy hearts, something romantic.

"Open it."

She lifted it out, noticing it felt a tiny bit different. She opened the cover finding it stiffer. There on the first page was Matt's name written in red ink about a million times. He must have been up half the night writing it. Did it mean what she thought it did? She looked up at him in wonder. He was smiling, but there was a hint of nervousness in his eyes. She found it endearing.

He pulled out a jeweler's box from his pocket, and flipped it open.

Monica looked at the beautiful solitaire engagement ring; the diamond flanked by emeralds the color of her eyes and got teary-eyed. She smiled at him through her tears, memorizing the picture of the hunk she loved, offering his heart.

Matt leaned in to brush a tear off her cheek. "I propose that you take on a manhunt of one, darlin'."

She leaned forward to kiss him saying, "Yes! I think I just bagged my limit."

They made love amidst the tissue paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

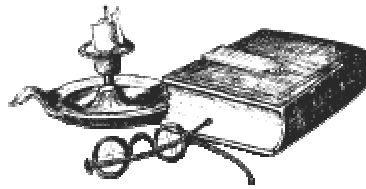
Honey Jans lives in a small Midwestern town with her husband and true inspiration. She is a born romantic with an extraordinarily vivid, yet kinky imagination.

As a novice in the erotic genre, Honey was overjoyed in February, 2005 when *The Gift* became the #1 Bestseller at Whiskey Creek Press. When the July, 2005 list went up and *April Love* was at the top, she was equally delighted. Now *The Commander's Club* is climbing the charts and she couldn't be happier.

In her spare time, Honey enjoys lounging under a shade tree and sipping a cool drink while reading a good book. Her talents and interest are not limited to Romance, Erotica or printed words. Honey is also an artist, with an amazing talent that she inherited from her mother. She lives life to the fullest, traveling whenever she can, frequently taking exotic tropical vacations and Caribbean cruises with her husband.

Honey hopes her erotic tales add spice and reading pleasure to your life. She loves to hear from her readers and tries to answer all enquires in a timely fashion. If you'd like to contact Honey, you can email her at: author888@hotmail.com or join her newsgroup for the latest news. She is a member of Romance Writers of America, WisRWA, Outreach, Passionate Ink.

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