



Hot With Handcuffs

Erin Katz

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Dedication

To all the men in uniform—you are a great inspiration.

Chapter One

"Well, Lambert do you prefer doing traffic for the Baptist Church or the Presbyterian Church?" Lt. Pete Hanson asked during the early morning briefing at the Chilhowee Cove Police Department.

"The Presbyterian Church," Lexie answered. Since it was her last stint on days before the shift change, it was her turn to pick her zone during roll call. Next week, coffee would be her best friend as she fought to stay awake through the wee hours of the morning to protect the good citizens of Chilhowee Cove. And because it was the Sunday before Christmas, church traffic would be extra busy on that morning.

"Okay then. Richardson, you get Zone three and here are the requests from the minister of the Baptist Church regarding the traffic controls." Hanson handed Richardson the list.

"Wimp," Richardson muttered in Lexie's direction.

"No, I'd say she's smart," Hanson corrected with his deep authoritarian voice.

"It's my Friday," Lexie reminded her co-worker as she took a sip of coffee. Really, it was a Sunday morning, but at the end of the day, she'd have four days off before beginning the graveyard shift.

"Whatever." Richardson's East Tennessee drawl slipped into his speech as he yawned.

"I'm sure they'll keep the doughnuts warm for you at the bakery." Lexie reached out to pat Richardson's overgrown tummy. "At least the bakery is in zone three."

Before Richardson could answer with his usual sarcastic reply, Officer Jake Blankenship stumbled into the squad room.

"Nice of you to join us this morning, Blankenship," Lexie greeted him. She made a point to put on her sweetest smile for the man who was often referred to as "Poster Boy".

After working with him for three years, Lexie had become immune to his sculpted, strong chin set in a gorgeous face. Of course, she'd been married when she and Jake had joined the force. Despite his flirtations prior to and since her divorce, she hadn't been able to look at him as more than a friend, especially after going through the academy with him.

"I had a rough night." Blankenship kneaded the top of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. The gray shirt of his uniform was still unbuttoned, revealing his white undershirt. He held his clip-on black tie.

"What's her name?"

"Jealous?"

"Not likely." Lexie added a chuckle to her voice. "I don't want to end up as one of your casualties."

"Still blowing the ink dry on your divorce papers?"

"Ooh, low one, Blankenship. But no, I just haven't met anyone that's worth it yet."

"I've never met anyone worth *it* either," Jake clarified as he buttoned up the top of his gray uniform shirt. He flashed Lexie his famous smile with the dimples that could make any woman with a sex drive melt. Lexie thanked God her knees didn't buckle when the smile went her way. "But I'm sure havin' fun findin' her."

"Is that why you play musical bed partners?"

"There's no harm in trying out a few of the wrong ones before finding the right one."

Yeah, that's what my ex-husband said, Lexie thought to herself as she rolled her eyes. *And it cost us our marriage.*

She shook her head when Jake shrugged his shoulders and collapsed into one of the plastic chairs of the squad room. Even without smiling, Jake's dimples left an impression visible underneath the fluorescent light of the squad room.

"All right, guys, calm down." Hanson broke in, his gruff voice halting the roar of the shift change. "Blankenship, you get zone two."

"Shit," Blankenship replied. "That means I have to deal with that old lady at the Waffle House."

"But she likes you," Lexie reminded him in a schoolgirl tone. Then again, most women liked Jake Blankenship. The gun, handcuffs, and badge only added to his allure since he could pick up a woman even without his badge. He seemed to like the "holster sniffers" that fawned over him as much as Richardson.

"Big deal. You'd think the hag would learn after the first ten years that there's no such thing as a non-smoking section in Waffle House in East Tennessee."

"Now, now, that's not a nice way to talk about your biggest fan." Lexie stood, slapped Blankenship on the back and offered him a smile.

"Kiss my..."

"I love you too," Lexie cut in and gave him a peck on the cheek. She noticed briefly that he hadn't bothered to shave before coming to work. That added to her theory that he'd been too busy the previous night to want to get out of bed or wherever they'd decided to do the deed.

Lexie knew Jake kept a clean change of clothes and an extra uniform in a duffle bag in his truck. That way, he could sleep with whatever tramp he'd chosen the night before and not have to stop by his apartment before heading to work.

"How come you never do that for me?" Richardson's voice had a whine to it, indicating he was jealous of the attention Lexie gave to Jake.

"You're not as good looking." Lexie turned on her heels and patted Zack Richardson's pouch belly. "And he's still single."

"I can be single any time you want me to," Richardson returned.

"I'm sure your wife would lu—uve that."

"She doesn't have to know."

"One of these days she's going to leave your fucking fat ass." Lexie bit her lip after saying that last word. She vaguely remembered not cursing before joining the police force.

"Why? She's got it made." Richardson's face turned up with a sly smile. "I work my ass off while she sits at home eating bon bons and watching soaps."

"I doubt that."

"Have you seen Richardson's wife?" Blankenship cut in. "After seeing her, I can understand why he's here on time."

"You're a jerk, you know that." Lexie lightly punched Blankenship in the belly, feeling the metal of his bullet-proof vest beneath her knuckles.

"I'm just honest," Blankenship insisted.

"How'd you like it if someone said that about your wife?" Lexie knew it was a

hypothetical question because Jake Blankenship was a confirmed bachelor insistent on playing the singles' circuit. Though, there was a nasty rumor that there was a woman out there just as immune to his charms as Lexie. And that was the woman who'd one day tame him. Lexie just hoped that she wouldn't be too old and blind to see that happen.

"I'm sure my wife—if I ever get one—will be a hell of a lot prettier than his."

"If you had a pretty wife, it wouldn't make a difference in your getting to work on time."

"Well, now if I'd woken up next to you instead of Candy, I would've been here on time." Blankenship put an arm around Lexie's shoulders.

"That sounds like an insult."

"No, because we'd have somethin' to do once we woke up."

Skepticism clouding her vision, she glanced up at the sharp, handsome lines in Jake's features. If she actually believed Jake would call her the next day or she wouldn't have to work with him, she might consider his invitation for a date. Or would it be a date if all they did was fuck? She'd been out of the dating world so long she didn't know the answer.

"I'd shoot you for being in my bed to begin with." Lexie added saccharine to her voice. Sarcasm was yet another trait she'd learned during her time as a police officer. It took the edge off dangerous and depressing situations.

"Oh, honey, it would take a lot more than a gun to keep me away from your bed," Zack broke in.

Lexie rolled her eyes. She couldn't help but smile at the glint in Jake's cornflower-blue eyes. Lexie had always held a soft spot in her heart for blue eyes, but it hadn't made her want Jake as anything more than a friend.

"That doesn't sound like a compliment," she told Jake in regards to his previous comment.

"No, it means we'd be up earlier getting our blood pumping."

"Yeah, right. You couldn't handle me."

"I love a challenge," he said, touching the top of her nose as she remained snuggled into the crook of his right arm. Anyone who didn't know them would assume they had a relationship on the side. But it was simply part of their on-job behavior.

Hanson stepped in. "I hate to break up the party but we have to get to work. Never know when one of you fools might actually get to be a hero."

Lexie spun around and made her way to her cruiser, which by now should be warm from the engine running for the last twenty minutes. She'd turned on the car when she'd reached the station, knowing it would be nice and toasty for her at the end of roll call.

The jovial discussions helped them all get pumped for hitting the streets for patrol duty at such an early hour when most people were still sleeping. Still, she made sure her thermos of coffee had the proper amount of creamer and sweetener in it before leaving the warmth of the station for the chill of the December morning.

She exhaled just to see her breath in the morning darkness highlighted by the lights at the back of the station. The childhood trick still gave her a little thrill.

"Damn, it's cold out here," Richardson said from behind her.

"Now, who's the wimp?" Lexie teased.

"Well, I didn't put on an extra shirt this morning."

"Big deal." Lexie rolled her eyes at how such a big man could be so sensitive to the

elements. Of course, she was well aware that if both of them were in a foot race, she'd win while he would be huffing and puffing halfway past the starting point. "I never wear an extra shirt."

"Yeah, but you got extra padding on the top half to help ward off the chill of the winter air."

"You're crude." Lexie groaned loudly. "But if you had to wear a bra under your vest, you wouldn't need an extra layer."

"Are you sure you're a woman?"

"If I'm not, then I got a lousy deal on a figure."

"And you're the best looking man I've ever seen."

She glared when she saw him look up and down her 5'4" frame from her feet to the top of her head.

"Have you ever heard of something called sexual harassment?"

"Yeah, it sounds like a lot of fun."

"Until the day you're slapped with a lawsuit."

Richardson simply smiled, his white teeth shining in the bright lights from the back of the station.

Shaking her head, she went to her own cruiser.

As she quickly checked that all her supplies were in order on the passenger seat, she prepared to put the car into drive.

With a laugh, she glanced at Jake scraping frost off the windshield of his cruiser. She avoided aggravating him about it and simply pressed the accelerator and sped out of the station's parking lot.

She still took great pride in driving her own police vehicle even though she'd been on patrol and out of training for nearly three years. Her ex-husband—Billy Lambert—had told her she couldn't do it. She'd gone out of her way to prove him wrong, and succeeded. Even at the cost of a normal social life.

When Billy left her for another woman while she went to the police academy, he'd relinquished the right to tell her how to live her life. Her best friend, Karen Pollack, who worked as a police clerk at the Chilhowee Cove Police Department, had encouraged her to go for the vacant patrol position when her marriage was on the rocks.

She'd graduated at the top of her class. Imagining the head of her target was her husband had helped with her shooting practice to gain the proper certification. Once she returned home to Chilhowee Cove, she moved in with a fresh-faced reporter named Melissa Conner, now recently married and expecting her first baby.

Pulling onto Cove Highway, she drove a few miles down the four-lane road and pulled into the parking lot of the Highway Bar.

"This is three-forty, I'm in the parking lot of the Highway Bar," she reported over her radio to the dispatch center.

"Ten-four," a voice she recognized but didn't have a face to match it with, replied. She knew dispatch had just changed their shifts as well, and the fresh crew had to get their bearings.

With the front of her cruiser facing east, she waited for the sunrise.

Her cruiser in park, Lexie relaxed her legs. Keeping her seat in the right position to pull out onto the highway at any moment, she worked the morning speeding round with her radar gun pointed at the highway.

Being so early on a Sunday, it was highly unlikely she'd catch a speeder. Between the bitter cold of winter and the laziness surrounding Sundays, people tended to stay put more so than in the warmer months.

Besides, Chilhowee Cove was a tourist town, and many of the speeders were from out-of-state and didn't quite comprehend that the city intended to enforce the 50 mile-per-hour speed limit. Tourists didn't drive around this early in the morning. The practically deserted road should stay quiet for a few more hours until people ventured out for church.

So when she heard a motorcycle zooming and grinding in the distance, her neck snapped to the left. The lights above the highway reflected against something orange, which was apparently a helmet.

From the sound of the throttle, the motorcyclist wasn't obeying the speed limit. Well, when an opportunity presented itself...

Her finger pressed into the button of the radar gun, she pointed it through the windshield. Bracing to jump onto the highway, she put her right foot on the brake and slid the gear into drive.

The radar gun beeped, and flashed "85". Without a thought, Lexie let the radar fall into her lap as she peeled onto the highway. Using her left hand to steer, she turned on the lights and siren with her right.

It had taken over a year to get the process of a traffic stop down to an art.

The motorcycle roared to a stop on the shoulder and Lexie parked behind it.

"Three- forty, traffic stop," Lexie advised dispatch per department procedure. "It's a black motorcycle ... with Tennessee tag Zulu Tango four-six-seven-zero northbound on the highway."

"Ten-four," the dispatcher replied.

"Three-ten to three- forty." Lt. Hanson called her on the radio as she started to open the door.

"Three- forty, go ahead, sir," she said as she opened the driver's side door of the cruiser.

"Do you need assistance?"

"That's a negative." It still irked Lexie when the guys didn't believe she could handle a simple traffic stop. On the other hand, as the only female on the force, she'd become accustomed to it.

She shook it off as she approached the motorcycle. Since the driver was clad in black, the only color she could pick up was on the helmet, which he now held in his lap.

Her flashlight leading the way, she pointed it in his face for a quick look. The illumination would help the camera mounted in her cruiser pick up his features.

"I need to see your driver's license and proof of insurance," she told the rider. Her breath almost caught in her throat when she noticed his eyes. Along with the orange helmet, those blue eyes were the only color in sight under the harsh glow of the flashlight.

Without a word, the man reached into his back pocket and pulled out a black leather wallet. Lexie noticed he kept his eyes on hers. Though she tried to maintain some professional dignity, she noticed that his pecs were well chiseled beneath his tight tee-shirt, visible because his leather jacket was unzipped. And although he sat, she could tell that his butt had a nice little curve to it—something so rare in most men.

Usually the driver of a traffic stop avoided her gaze at all costs. Not this one.

If it wasn't for the sharp edges of his eyes glistening in her flashlight, unafraid of her assessing gaze, she would have thought he meant trouble. The cool, steadiness of his gaze told her he would not.

From her peripheral vision, she saw his fingers grab his license and a piece of paper from the wallet and hand it to her, clasped between his thumb and forefinger.

She nodded and took the documents, returning to her cruiser to relay the license number back to dispatch.

While waiting for the central computer to run his information, she grabbed her ticket pad and started to fill in the name on the driver's license—Max Davis—into the first few blanks on the ticket.

If he had a middle name, it wasn't on his driver's license. Didn't that mean trouble?

"Three-forty, that checks out, ten-four," dispatch advised her. The dispatcher purposely remained monotone and releasing only a few necessary details to avoid complications.

"Ten-four," she replied.

She returned to the motorcycle.

"Because you were going twenty miles over the posted speed limit, you don't qualify for the first time offenders' sentence. And our judge doesn't look too kindly on speeders," she told him as she handed him back his license and insurance card.

Avoiding his eyes, she clicked her pen into place to continue writing.

"I need a current address and occupation," she requested using a purposeful cool tone.

"It's one-eight-six-five Cove Highway."

"That's the Chilhowee Inn." Lexie had been to the establishment on enough domestic disputes to know the address well. "You live at the hotel?"

"It's just temporary. Until I find an apartment."

"Okay. And do you work?"

"Yes." He matched her inquisitive tone with a curt one. "I'm a corrections' officer at the jail."

Now that his wallet was once again stowed in his rear pocket, his right hand kneaded the handlebar of the motorcycle. His gloves were off and his hands appeared strong. For some strange reason, a chill floated through her body at the thought of his rough palms going over her body.

Damn it, he was a cop. That presented her with a problem. Normally, patrol officers let a fellow cop go with a warning.

She had no proof he was a cop. Most cops had a habit of flashing a copy of their badge along with their license upon being pulled over. He hadn't, which made her suspicious of his claim.

"I've never seen you before." She hoped to draw him out to discern if he was telling the truth or trying to get out of an expensive ticket.

"I only started last week."

"Then I guess you don't know that this area is highly patrolled. The tourists refer to it as a speed trap." In fact, most of the speeders she ticketed on the highway had out-of-state tags. Perhaps, that's why the motorcycle with Tennessee tags had sent up a red flag.

"I'm late for work."

“Like I haven’t heard that one before.” Once again, her eyes stared into his. The steely-blue didn’t hold the shiftiness of a liar. Since she was in the middle of a traffic stop, Lexie also tried to shrug off the tightening sensation just below her heart.

“What shift are you?” She narrowed her eyes. If he was a liar, he couldn’t hold on to the illusion for very long. Her glare was just as strong as one of those interrogation room lights.

“Normally, I work evenings,” he said after pulling back his sleeve to glance at his watch. “But with the holidays coming up, I’m pulling a double shift today. Corporal Jones likes to work the newbies to death.”

“I see,” Lexie answered with a calculated tone. The name-dropping certainly helped his case.

“Just give me the damn ticket so I can get going.” He groaned loudly.

She eyed him closely. A man barking orders reminded her of her ex-husband, which always brought a bitter taste to her tongue.

Nonetheless, she wanted to do as he asked just to get away from him. She ripped the top paper from her ticket book with force, and practically slammed it into a ball in his fist.

*

He folded the ticket and tucked it into his wallet, which he replaced in the back pocket of his black fatigue-style pants.

Without another word, he pulled his gloves on, jumped on the gear and zoomed off on his motorcycle.

From the “Lambert” engraved into the gold tag above the left breast of her gray uniform shirt, Max knew the ticketing officer was the infamous Lexie Lambert. From the talk of the other officers, he’d assumed she was a tall blonde Amazon.

Though he couldn’t tell exactly what color her hair was underneath the black bucket hat of her uniform, he knew it wasn’t blonde. Despite the darkness, he detected a few freckles scattered across her nose and there was something about the cream of her skin that made him suspect she was a redhead. Her eyes had shone like freshly polished emeralds. That was the only feature he could detect with any certainty under the dim light of the streetlights.

He’d noticed that the uniform that made most female officers appear less feminine did not do a good job covering the curves of her hips and breasts.

He’d also managed to steal a glance of her rear swaying with a soft swish as she walked back to her cruiser. Luckily, she hadn’t seen that. She probably would have found a reason to give him another ticket.

Jake Blankenship had been right about one thing. She had a nice ass. One that begged to be clutched and kneaded and wasn’t meant to be covered.

Officer Lambert sped past him in her cruiser, continuing down the highway towards the airport. Her silhouette was all he could detect in the darkness of her car. The headlights then slowed as she did a quick U-turn and drove the other way.

“What the hell am I waiting for?” he muttered. “I’m already late.”

Max shook his head, turned the gas on the handlebars and picked up speed, hoping the movement would help release the tension mounting in his pants. He was careful to keep the speed needle just below the limit. How in the world would he explain a gigantic hard-on to his supervisor? Considering he was still in his probation period of the job, it

might not be a good idea to have an erection while working D-Pod, reserved for the female inmates.

It had been years since Max had gotten a ticket for speeding. And none of the tickets of his misspent youth had been written by such a sexy cop.

His leather gloves protected his fingers from the chill, but the wind beat against his cheeks as he drove towards the jail. The vibration of the motor didn't help his boner, and focusing on the road certainly didn't turn his thoughts off Lexie Lambert.

After only a week on the job, he'd already tired of the monotonous work of the booking zoo. Once he'd mastered the computer program, it had been simple. Most of the intakes were repeats and already had their information in the system. And he still had a supervisor looking over his shoulder most of the time.

The pay was decent though and it would hold him over until he could get a job as a patrolman with the Sheriff's Office. Hell, he'd even settle for a position with the city police if it meant he could look at Lexie Lambert a few times a week. Well, it was a thought.

Now that he was free of his enlistment time in the Marine Corps, it seemed strange to be able to pursue any career path he desired.

To be honest, Max didn't particularly care for Chilhowee Cove, but his aging grandfather had enticed him to move there. After all, with Pappy now living in a retirement community in the mountains, he needed a visit from his only surviving relative every once in a while.

Max pulled into the employee parking area behind the jail and stopped the cycle.

He yanked the speeding ticket out of his jacket pocket and looked at it, seeing Lexie Lambert's scrawl for a signature at the bottom.

"What a way to start the day," Max muttered and stuffed it back into his pocket. "I wonder who I can see about getting this thing taken care of."

Chapter Two

As she did every Monday, Lexie went to Hal's Diner on the highway for lunch with her best friend, Karen. Though she'd had her fair share of rest since she left work the day before, her head throbbed the moment the smell of over-brewed coffee filled her nostrils.

Karen sat in their usual booth in the corner, her red painted fingernails clicking against the tabletop.

"Good," her friend greeted her. "I don't have to page you to hurry your ass up."

"I'm here," Lexie forced a smile across her face.

"Well, I hear that you met the infamous Max Davis yesterday." Karen stopped her fingernail dance and pressed her palms flat on the table.

"Who?" Lexie replied nonchalantly. She wasn't in the mood for Karen's games. After peering at the menu and deciding once again to indulge in the monster cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake, she met her friend's gaze.

"The guy you ticketed on the highway yesterday," Karen said in a "duh" tone.

"Oh him. The jailer. How'd you know? I haven't filed the ticket yet."

"Who else? Jake." Karen rolled her eyes. "He loves to gossip."

"Oh. How'd he find out?"

"Don't know," Karen said with a shrug. "You know Jake. He always finds a way to find out just about everything."

"Well, this Max character—I felt bad about giving him the ticket last night."

"Yeah, Steve said all the females over at the county are hot on his trail." Karen also loved gossiping, especially that which she gathered from her husband Steve, a detective for the county sheriff. "I guess 'cause he's fresh meat."

Lexie shrugged as the waitress came and took their menus. "What'll you have?"

"The usual," Lexie said with a groan. Since she was off for a few days, she could spend a little extra time at the gym working off the cheeseburger and chocolate milkshake.

"Me too," Karen agreed. The waitress nodded and retreated to the kitchen.

"Melissa's not coming?" Lexie rolled open the napkin containing her silverware and placed each piece in the proper place in preparation for their coming meal, though she didn't need the fork and knife to eat a cheeseburger.

"No. I called her this morning. The nausea has hit her hard." Their friend and Lexie's former roommate, Melissa Conner Reed was five months pregnant and her morning sickness had come in the second trimester instead of the first. Melissa was a police reporter for the local newspaper, though her husband, Spencer, wanted her to go to part time with the baby on the way.

"That's too bad," Lexie said with a sigh. "I was looking forward to visiting with her. It's been a while since I've seen her."

"She says she's huge," Karen murmured. "So, tell me. Is his ass really as good as they say?" Obviously, Karen wanted to talk about Max Davis and not their best friend.

"I don't know. He stayed on his motorcycle and I didn't get a good enough look."

"So did you decide to give him a ticket in the hopes he'd want to work it out? If he's good in bed, then you can pull it."

“He can pay it like everybody else. I don’t really give a damn.” She couldn’t believe Karen had suggested such a thing. Then again, Karen’s morals had loosened a bit since she decided not to let her husband’s extra-marital affairs bother her anymore.

“You really don’t care, do you?”

“About what?”

“That with your attitude you’ll probably never have sex again.”

“Excuse me. I thought we were talking about a ticket.” The waitress returned with their drink order, and Karen waited until she left before she spoke again.

“Give me a break, Lexie. You can’t say you haven’t thought about it.”

“The last time I checked, I could get fired for something like that.”

“Nobody has to know,” Karen shrugged.

“If Jake finds out, they will.”

“So don’t tell anybody.” It seemed simple enough, but things did go through the police department quickly.

“I didn’t tell anyone about the ticket, and Jake found out about that. Besides, this Max probably has a big mouth. He’s a cop, after all.”

“You’re such a prude.”

“No, I’m sensible about work and sex.”

“You haven’t had sex in three years,” Karen pointed out. “I’m surprised you haven’t collapsed from orgasm deprivation.”

“Is there such a thing?”

“Yeah. That’s why I got a vibrator. I don’t need Steve as much.”

Lexie groaned. She really didn’t want to think about her friend’s toys over lunch. Luckily, their food came and they didn’t have to talk much at all.

* * * *

“Are you sure she’ll be in there?” Max asked Jake for the third time since Jake had picked him up from his room at the motel. “It’s Christmas. Why would she spend time in a bar at Christmas?”

“Cause she’s just as lonely as you.” Jake sighed as he pulled open the front door to The Dugout—a bar along the highway that never closed even on religious holidays.

“I’m not lonely.”

“Whatever. Besides, if you’re lucky, she’s had a couple shots of tequila and will be willing to listen.”

Max shrugged and started through the door. Greeted by music pulsing the entire small joint, the lights were dim enough so any dog would look beautiful in that light. Immediately, he found Lexie Lambert standing by the bar. Instantly, his hips twitched in her direction. *Does she already have some sort of leash on my dick?*

She wore a tight shirt showing off the luscious breasts without being encumbered by a bullet-proof jacket or uniform shirt. Her jeans hugged the curves of her hips, and were tight around her slender thighs. Holy shit, how he wanted to brace his hands on those hips, and...

A skinny man with a cowboy hat popped up beside her and began whispering in her ear. Max’s hand balled into a tight fist, especially as he watched her lips turn down into a frown. She easily pushed the cowboy away.

Relaxing his muscles a bit, Max started towards her. Jake whisked past him and

reached her side.

"Hey, doll." Jake greeted her and gave a kiss on the cheek. Jealousy pulsed through Max at Jake touching his lips to her skin. Max stopped his walk mere inches away from her and inhaled her scent—vanilla permeated with delicious femininity filled his nostrils over the stale smell of cigarette smoke and beer.

She flashed a smile at Jake, revealing a set of pearly-white teeth.

"I believe you two have met," Jake motioned towards Max.

Her gaze stopped at him and the smile fell. "Oh, it's you," she groaned.

"Yeah, it's me. It's nice to see you again." One glance told him that the feeling wasn't mutual.

"And I see someone I know," Jake interjected, slapping Max on the back and pushing him towards Lexie. "I'll leave you two alone."

As Jake fled towards a leggy blonde, Max kept his gaze on Lexie, and her green eyes studied him with suspicion.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No," she said through clenched teeth. "I've had enough. Since I have to drive home and all. In fact, I should probably get going."

She started to push past him. Instinct led him to grab her forearm. "Oh no, we have something to talk about."

"And what would that be?"

"The speeding ticket you gave me a few days ago. If it's not dropped, then my probationary period at the jail will be extended."

"Sorry. Not my problem."

"Oh, yes, it is your problem." She tried to wiggle away and he clasped her harder, pulling her to his chest.

Surprisingly, her face softened. "What do you want?"

"I want you to drop the charges."

"It's not that easy."

"I know you haven't been back in to file it. You can easily toss it."

"You're right, I can," she agreed, craning her neck upwards to meet his gaze. Even with her high-heeled boots, he stood a good head taller than her.

"I would be most grateful if you would. And I'd owe you a favor."

"You're right, you would." He released her arm and she leaned back against the bar. "The question is, what and when?"

Her voice carried a teasing tone that made the all too familiar bulge return to his crotch. Damn it, what was it about this woman? It was as though she had some sort of magical powers to make his cock float upwards just at the sound of her voice.

"How 'bout now?" he suggested.

"Hmm," she murmured and leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "But what?" Her breath was warm against his skin and she lowered back to her heels slowly, her body gliding against his as she moved.

"A dance," he suggested. It was far from what he really wanted from her, but it was a start.

She nodded and he easily slid his hand into hers to lead her to the small dance floor littered with peanut shells and cigarette butts. Obviously, they didn't sweep the place very often.

He'd timed it right as a slow song had begun to play, and he brought her toward him, wrapping his arms around her waist. Slowly, her arms laced around his neck, her elbows resting on his chest. Immediately, his cock responded by hardening and rising.

"So what's a girl like you doin' in a dive like this at Christmas?" he whispered into her ear. Maybe she could help relieve the tension mounting in his crotch.

"Nothin' better to do." She shrugged.

"I doubt that."

"It's my night off." Her small voice barely carried over the noise and music to his ears. He had to crane his neck downwards to look at her. He'd been right. She was a redhead. And a damn fine one at that. Her long curls fell in a mass down her back, framing her face with a delicate edge.

"No family?" He hadn't intended to get this personal, but it seemed appropriate for some reason.

"Just my great-aunt, Milly."

"Friends?"

"Yeah, but they're busy with their own lives tonight."

"So, that's why you're here with me."

She pushed away, her palms on his chest and narrowed her eyes with disgust. "I'm not with you," she proclaimed through clenched teeth. At the same time, he almost felt her shudder against him.

"But you could be," he crooned.

"Is it really worth this much to get out of a stupid speeding ticket?"

Max shrugged and dropped his arms as she took a step back. "I intend to stay around here for a long time and I don't want to start off bad."

"Like I said before, not my problem." Her green eyes turned icy and she turned away from him again. He didn't try to stop her and watched her walk towards the bar, her sweet ass moving to the music. If he didn't get to touch that rear and fondle the naked skin, he'd explode.

"How's it going?" Jake asked as he slapped him on the back of his shoulder. Max looked up to see Jake's arm around the blonde he'd chased earlier.

"Not good," Max muttered.

"Let me see what I can do." Still clasping his blonde, Jake went after Lexie.

Once again, Max clenched his fists as Jake approached her.

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Jake stepped up to the bar beside Lexie. "Why are you being such a bitch to my friend Max?"

"Excuse me?" Lexie felt her eyelashes flutter as she turned to look at Jake. The bottle-blond with fake eyelashes looked cheap and easy, which was probably exactly what he wanted.

"Cut him some slack. I think you two could have a good thing if you relax just a bit."

"What are you suggesting? That I go over there and offer to screw him?"

"Wouldn't hurt," Jake said with a shrug.

"You're sick."

"Look, I know it's been a while for you, but have you ever considered just having sex for the sake of sex?"

"Did he ask you to come over here and butter me up so I'd toss out the ticket?"

“No. But I think he could be exactly what you need.”

“Need?” She wasn’t aware she needed anything from any man, especially Max Davis.

“You need to have sex.”

“How would you know that?” She felt embarrassment heat her cheeks.

“You haven’t been with anyone since you split with Billy. A good one-night stand would do you some good.”

Looking over her shoulder toward Max, she watched him grab a beer bottle from a waitress. Her mouth salivated as she realized how well he filled out his jeans. He had a firm, well-defined butt just as Karen had said. His dark hair was cut short but somehow it suited him. And she could see those blue eyes sparkling from halfway across the joint.

“So, you’re suggesting,” she began slowly, “that I sleep with Max Davis.”

“I’m suggesting you give yourself a little Christmas present.”

“Can I have another shot?” she asked the bartender, who complied quickly, giving her a slice of lime as well. “Thanks.”

She licked her wrist, sprinkled salt on it and licked it off before taking the shot of tequila, which warmed her as it made its way down to her stomach. Putting the lime in her pursed lips, it took the edge off the shot. The liquid courage would give her the gumption to face Max.

“Just consider it,” Jake suggested. With that, Jake was gone, blonde in tow. Moments later, she saw them walk out the front door.

Jake’s suggestion echoed in her mind. There wasn’t anything wrong with a one-night stand. And Max Davis wasn’t a bad one to have it with. Maybe, just maybe, she could do it.

Licking her lips, she turned and leaned back into the bar to size him up. She knew how firm his pecs were from when she’d had her palms on his chest. Dark hair peeked out of the top collar of his tee-shirt.

Her hands twitched for a moment as she imagined running her hands down his chest and feeling that hair.

She walked back to Max. “Did you ride here with him?”

“Yeah,” Max groaned as he stared at the door.

“Sorry.”

Max shrugged. “Did you come to apologize?”

“No.” She exhaled hard. “I wanted to offer you a ride home.”

“And?”

“And that’s all. If you want it, then come with me. Otherwise, call a cab.”

Feeling a smirk on her face, she turned and walked towards the door. As she started to push it open, a man’s arm pushed it out for her. Over her shoulder, she saw Max.

“Now it looks like I have two things to make up to you.” Her stomach flipped at the thought of what he would consider “acceptable payback”.

Lexie shrugged and started through the parking lot. *We’ll see*, she thought to herself.

Chapter Three

“Do you want to come in?” Max broke the silence first after Lexie had pulled her SUV into the parking lot of the Chilhowee Inn just outside his room door.

“I don’t know.” She pushed the gear into park and clutched the shifter with a tight grip.

“It’s not much and I intend to get an apartment as soon as I can,” he said in defense of his meager housing arrangement.

He watched as she bobbed her head up and down in a nod. She stared out the window and wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“Do you always avoid peoples’ eyes?”

“Not intentionally.” She turned her eyes to him.

He sensed her nervousness from the way her knuckles turned a bright white, detectable even in the dim light coming through the windshield. But why? All she’d done was give him a ride home.

He moved his hand and covered hers atop the shifter. As his fingers caressed the top of her hand, running over the silk of it, he felt it relax a bit. He watched her soften her shoulders, relax into the back of the driver’s seat and lay her head back, her eyes still locked with his.

“It doesn’t have to end here, you know.” He hoped he carried enough suggestion in his voice.

“I know.” Her voice was small and carried a sweetness he’d never heard before.

“So come inside,” he urged her, tightening his grip around her hand and lacing his fingers through hers. Bringing the hand to his mouth, he kissed the inside of her wrist, coming the closest he had yet to tasting her. She gasped as he leaned closer and he detected the slightest of shivers despite the warm air flowing through the vents. He wanted to use his tongue to completely take her in.

Liquid fire shot through his veins and the erection in his jeans hardened even more. Just being in her presence had made his cock rise and stiffen the moment he’d started talking to her in the club. He wondered if he’d even be able to walk once he exited the car. *Oh, I’ll find a way to walk. If I have to crawl into the damn room to be with her, then I will.*

“It’s been a long time,” she confessed. Desire flowed through the deep sparkle of her emerald eyes.

“Long time since what?” He’d pulled her hand over to his thigh where it rested, still entwined with his own hand. Running the fingertips of his other hand up the inside of her arm to her shoulder, he gently caressed the outline of her breasts. The edge of her tongue peeked between her lips to wet her lower lip.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head. “Since I had sex.”

Max swallowed hard, trying to digest the disbelief of what she’d said. How was that possible? He’d wanted to touch her, taste her since the moment she’d torn that ticket off the pad.

“There hasn’t been anyone since my husband,” she continued and looked back at him for a brief moment. “We divorced three years ago.” Her gaze moved to her lap.

“He was a damn fool for letting you get away.” If he had a woman like her in his bed even once, he wasn’t sure he could let it only be for one night. He’d never even kissed her full on the lips and already he ached for more than one night with her.

“It doesn’t matter. I just don’t know that I’m any good at the one-night stand thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be a one-night stand,” he argued with a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “We can do it again.”

“No,” she shot back, pulling her hand away from him violently, folding it into her lap with her other hand. “I can’t invest in more than a one-night stand.”

Max sighed. “What do you want?”

“I want tonight and just tonight. Nothing more.” He detected a high degree of doubt in her voice.

“Are you sure?” Determined to show her a good time, he’d make sure she’d be back for more of him.

“It has to be. I don’t believe in happily ever after anymore.”

“There is a such thing as a middle ground, you know between a one-night stand and happily ever after.”

“I don’t want that either. I just want sex. Something to get me through the night.”

“Why tonight?” Keeping his eyes trained on her profile, he leaned back into the seat and grabbed her hand again, clenching it harder as his rock hard erection began to twitch at the nearness of her hand entwined with his on his upper thigh.

“It’s Christmas.” Her voice was laden with nostalgia. “Something has to make it special. I didn’t get anything I particularly wanted in the way of gifts.”

“Did you ask Santa to bring you a one-night stand?”

“No,” she replied with a soft laugh. He found it difficult to believe that a woman like Lexie would be satisfied with one night.

“Look, we either gotta go inside or say goodbye. It’s getting cold out here.” He didn’t see a need to dawdle and dance around the subject. Once he had her inside, he could release her breasts from that shirt and finally cup that sweet ass of hers. Oh, he’d show her how good sex could be.

She turned off the engine and then jumped out of the car. Apparently, she intended to come inside with him.

Initially, he followed her, as she walked toward his door, and then passed her to put his key in the lock. Before releasing the lock, he turned and claimed her lips for a kiss. Hard and fast, he tasted her. Finally, the urge was quenched for a moment as he took her in. She responded by letting her body fall into his and lacing her arms around his waist.

His fingers moved through her hair as he held her to him. The constriction in his crotch tightened even more. He needed more than a kiss. Even a cold shower wouldn’t cool him down now.

She kept her lips closed against his assault. She shuddered beneath his hands, either from the cold or his anxiousness. He slowed himself, realizing she might be nervous. He licked the seam of her lips slowly, nibbling at the corner and across her jaw to her neck. He could spend hours grazing his tongue over her soft skin. Her body fell into his and she laced her arms around his waist, hooking her fingers through his belt loops. Stronger than most women, she pulled him closer until his cock pressed against her belly. She gasped at their touch and he took advantage. He buried his tongue inside her mouth, licking her and dueling with her.

With reservations, Max pulled away for air.

"Let's go inside," he said, his breath a fog as he spoke into the chilled air.

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Lexie didn't hesitate to walk through the door with Max as he clasped her hand and led her inside. The motel room was simple with one double bed, which had apparently been made earlier, in the center. Several boxes sat in one corner and some other items littered the dresser where the television also sat.

He swept her back into his arms before she could take in the rest of the room. Soon, she felt her back pressed into the wall and his hands running through her hair. He crushed his mouth against hers for another kiss, and she complied, feeling the excitement run through her blood all the way to her toes. She found herself wiggling them a bit inside the pointed end of her boots.

The man certainly could kiss and if the growth mounting against her stomach was any indication, he was also enjoying it. The insides of her sex seemed to melt and started to cream her panties. The warmth of it shot through her pelvis.

Clenching the waistband of his jeans, her thumbs probed into his sides, feeling the tight muscles of a six-pack.

As cliché as it may have been, her eyes closed as she fell deeper into the kiss, his tongue massaging the inner confines of her mouth. Boy could he kiss. It was more than foreplay. She felt her heart beating beneath her ribs, pounding harder against him.

Slowly, she pulled the tail of his shirt from the waistband and moved her hands beneath it, palms running up his back with the fingers of one hand dipping into the back of his jeans.

As she came in contact with the waistband of his underwear, she realized he wore boxers instead of briefs. Cotton ones that were very soft from several washings. She wondered for a second what color or pattern they were.

She broke free from the kiss and moved her palms upward, taking the shirt with her. With his assistance, she pulled it over his head, revealing the taut chest and stomach that had been molded against hers. Stepping back, she took him in. Blue eyes darkened with lust. Dark hair dusted his chest with a trail leading down past his navel inside the waistband of his jeans.

"Like what you see?" he asked with a husky tone.

She could only manage to nod. With Billy, things had always been so quick that she hadn't had time to react or take him in.

"I think it's only fair that I see you without a top too," he said teasingly. She didn't resist when his hands went inside her baby doll tee, which he pulled gently over her head. "Are you wearing panties to match?" He tossed the shirt to the floor and one finger went beneath her bra strap.

"Yeah." Her voice caught in her throat. Due to her friend Melissa's obsession with her panties and bra matching, she'd picked up the habit.

He pulled the straps down to her forearms and let his fingers wander inside the cups, gently pressing into the soft molds. Her nipples hardened at the touch and begged to be released from the confines of the bra.

"I want to see them," he moaned.

Reaching behind her, he unclasped her bra. With a shrug of her arms, it fell to her feet. He took one breast in each hand, massaging and then pressing each nipple between a

thumb and forefinger. They beaded painfully, wanting more.

He lowered his head and took one into his mouth. He suckled until she thought her knees would buckle. "Please..." she needed to sit down. With light kisses, he moved across her chest and began torturing the other. "I have to..."

"What, babe? You have to what?"

She didn't know. All she knew was that she needed him to do it.

She threw her head back from the thrill filling her stomach when he started nibbling and kissing the inside of her neck.

Looking down at her, he took her hands. With ease, he stepped backward to the bed and sat, bringing her with him so she straddled him.

Dipping his head down, he flirted with her breasts once again, the sensation flooding her chest and sending an additional jolt to her heart. Any more jolts, and she'd be going into overload.

His touch encouraged her heart to beat at an increased rate, pounding and vibrating beneath his fingertips.

If she had time to think about it, she'd take in the surreal feeling of it. But she didn't. She just felt, and enjoyed being touched by a man.

She didn't care that his palms were rough and seared against her skin as they moved. The ecstasy pumping through her blood made it all so damn good there wasn't a word to describe it.

After he'd suckled and made her other breast bead with matching desire, he cupped her cheeks and brought her down with him as he lay into the bed. She didn't have time to feel silly about the fact that her designer boots knocked against his cowboy boots.

Their lips joined again for yet another kiss that sent not only volts of electricity through her, but a chill down her spine as though someone had run an ice cube down it. He rolled her over with a swift and easy movement.

Kneeling beside the bed, he reached beneath the cuff of her jeans and unzipped each boot, pulling them off with her socks.

She sat up enough to grab his hands and bring them to the waistband of her jeans. He unfastened them and slowly brought them down her hips. Instead of the chill hitting her skin, she felt warmth from the revealing action. Once he'd deposited her jeans beside the bed, he lay on his side next to her.

His hand lightly caressed the valley between her breasts, going lower and lower each time. He stopped for a moment with his palm on her belly to give her a quick, heated kiss.

While he moved back, she locked with his eyes, seeing a sea of blue that started to send a dizzy sensation through her head. His hand moved further down, dipping into the lace of her panties.

"Why do you shave if you haven't been having sex?" he asked with a grin. His fingers ran along her smooth skin.

"I don't know." She shuddered as one finger dipped inside her pussy. A friend had once told her it made sex feel better. Though it had been three long years since she'd indulged in sex, she had a motto of always being prepared.

He released a low, throaty groan that bordered on being animal.

He pulled the panties down. Wiggling her legs a bit, they fell from her feet.

"It certainly makes what I'm about to do a much more pleasant experience," he said

with almost a growl as he motioned his chin in the direction of her pussy.

He balanced over her long enough to kiss her lips. Blue eyes followed his hand as he stroked down the length of her body. "You're just as I imagine. Soft and my perfect fit." She watched as he planted kisses down her torso and delved his tongue inside her navel. With a nip against her belly, he continued his journey downward with a trail of hot, seething kisses.

As he reached the top of the triangle of her sex, he moved back to the floor on his knees. With a gentle tug, he pulled her down so her ass was on the edge of the bed.

Slowly, he parted her legs, and she complied without any doubts. Her legs hooked around his strong shoulders, her feet dangling down his back.

Looking between her legs, she held his gaze, getting lost again in his blue eyes, as two fingers entered the hot fire of her.

"Damn, you're wet," he remarked. She arched her hips upward a bit, wanting him to go deeper inside her. "I've got to find out if you taste as good as you feel."

Her entire body clenched in response as he removed his fingers and gave her a mischievous grin, lowering his face slowly to her. She watched his mouth disappear and saw only the top of his head.

His burning, searing tongue fluttered inside her. Warm and hot, he seemed to know where she needed to be touched. The arch in her back intensified so she felt as though she were a bucking horse instead of a woman.

The heat rose up higher through her pelvis and into her stomach where it helped her insides boil and steam with delight. The searing made her tense her muscles in the lower half of her body as she buried her hands in his hair. He didn't have much, but with what he had, she gripped it hard to keep a hold on him.

"Holy shit," she moaned. Nothing had ever felt that good before in her life. Everything went hazy for a moment as she climaxed and she dropped her hands to clutch the bedspread. She couldn't remember ever being that satisfied and still wanting more.

Her back relaxed on the bed as she panted hard and fast, the beat of her heart responding with an intense pumping of blood.

When her vision became clear again, she watched his face as he sat back on his heels and then, using the leverage of the bed, stood.

"Do you want me to return the favor?" She felt out of breath.

"No, I want to bury my cock inside there." His voice remained thick with pure desire.

"Sounds good to me." And it did. Too good. His fingers went to his fly and she sat up quickly. "No, let me," she urged him.

His hands went to her shoulders as her shaking fingers undid the button and pulled the zipper down. She gazed up at him for a moment as she yanked the jeans down his legs. They fell and he stepped out of them.

"I like your boxers," she commented. They were a plain faded red. The tip of his penis peeked out of the opening.

"I'd like 'em better if they were off."

Feeling her lips turn up in a smile, she complied and slipped them off his hips.

She took his dick in her hands to feel the hard shaft with a small bead of moisture oozing from the tip.

"Do you have protection?" Her voice was still thick and husky, surprising to hear.

He nodded and moved swiftly to the bedside table, where he pulled out a condom package from the drawer and handed it to her.

Ripping the package open with her teeth, she pulled out the condom. Slowly, she rolled it up his hard shaft until she reached the base nested in dark curls.

He reached down and pulled her up. With his hands back on her shoulders, he moved her back to the dresser. His hands on her hips, he raised her up, her rear on the slick top.

She'd read about moments like these in books but never had experienced them. She gave in readily as he stepped between her parted legs. Slowly, he slipped his cock inside her with a gentle thrust.

Almost immediately, she thought she felt the tickle in the base of her womb. Gripping his flexed biceps, her nails dug into his skin. She breathed too hard to kiss him just yet.

"Ohhh," she sighed ecstatically. The walls of her pussy tightened around him as he plunged deeper inside her.

To hold the feeling, she wrapped her arms around his waist.

He lifted her easily, his hands clasping her hips; helping her find a rhythm with him. With each moment, he moved deeper and deeper. Before she knew it, she felt her back pressed against the wall, as he continued to plow his way into her.

"You—fe—feel—so—so damn good," he panted, his breath hot against the side of her neck.

He felt good too. And to be honest, "good" didn't quite do the feeling justice.

Her climax built as she heard his breath increase in speed. Tightening her legs around him, she finally hit the ultimate bliss, trying hard not to melt from it.

"Oh, my God," she moaned. The words came from deep inside her chest.

"I can't hold it any longer," he groaned. His voice held a combination of thrill and near pain.

She felt the rush of his cum even through the confines of the condom. He pulled out slowly, helping her gain her footing before taking a step back. As he walked to the bathroom, she blindly made her way to the bed, where she collapsed onto the covers.

As she lay there, staring up at the stain-streaked ceiling, her chest heaved up and down with a giant force. Her heart complied by beating with matching intensity.

She heard a faucet run and looked to the side to see him taking a drink of water from a glass. Meeting her gaze, he put the glass down and stalked back to the bed. She noticed that his dick still seemed to hold some rigidity.

He lay down beside her and pulled her body into his. Finding her lips, he gave her a post-coital kiss. "Now, that's what I call a Christmas present," she said with a low laugh.

She brushed her hair away from her face as he kissed the tip of her nose. Every nerve continued to tingle at the experience and her breathing still hadn't returned to normal.

"And I haven't even brought out the mistletoe yet," he replied with a gleam in his eyes.

Her laugh intensified to an almost silly giggle, which he quelled by covering her mouth with his.

Too bad this is only for one night. But she couldn't change the rules of the game now. She'd just enjoy it while it lasted.

Chapter Four

Lexie blinked several times before she remembered she lay in Max's bed in his hotel room. She hadn't intended to spend the night, but she'd been so tired that she had just fallen asleep. God, she had missed sex. And spending a night in a man's arms certainly hadn't been all that bad either. She'd forgotten how much she liked it. Maybe the partner had something to do with it. Billy had never taken in every inch of her body and fulfilled her in such a way.

I should have tried a one-night stand long before now.

At the same time, muscles she hadn't used in years were tense and twitching from being exercised—or rather, sexercised—the night before. It was almost like the morning after that first hard workout where every muscle ached and rebelled against the routine.

Max was curled around her, naked skin to naked skin. Slowly, she eased her way out of his grip. It wouldn't be much of a one-night stand if she hung around for breakfast. With as much quiet grace as she could muster, she pulled on her jeans and shirt. She couldn't find her panties but had put her bra beside her keys on the dresser. When Max had her up there last night, she realized her rear had just missed sitting on them.

She pulled on her boots without her socks, since she could only find one of the pair, and when she did find the other, she stuffed them both in her pocket.

Tiptoeing against the worn carpet, she opened the door, which surprisingly didn't creak. Obviously, it was made for quick escapes such as hers.

She stepped outside and held the door as she closed it to avoid a slam.

Allowing herself to finally breathe, she took several deep breaths before starting towards her SUV.

She didn't notice the cold, despite her breath evident in the chill of the morning. Luckily, once she turned the key in the ignition, the heater quickly burned off the frost on the windows. When it had reached a point to where she could see, she pulled out of the space and headed for home.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel, sweating from the tension. Her stomach continued to flip at the night she'd shared with Max. Dear God, what had she done? Now, he'd expect her to tear up the ticket. And she could kiss her career goodbye. Did women ever get into trouble for using their jobs to get laid?

A few moments later, she turned onto the street to her apartment and had to immediately stop at a red light on the deserted street. Being the day after Christmas, only the stores would be seeing the traffic and she doubted many were open yet. It was still dark and even Santa probably hadn't made it home. Glancing down at the console, she noticed her cell phone had a message on it.

She unflipped it and dialed her voice mail.

"Hey girl," Karen's voice greeted her. "I hear you spent the night at Max's hotel room. Call me and let me know all the details."

"How in the hell?" Lexie murmured under her breath as she hit the seven key to delete the message. Folding up her phone, she tossed it to the passenger seat just as the light turned green.

Pressing the gas, she nearly jumped as her phone rang.

Grabbing it, she opened it without looking at the Caller ID screen. It was probably Karen. Leave it to her best friend to stay up all night and harass her about her newly discovered sex life.

“Hey,” Melissa’s voice boomed through her ear before she’d even had the chance to say “Hello.”

“Hey,” Lexie returned with less enthusiasm. “What’re you doing up so early?”

“I had to pee. Besides, Karen called me last night and said I’d probably want to talk to you.”

“Oh.”

“So you got lucky last night?”

“How in the hell do you know these things?” Did her friends have some kind of a tracking device on her?

“Karen,” Melissa replied.

“How did she find out?”

“Who else? Jake. He saw your car parked at the motel after he’d left his lady friend’s house.”

“Figures,” Lexie muttered. “Can’t he just mind his own business?” She knew the answer. No, he couldn’t mind his own business.

“So, how was it?”

Lexie rolled her eyes. Why had everyone take such an interest in her getting laid? It was as though each of her friends owned stock in her libido.

“Fine,” Lexie answered curtly.

“Oh, don’t give me that. When Spencer and I first hooked up, I had to tell you everything.”

“And as I recall, it was more like a recount of a hurricane than a love affair.” Spencer had taken nearly a lifetime to finally admit he loved Melissa. In fact, she’d nearly been killed in an explosion at the courthouse before he finally did. If hadn’t been for that crisis, Melissa and Lexie would likely still be living together and Melissa would be continuing to complain about her unrequited love. Luckily, to avoid Lexie having Melissa committed to an insane asylum, Spencer and Melissa had their happily ever after.

“Doesn’t matter. I still told you.”

“I don’t recall asking for the details. You were pretty free with them.”

“Oh.”

“And to be honest, I’m not the kind of girl to kiss and tell.” Her crotch began to protest at the roughness of her jeans rubbing against her skin.

“I knew it. You had yourself a good little Christmas present.” The empty road made driving while talking on the phone a fairly simple process.

“I got what I needed,” she assured Melissa. That was all she should know.

“It’s about freakin’ time.”

“This from the girl who waited two years to finally screw the man she’d been crushing on.”

“Hey, I’m happy now. That’s all that matters.” Melissa had a point, and Lexie wasn’t about to contradict her. Lexie didn’t think it good manners to argue with a pregnant woman.

Instead of answering her friend, she sighed, hoping it was loud enough to travel to her friend’s ear. She hated gossip, and especially disliked the way it spread through

Chilhowee Cove. If at all possible, she didn't want to be the subject of it or the one to spread it.

"Okay, okay," Melissa said with apparent surrender. "I'll let you go. I'm sure you have things to do today."

"Okay, bye."

Lexie folded up her phone and let it fall to her lap before Melissa could say another word. Things certainly didn't have much of a silver lining. With Jake running his mouth, everyone would know she'd spent the night with Max Davis. And the fallout could cost her job.

* * * *

When Max awoke, his arms were empty and cold and he wondered if he'd dreamed everything when he didn't see Lexie there.

Smelling her perfume in the pillowcases and sheets indicated he hadn't been dreaming after all. His thirst had been quenched by tasting her and being inside her.

His morning erection throbbed at him to go for another round. Had she been there, he would have rolled her over and plunged inside her as soon as possible. He loved early morning sex.

"Hey, little mister, she ain't here," he said down towards his crotch. He took her pillow and buried his face in it. It was the closest he could get to touching her, remembering how each curve felt beneath his fingers. It wasn't enough to satisfy his desire for her. He needed the real thing.

She apparently *had* wanted nothing more than a one-night stand. Slowly, he pulled himself to a seated position and placed his bare feet on the floor. As he stood, he felt something lacy beside his left foot.

Looking down, he saw Lexie's crumpled panties—black lace. He picked them up. He could almost taste her as he remembered pulling them off. She'd been primed and ready—more so than he'd expected. And if the noise she'd made was any indication, she'd thoroughly enjoyed herself. Well, now he had a little souvenir to remember her by. Not that he had a display case to put them in or anything. His fingers curled around them.

He thought that at one point she'd purred with delight, and he felt quite pleased at bringing out her animal instincts. She'd certainly brought them out in him. More so than any woman he'd ever known.

Who would have thought that the patrol cop with the nice ass would turn out to be such a sex kitten?

His cell phone rang, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah," he answered, seeing Jake's number on the screen.

"I guess you won't have to worry about that ticket after all," Jake said.

"Go to hell," Max muttered in response. He didn't like the idea of sharing something so intimate with someone and then blabbing it to the whole damn town. Lexie was way too classy and deserved much better than being the talk of Jake Blankenship's latest gossip round.

"Cut the crap," Jake snarled. "I know she spent the night at your place. Did you get lucky?"

"I'm not going to answer that." No matter what had passed between them the night before, it was still their business. Jake had no place prying into his very intimate night

with Lexie.

“Doesn’t matter if you do or don’t. I’ll get the full story.”

“I’m sure you will,” Max muttered. He almost believed what someone had told him—men could be worse gossips than women. Jake’s big mouth certainly could be amusing at times but right now, Max found it down right irritating.

“Ah, come on,” Jake said with a near whine. “I wanna know if those tits of hers look as good as I’ve imagined.”

“You’ll never find out,” he goaded Jake. He’d learned all about Jake’s reputation as a lady’s man and knew Lexie Lambert was one conquest he couldn’t fill.

“Of course I’ve tried,” Jake confessed. “Once when she was drunk on tequila at The Dugout, I tried to get her to flash me. Me and a couple of the other guys offered to make a huddle around her so we’d be the only ones to see.”

“Good thing you’re not holding on to any government secrets or else the entire nation would have been destroyed.”

“Oh, come on. I had every right to try and take a peek. Can’t blame a guy for trying.” Jake finished his story, oblivious to Max’s comment.

“I take it she didn’t comply.”

“No, she keeps them guarded I think. They probably have bullets in ‘em like in that Austin Powers movie.”

Oh no, Lexie’s breasts didn’t have bullets inside them, but they were still lethal weapons. He’d thoroughly enjoyed his attention to them. A sense of pride floated through his blood that he’d done something Jake Blankenship hadn’t—been to bed with Lexie Lambert. She was probably the only woman in the county Jake hadn’t been with.

He didn’t want to dignify Jake’s comment with an answer so stayed silent, which urged Jake to babble on.

“Didn’t I tell you that if you played your cards right you’d be the one to finally dust the cobwebs off that pussy of hers.”

“Hey, watch it,” Max warned.

“So, I guess someone did a little dusting after all.” Jake apparently thought Max had made a confession. Max still kept his mouth firmly closed. He may have been new, but he didn’t want talk of their coupling to spread to every ear in the county. He respected Lexie too much. Even if she had given him a speeding ticket. “Since you didn’t deny it, I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” he finished.

“Look, dude, I’m not in the mood to give you something to chew on for the local gossip. I don’t want a bunch of people in my business.” The last thing he needed was for his grandfather in Mountain View Village to hear about how his grandson screwed his way out of a ticket.

“Okay, okay. Just trying to help.”

“Well, you’re not being much help.”

Wearily, he returned to the bed, lying down and staring up at the ceiling. Geez, this motel is a dive. I need to step up the apartment search so I can get out of this hole in the wall.

“So, is this a one-night thing or are you two an item?”

“Damn it, Blankenship, let it go.”

“Look, if you’re gonna be pissy about it, then I’ll let you go and call someone who won’t bitch at me.”

“Fine,” Max replied through clenched teeth. He didn’t like the conversation they’d had to begin with.

“See ya.”

“Whatever.” Max clicked the “end” key. “I hope he hasn’t talked to anyone else about this,” he muttered.

No, likely, it had already spread through town. And the nitty gritty details about how they met and the speeding ticket would come out.

“Shit, she could lose her job if she pulls that damn ticket.”

Fingering his cell phone, he had an instinct to call her and tell her not to worry about it anymore. He’d pay the damn ticket. It would add thirty days to his probationary period but that was a lot better than her losing her job.

Before he depressed the key to go through the cell’s phone book, he realized he didn’t have a number for her. For a moment, he considered calling dispatch and having her paged. But if Jake had already blabbed, it would add more fuel to the already spreading wildfire of gossip.

He could wait until he ran into her again and ask for it, but he didn’t have the patience to give fate that much control.

No, the only person he could turn to was Jake Blankenship. He’d give him her number, but not without a price.

Max took several deep breaths weighing his options. He didn’t want to make Lexie out to be some kind of a tramp when she wasn’t. Knowing all too well how double standards worked, she wouldn’t come across very good. Gossip could be brutal. And from his time in the military, he knew gossip could destroy careers.

No, he had to come up with a better plan. He didn’t intend to let Lexie Lambert get away after just one night.

Chapter Five

After a shower, Lexie put on a clean set of clothes and made herself a fresh cup of coffee. She switched on the television to see that TiVo had picked up one of her favorite sitcoms now in syndicate. She watched it blindly, and couldn't concentrate because the events of the previous night continued to hammer through her head. Everything seemed to remind her of Max, including a commercial for Pepto Bismol. Maybe taking a swig of the pink stuff would relieve the tension he brought to her stomach.

Lexie couldn't believe she'd actually brought herself to indulge a one-night stand. It was far from anything she'd ever done before. It wasn't that her sexual experiences were limited to her ex-husband, but she didn't like to sleep with someone and not talk to him the next day.

Even if her liaison with Max didn't threaten her job, she'd still have guilt plaguing her for being so carefree. She couldn't have sex without emotions, especially when it felt so damn good. She could easily fall for Max Davis and get her heart stomped on in the process. Most sinful pleasures brought a person physical thrills. That didn't make them right.

Or was it wrong?

No, she couldn't be like other cops only concerned with physical desire and not other ramifications. Sooner or later, it would bite her in the ass. And when it did, she might not ever be able to recover. It had taken three years—three damn long years—to get past her split with Billy before even trying being intimate with a man. She might not ever be able to have another relationship again.

It had been one hell of a night, though. Okay, so maybe the sex without feelings thing had its good points.

With a sigh, she switched off her television and headed back to her SUV. She'd go insane thinking about Max.

She drove to Mountain View Village, where her great-aunt Milly lived. Her family duty would help keep her mind off Max. Or at least keep her from obsessing over it all day.

She tried to visit the aged woman at least once a week, and since it was the day after Christmas, Lexie knew Milly would likely be depressed about having spent it without relatives around her. Lexie's parents were long gone and Milly's kids were all too consumed in their own lives to take time to spend a moment on their mother. Lexie had offered to come over on Christmas Day, but the older woman insisted Lexie do something fun and visit her the day after Christmas.

Well, she had. Even though it probably wasn't what Milly had intended for her.

With a loud sigh, Lexie opened the front door to the village's main building, where Milly had her little apartment. She nodded and smiled to the nurse behind the desk, who now knew her by sight.

After reaching Milly's door, she knocked lightly and nobody answered. Since her aunt knew she was coming, Lexie immediately feared the worst. After all, she'd been having problems with her pacemaker the last few months. Panic flooded her chest and adrenaline began to take over her mind.

“Milly,” Lexie called as she turned the handle. Peering inside, she saw the living room vacant. She stepped inside and called “Milly” again.

Once Lexie stepped into the center of the small living room, she heard strange noises coming from the direction of the bedroom. With tentative steps, Lexie approached. Did Milly get a new television for her bedroom?

“Oh, Rupert,” Milly moaned. “Why didn’t we do this sooner?”

“The doctor just gave me the okay yesterday,” a strange man’s voice—presumably Rupert’s—said.

“Ohhhh,” Milly cried again.

“Yeah, I’m more than just checkers,” Rupert yelled.

“Eew,” Lexie muttered and turned for the front door.

But before she could reach it, the bedroom door opened.

“Oh, Lexie, I forgot you were coming,” Milly called.

Afraid to turn, Lexie stood frozen in place for several moments. “Sorry, Aunt Milly, but the door was open and you didn’t answer when I knocked so I…”

“It’s okay, dear,” Milly said. “Go have a seat on the couch. We’ll be right out.”

“No, I can go, and come back later,” Lexie insisted. She didn’t want to have to face Milly and her gentleman friend naked.

“No, no. I’ve missed you.” How did she have time to miss her great-niece? She’d apparently found someone to keep her busy.

That made Lexie do as her aunt bid once she heard the bedroom door shut. As much as she hated to admit it, a part of her was curious to know what had been going on.

Well, it looks like I’m not the only who got lucky. Yuck. I don’t want to think about it.

“Dear, can I fix you some tea?” Milly asked, interrupting Lexie’s thoughts. Lexie looked up to see her aunt tying the belt of her robe.

Geez, she could have at least put on some real clothes. That robe was ancient and Lexie remembered her wearing it when she’d visited her great aunt as a kid.

Apparently, Milly didn’t have any shame about what she’d just done. Oh well, the woman was in her eighties. She deserved a little fun. Though she’d always thought that being in a retirement village meant Milly had given up on dating. And didn’t people quit having sex after a certain age? Suddenly the v-word—Viagra—popped into her head. Oh, God.

“Uh, no thanks, Aunt Milly,” Lexie replied, rubbing her throat to ease the scratchiness inside. “So—um—who’s your friend?”

“Oh, that’s Rupert. He’ll be out in a minute. He’s so sweet.”

“Is he your boyfriend?” Lexie didn’t recall Milly ever mentioning a Rupert. Then again, it had been over two weeks since Lexie had visited her.

“No, not exactly.” Milly sat in the chair next to the couch where Lexie was seated. “He’s more of a friend. A friend with benefits.”

Eew again.

Lexie swallowed hard to avoid choking at the thought of Aunt Milly being so sexually free. “I see,” she managed to stammer.

“So, who’s this beautiful little lady?” an older man’s voice boomed from the edge of the living room. Lexie looked up to see him wearing a pale blue shirt that clashed with his bright green plaid golf pants. Apparently, it wasn’t his fashion sense that had attracted

Milly. The thought of being intimate and pulling those pants off made Lexie's stomach turn.

"This is my dear sweet great-niece, Lexie. Remember, I told you about her?" Milly rose and Rupert sat in her chair, bringing down his friend-with-benefits to his lap.

Lexie darted her eyes away to avoid watching Rupert as he pulled up the hem of Milly's robe and rubbed her knee.

"Yes, I remember everything you tell me, my dear," Rupert crooned.

"Lexie dear, this is Rupert Davis," she heard Milly say. The sound of the name "Davis" made her neck snap and she faced them.

"Davis?" Lexie inquired. It was a pretty common name. Surely, Rupert wasn't related to..."You wouldn't by any chance be related to a Max Davis? He works over at the jail?"

"Lexie's a cop, and a damn fine one," Milly cut in.

"I believe that," Rupert agreed. "I bet all she has to do is stand on the side of the road to stop traffic."

Lexie forced her mouth up into a smile, embarrassed heat filling her cheeks.

"Do you know Max?" Milly asked as she laced an arm around Rupert's neck.

"Um, actually, I do," Lexie admitted. *I know him very intimately. Too intimately.*

"He's Rupert's grandson. He moved back recently just to be close to him."

"Th—that's nice." The forced smile on her mouth was starting to cramp.

"He's such a sweet boy."

"He's certainly made me proud," Rupert said with a wild grin. "He went into the Marines like his old Pappy and did a damn fine job. He didn't make it a career, but I don't hold it against him."

"With all the turmoil in the world, I can't say I blame him," Milly said with a curt nod.

Lexie nodded in agreement.

"Hmmp. I never let that scare me," Rupert grumbled. Lexie imagined that very little deterred Rupert.

"Max doesn't strike me as a man who scares easily," Lexie broke in. Immediately, she regretted it. She shouldn't know him that well. "Not—not that I would know," Lexie stammered. "I did just meet him."

"Maybe the four of us could go out sometime on a double date," Milly suggested and Lexie saw a gleam in the older woman's eyes. "The cafeteria makes a good meatloaf on Friday nights."

"That's okay, Aunt Milly." Lexie didn't care how well-reviewed the cafeteria on the retirement community's campus was. She didn't want to sit at a table with Rupert, Max and Milly. That was a slightly scary picture.

"If you want me to set you up with my grandson..."

"No, that's okay." Lexie raised her voice by decibel. The last thing she needed was a set up with Max. They'd found their way together quite fine without Rupert's help.

"Are you sure, Lexie?" Milly asked. "He's a very nice young man. And he has the most gorgeous set of blue eyes, which he inherited from his grandfather here."

"You're so sweet," Rupert said as he wrinkled his nose and kissed Milly on the side of her cheek.

I don't need to see this.

Suddenly, an image of her and Max being that affectionate forty years in the future pulsed through her head. No, it was only a one-night stand. She couldn't think that way. To keep her skin from twitching, she had to get out of there and to a place where people weren't so—

“Listen, I don't want to get in your way so I'll just be...”

“No, stay,” Milly insisted as she paused in mid stand-up.

“Okay.” Lexie sat back and folded her hands in her lap. She clenched her jaw and squared her shoulders.

“Well, speaking of my grandson...” Rupert paused, swatted Milly on the rear, and pushed her to a standing position and then followed. “I need to call him.”

“Oh good. Then Lexie and I will have a nice little visit.” Milly followed Rupert to the door and Lexie looked away just in time to keep from seeing their slurping kiss that could be heard across the room.

Once Milly had closed the door behind Rupert, she took several steps back into the living room and then put her hands on her hips.

“You know, it wouldn't hurt to at least go out with Max once,” she suggested. “If he's anything like his grandfather, he's probably great in the sack.”

“Yu—uck, Aunt Milly.” Lexie covered her ears with her palms. She didn't want to admit that she already knew Max was “great in the sack”. And out of it.

“When did you become such a prude?” Milly rolled her eyes and returned to her chair, crossing her legs at the ankles.

“When did we start talking about our sex lives?”

“Aha. Now, at least you admit to having a sex life.”

“No,” Lexie said a little too quickly. “I just meant in theory.”

“Dear, I'm worried about you. Has there been anyone since Billy?”

Now her great-aunt was interested in her sex life—or until recently, lack thereof.

Lexie looked away. She couldn't tell a lie even by omission. But if she told Milly, *she'd* tell Rupert and God only knew who Rupert would talk to.

“Listen, ever since Rupert and I began seeing each other, my cholesterol is close to what it was in my younger years. Sex is one of those things that can be tailored to each person and their...”

Lexie held up a hand to make Milly hush. She felt her entire body cringe as she continued to stare out the window of the apartment. The thought of Milly having more of a sex life than herself was depressing.

“Why don't you tell me how your Christmas was,” Lexie suggested, forcing sweetness into her voice. She turned to face her to show interest. Fear began to shake her stomach at what Milly might say.

“Oh, it was nice. Rupert had a piece of mistletoe that one of the nurse's husbands shot down in the woods a week ago. We hung it up in my bedroom.”

Holding her lips together tightly, she simply nodded. *Think about something else. Cleaning my gun. Cuffing someone twice my size. Physical fitness tests...*

“And Rupert gave me a copy of the Kama Sutra specifically designed for senior citizens. As a special treat, we tried page twenty-five in honor of Christmas.”

Dear God, what did I do to deserve this torture? If it was for having a one-night stand, I promise I won't have another one if you make Aunt Milly stop talking about her sex life.

“I thought you and Rupert were just friends with benefits?” It seemed strange at how Aunt Milly gushed about him. And here Lexie thought that when you had such a special friend, one of the perks was keeping it a secret.

“Yeah, we are.” Milly shrugged. “But we just don’t want to bog ourselves down with a commitment. There’s not much point when you reach our age.”

Lexie had to admit that she made some sense. “I guess. Listen, Aunt Milly, can we talk about something else?” Her stomach couldn’t take much more.

“Oh, of course we can, dear. How’s your job going?”

Yet another topic she didn’t want to discuss.

* * * *

As Max put on his uniform, he couldn’t believe that Christmas had come and gone. Other than the gift certificate to a local restaurant from the sheriff, he hadn’t gotten any gifts. Pappy didn’t have a car anymore, but had given him a nice wad of cash, which would come in handy when he found an apartment.

Pappy had said he was busy with his lady friend and couldn’t spend time with his only grandson on Christmas. Pappy always had a way of finding friends—usually female—wherever he went.

He felt the corners of his lips turn up into a smile. “I wonder if such prowling runs in the family.”

Shaking his head, he picked up his wallet, and the paper speeding ticket fell out. He’d brought it with him to the club the previous night with the hopes that Lexie would drop it. As it was, the subject hadn’t come up again once they’d gotten to his hotel room.

With a shrug, he unfolded it.

“I guess I’ll go ahead and pay this.” He didn’t want to get her into trouble with her job. She looked too damn good in that uniform. Of course, she looked better out of it. And that’s what he intended to see again.

* * * *

Though it was the day after Christmas, the police station was open for business since it was a weekday. Max swung by on his way to work.

He walked into the newly remodeled city offices and went to the window indicating police tickets.

After he’d stood at the window a couple moments, a short woman with a shirt with “Chilhowee Cove Police Department” stitched on it, came up to the counter.

“May I help you?” He noticed that she didn’t make contact eye contact with him.

“Yeah, I want to pay this ticket.” He slid it along the metal tray under the glass to her.

She took it and looked it over for a moment. “You know that this hasn’t been filed yet.”

“So? I can still pay it, can’t I?”

“Yeah, but it will probably cost you more because I’ll have to charge you the standard fee. Once it’s filed, it may go down.”

“I don’t care,” Max muttered with a shrug, speaking into the silver microphone opening between them. “I just want to get it taken care of.”

“Okay, Max.” There was a glint in the woman’s voice and as he looked with her brown eyes, he saw a hint of a sparkle. “But if Lexie decides not to file it, the city doesn’t give refunds.”

“How much do I owe you?” If he had any chance of seeing more of Lexie Lambert, he had to get this ticket nonsense taken care of.

“Three hundred dollars.”

“What?” How could charging such an exorbitant fine be legal?

“As I told you, if the ticket hasn’t been filed then we have to charge the maximum fine.”

“Why?” This seemed a bit ridiculous. Leave it to him to fall into a loophole.

“Well, the city council passed an ordinance that allows us to charge the maximum fine until the ticket can be filed. Once the ticket is filed, the city judge imposes a fee based on the individual ticket. Then, someone can contest it in court.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

The woman shrugged. “Sorry, Max, I just work here.”

“Do you always call customers by their first names?” He detected something suspicious—besides an overpriced speeding ticket.

“I saw your name on the ticket. Jake told me you guys were friends. And Lexie is one of my best friends.”

“Oh.” It seemed like such a small world all of a sudden. Next, she’d tell him she went to high school with his cousin.

“Listen, the ordinance also states that if the officer doesn’t file the ticket within ten days of the alleged infraction, then all charges are dropped. But we can’t refund your money.”

“Look, I just want this over with.”

Begrudgingly, he pulled out his checkbook. He’d already written in “Chilhowee Cove Police Department” and signed it. All he had to do was fill in the amount and tear it off for the lady. He did, and slid it under the glass.

“I’ll get you a receipt.” She turned and went to a computer where she typed in several things and then waited for a receipt to print out. “Here you go.” She slid it under the glass to him and offered him a smile.

“So what’s your name?” he asked. After all she knew his name. It made sense that he know hers.

“Karen—Karen Pollack.”

“Well, it’s been nice to meet you, Karen.” He folded up the receipt and put it in his checkbook. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again.” She nodded. Turning on his heels, he exhaled loudly and returned to his truck.

Chapter Six

Lexie clenched her jaw and folded her fingers around the steering wheel in the hopes of driving out the thought of Rupert and Aunt Milly.

“Who would have thought there’d be such a market for a short man in his eighties with a hump?” she said with a sigh. As she stopped at a stoplight, the pager clipped to her jeans’ waistband began to buzz. She had to wear the blasted thing all the time—well almost all the time—as all officers were considered to be on call twenty-four hours a day. Since nothing catastrophic ever happened, it was usually a way for someone from the department to get in touch with her on her days off.

With a groan, she pulled it out of its casing and saw a text message. “CALL ME ASAP. KP.”

“What does Karen want now?” With a shake of her head, she waited until she pulled into the gravel driveway of her apartment building before pulling out her cell.

“This is Karen.” Her friend answered the phone with a cheerful voice.

“What do you want?” More than likely, she had to correct something on a report.

“He paid his ticket,” she said with a whisper.

“Who?” Lexie replied with a matching tone. She really wasn’t in the mood to play games.

“Max Davis.”

“Why?” Once the word came out, Lexie realized it had a squeak to it. “It hasn’t even been filed yet,” she said in a more even tone.

“I know. And he paid the full amount.” Karen’s voice continued to be low, which indicated she didn’t want the rest of the front office staff listening to the conversation.

“Whatever,” Lexie sighed.

“You must have been really good last night.” Of course, that would come up again.

Lexie didn’t dignify the comment with an answer.

“I mean he wouldn’t have paid three hundred dollars and faced that extra month of probation unless it was really worth it,” Karen continued. “Did you give him a blow job?” she asked in an extra low voice.

“Karen, I’m not going to talk to you about this. As I said, it’s really nobody’s business what we did or didn’t do last night.”

“Oooh, so you did do something, didn’t you?”

“Karen, stop.” Lexie turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car. She lowered her voice so her elderly neighbors wouldn’t hear the conversation. Then again, they probably didn’t care what she did or didn’t do on her own time.

“Oh I get it. You’re worried they still have the phones tapped.”

“No, I wouldn’t tell you anyway. There are some things that shouldn’t be talked about among friends.” Not that it made much of a difference with hers.

“Then how else will it get around?”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“All right, fine, be that way.”

“See ya later.”

“Yeah, bye.”

With a shake of her head, she folded up the phone and started up the stairs to her apartment. Then her phone beeped indicating she had a voice mail.

“Why didn’t that beep before?” she muttered as she reached the door. After turning the key, she entered her apartment and sat on the couch with a huff. Pressing the necessary button, she entered her voice mail.

“Hey, doll,” Jake’s voice greeted her. “I gave Max your number. He’ll probably be calling you later on today.”

“Shit,” she groaned. Now that Max had made the noble gesture of paying his ticket, he’d probably expect something more. After deleting the message, she folded the phone back up and threw it to the other side of the couch. Rubbing her face with her hands, she tried to massage away the memory of the previous night replaying through her head.

The feel of Max’s skin. The way his hands had explored her body. They’d had an intimate and personal experience.

“That’s being shared with the whole damn town,” she groaned.

Just then, Melissa’s cat, Sybil, jumped into her lap. “Murr—oww,” Sybil purred as she looked up at her mistress. Because Melissa’s husband had been allergic to cats, she’d left the orange tabby with Lexie when she’d moved out.

“Hey girl. You should be glad you don’t have such problems.” Scratching the top of the cat’s head, she felt Sybil’s purr increase in volume. “No, as long as you get a good petting every once in awhile, you don’t have an urge for anything more. Must be nice.”

With a sigh, Lexie let the back of her head fall into the cushion of the couch. She wanted to crawl into bed, escape under the covers and pray she wouldn’t dream of Max. Closing her eyes, she tried to breathe deeply to avoid anger at the situation boiling up in her chest. Whatever happened to discretion?

Of course, it had been the lack of discretion that led Lexie to discover Billy’s affairs during their marriage. That had been a blessing in disguise. Now he was gone, she didn’t have to worry about who or what he may pick up.

She hadn’t wanted to get involved with another cop for that very reason. She didn’t want everyone knowing about her sex life. She knew too much about other people’s for her own peace of mind.

The melody of her cell phone made her jump and Sybil dug her claws into the material of her jeans in response. As she sat back up, the cat jumped to the floor and headed back to the spare room.

Glancing at the Caller ID, she saw the jail’s number.

“Well, he didn’t waste any time,” she muttered. She tossed it back down, determined not to talk to Max Davis just yet.

And of course a few moments after it stopped ringing, the phone beeped with a message.

* * * *

Max groaned as he hung up the phone after calling Lexie for the fourth time that evening. He knew she was blowing him off.

And he didn’t like it.

He’d made the one mistake he’d said he wouldn’t. He asked Jake for her phone number, which of course, added fuel to the already flaming gossip fire.

An hour before he was scheduled to go home, Jake sauntered in with a drunk driver

he'd arrested.

"Did you talk to her?" Jake asked as he handed Max a copy of the police report.

"I called but she didn't answer." Max kept his eyes on Jake.

"She may be avoiding you," Jake grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "If you want to talk to her, you ought to go to her apartment."

"I don't know." That seemed a little drastic. He barely knew Lexie—well, at least not in the emotional sense. He knew her very well in the physical sense. Banging on her front door to get her to talk to him seemed a little too much.

"Here, hand me that notepad." Max did as Jake bid and Jake began scribbling on it. Peeling off the top page, he handed it over. "That's her address and directions from the jail. Since she goes back on shift tomorrow, she'll probably be up late knowing she's going on graveyard for a week."

Max looked down at Jake's scrawls. It seemed so simple. But it wasn't.

"Thanks, man," Max said.

"Any time." Jake tipped his hat and went to one of the other corrections officers to talk about paging the magistrate.

Max folded up the paper and pushed it into his pants pocket. Well, he might just stop in on Lexie Lambert on his way home.

* * * *

Lexie had pulled on her most comfortable and worn flannel pajamas as she settled in with a stack of DVDs to watch. In order to create the illusion of a movie theatre, she'd dimmed the lights and popped a batch of extra buttery popcorn. It was something she and Melissa had enjoyed when they'd both been single. Now, it was just Lexie and Sybil.

Reclined on the couch, Sybil had settled on Lexie's bare feet and had long since gone to sleep. Sybil didn't like movies as much as Lexie.

When a thundering knock came on the front door, Lexie thought she would jump out of her skin. Nobody visited her this late. Especially without calling. Even Sybil was startled, and after digging her claws into Lexie's calves, she jumped off the couch and went behind a chair.

Grabbing the gun she always kept nearby, Lexie walked quietly to the door. Undoing the deadbolt, she opened it, leaving the chain on for added protection.

Peering through the small opening, she saw Max standing there in his all black corrections officer's uniform.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in exasperation. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail and wore no makeup. If she'd known he was coming, she might have at least done something to make herself more presentable.

She shut the door, unfastened the chain lock and then opened the door again. She let him see her put the black handgun on the end table, which brought a smirk to his lips.

Leaning into the doorframe, she folded her arms under her breasts, now aware she wasn't wearing a bra to lift and separate them to the desired position.

"You left without saying goodbye," he replied with a grin.

"What was there to say?" She shrugged.

"Uh, maybe 'good job last night' or 'let's do it again'?"

"Sorry, I thought it was a one-night stand." She crossed one foot over the other.

"And as I told you last night," he said slowly taking a step forward. "It didn't have to

just be one night.”

Groaning under her breath, she opened the door wider. “Come on in.” As he stepped through the threshold, his sleeve rubbing against hers, she wagged a finger in front of his face. “But it’s not an invitation.”

“Noted.” He held his hands up in surrender and his blue eyes twinkled.

He walked inside and made himself at home on her couch by putting his feet on the coffee table and lacing his hands behind his head.

“Feel free to make yourself comfortable,” she said sarcastically. She sat on the arm of the couch. “Now why are you really here?”

“I thought you’d want to know that I paid my ticket so it’s a moot point. Now we have nothing standing between us.” His voice was filled with confidence and exuded pure desire. He appeared to be a man who always got what he wanted. And it seemed that he wanted Lexie. At least for now.

“There isn’t anything between us.”

She avoided his gaze. If she looked too deeply into his blue eyes, she’d melt. With a swift move, he reached over, pulled her off the arm of the couch and placed her into his lap.

“You sure about that?” His breath was hot against her cheek. She started to wiggle out of his grasp, but he tightened his grip on her arms, holding her down.

Her jaw clenched and she bit her lower lip to avoid giving into the knowledge that she was salivating for his kiss. She couldn’t surrender to him again. It clouded her mind so she could barely think straight. Not a good quality in someone who’d taken a vow to serve and protect.

Releasing one of her arms, he cupped her cheek and gave it a gentle nudge to face him. Her eyes locked with his. The one thing she feared—melting—started. Along with the usual mischief, his blue eyes glistened with a something more—deep yearning. And if she had any doubts, the mounting erection against her hip told her for sure. He wanted her.

She felt paralyzed; he seemed to hypnotize her with his eyes.

I have to break free. I have to stand up. I can’t fall for Max Davis.

Before she could react, he covered her mouth with his. He gave her what she’d salivated for, quenching a need so primal she bordered on being animal instead of human. Her muscles relaxed, and her doubts slipped away. She could survive being kissed by him. As yearning for more built in the pit of her stomach, she felt her sex cream.

Finally, he pulled away for air.

“Now what?”

“What do you want?” His tone was serious and oddly objective.

You.

Once again, she bit her lip, her mind taking back control. She couldn’t give into him again. So, she said nothing.

“I had a thought,” he said with a low moan. “I thought maybe we could have a real date.”

It sounded good. He kissed her forehead and nuzzled her neck with his hands.

“We could start with dinner and maybe come back here for some dessert,” he suggested. He moved his lips to the inside of her neck, giving her tiny kisses as he explored.

“Not tonight.” Her body stiffened. He responded by sitting back into the couch.

“Okay. When?” He raked a hand through his short hair.

“I start graveyard tomorrow. How about Friday night when I’m off?”

“Okay,” he replied with a shrug. “I think I’m off that night too.”

“So, it’s a date?” Her tone was hopeful, bordering on desperate. The part of her that feared rejection seemed to be turned off for the moment.

“Yeah.” She stood quickly with a bounce to her movement. Slowly, Max stood as well. “I guess I should be going. You probably have things to do.” He nodded towards the television, where Lexie’s movie was still frozen in place. “I’ll holler at you tomorrow for the time.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

“And you’ll answer your phone?” He gave her nose a friendly tap.

“I’ll answer my phone,” she vowed quietly.

“Good.” He gave her a quick kiss to her cheek. Two steps behind him, she went to the door. “I’ll see you later.”

He opened the door and left. A twinge of disappointment floated through her that he didn’t give her a kiss goodbye. Perhaps it was fair play. She hadn’t told him goodbye that morning.

Chapter Seven

As Lexie's long legs paced across the linoleum of the kitchen floor, she gnawed on her right thumbnail.

Despite expecting him, Lexie jumped when a soft knock sounded on the door. With a few quick steps, she opened it to see Max standing before her.

His dark hair matched the black of his leather jacket with his cornflower blue eyes shining out in contrast.

"I almost didn't recognize you with clothes on," Lexie told him with a laugh as Max crossed the threshold into her apartment.

He responded with a sly smile, his eyes glistening in the softness of the lamplight and flickering of a nearby candle.

"Come on in."

His lips curled and parted enough to reveal his white teeth as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Would you like some wine?" She hoped alcohol would help kill the jitters in her stomach. Though he did not immediately take her in his arms and rip off her clothes, she was well aware that he was there for something more than a social call.

"No." The simple word seemed to echo in the kitchen for a moment.

Lexie returned his smile, went to the counter, and poured herself a glass of wine, hoping the first sip would make it less awkward to stand around with the black satin thong underneath her tight blue jeans. She'd only worn it because she knew he'd be peeling off her jeans and would see them. Otherwise, she would have opted for the bikinis she normally wore.

"Are you sure?" she insisted as she picked up the bottle again. Her eyes met his again, and she had to look away quickly to avoid melting at his feet.

"No, I prefer beer." His voice was thick and honest.

Lexie was immediately reminded of her ex-husband and that this was her first date since her divorce. After all, their previous coupling couldn't really be considered a date. Then again, she didn't want to analyze things now. She had a good-looking guy in her apartment. She had every right to take advantage of the situation.

"Sorry, I don't have any beer."

He simply nodded. Walking past him, Lexie made her way into the living room and folded her body onto the couch as she placed the wine glass on the coffee table. Max followed and sat beside her toward the right corner.

"So where do you want to go to dinner?"

"Now, I'm thinking I'd rather order a pizza if that's okay with you." From the suggestive tone in his voice, she knew they wouldn't be eating for quite awhile. Her stomach had been twitching with so much nervous tension that she wouldn't be able to eat anyway.

"That's fine," she said with a shrug. She wasn't sure how the logistics of going somewhere would work. Nobody drove her SUV and she wasn't about to sit on the back of a motorcycle. And for some reason, she didn't like the idea of driving on a date. Even though she considered herself a liberated woman, she just had the idea that maybe a man

should drive on a date.

Lexie closed her eyes in an attempt to calm the jitters jolting through her blood. It didn't work. She'd never wanted to be naked with someone this much in her entire life.

The quiet of the awkward haze surrounding them intensified the nerves in her stomach. Having not eaten in the past few days, her stomach growled at any mention of food. Why weren't they talking? Did they have anything to talk about?

"Is your hair different?" he asked suddenly. At least it was conversation.

"I usually pull it back during work," Lexie explained with a nod, a hand touching the top of her head. "I had it down the other night, though." Obviously, he hadn't paid it too much attention. Or maybe he was just trying to make small talk.

"I guess you can't keep yours shaved like the rest of us," Max replied, referring to the typical cop buzz cut so many had. For some reason, the cut suited him.

"I could, but I don't," she said with a groan. After all, if she shaved her head, he wouldn't be with her now.

Lexie began to lean in again to grab her wineglass when Max suddenly pulled her toward him roughly. Their lips met, and her tongue slowly entered into the depths of his mouth. Slowly, but surely, her nerves started to settle as they connected and spoke in a way they had found most successful.

When he kissed her, there was no need for words. All she had to do was feel. And she did. It was damn good. New sensations fluttered through her nerves and her whole body seemed to be possessed by another force.

With their lips still connected, Max brought Lexie to him, settling her into his lap. Her palms pressed to the side of his face to remind herself that what was happening was in fact real and not part of a dream. It was better than a dream because she could touch and feel. Every last desire could be quenched.

"Hmmm," she moaned when they finally parted for a breath.

"Damn right," he agreed hungrily.

"So how did I do?" She still had performance issues when it came to being intimate with a man. Though it was an odd question to ask since they'd already been together once and this wasn't exactly their first kiss.

"Let me see..."

He crushed her lips underneath his, this time taking her mouth with a bit more power. With each gentle probe with his tongue, they became closer, their hearts beating almost in unison. His urging was gentle and knowing, a sure sign he was more than prepared to physically love her.

I guess we're having dessert before dinner.

Not that she minded. As long as she could kiss him, she didn't need food. She might lose a few pounds in the process, but it was a low price to pay.

God, a kiss had never been this good. Now that she thought about it, even with her ex-husband she easily got bored and wanted nothing more than to get his elephant tongue away from her. So many times, she'd wished she could read or watch television while Billy did his thing. Not with Max. She didn't need any other entertainment as long as she had him.

With every beat of her heart, their bodies pressed closer together, longing pulsed quicker through her veins. She couldn't remember the last time she wanted something so badly. Needed something so much.

His hands moved from her hips and he circled his fingers into the material of her belt loop as leverage, pulling her as close to him as possible. To make it more comfortable, she repositioned herself so her legs straddled him, a jean-covered knee on each side of his hips. It still wasn't close enough for her and her clit ached from the closeness with Max. Her entire being begged for him to explore her skin.

"So I guess I'm doing okay." Her voice had a husky tone against his lips.

Max grunted an approval that said he was still hungry for her. The hunger was calmed when they connected again, this time, faster, harder jolts going through their bodies with climbing need and want.

Turning to lie on her back against the length of the couch, she pulled him with an easy grace, their mouths not parting for a millisecond as they moved. Her right leg curled on top of his legs as he settled on her, crushing her breasts into his chest.

Slowly, her hand reached up under his shirt, stroking upward toward his pecs. Max's taut, sculpted chest surprised Lexie for a moment. Why hadn't she realized how chiseled his body was last time?

*

With her hands still exploring the contours of his upper body, Max dropped one of his to Lexie's stomach, the warmth of her skin pulsating into his palm.

He couldn't resist letting his hand to travel upward, taking the hem of her black knit shirt with him. "You smell good enough to eat," he grunted.

His mouth went to the soft spot above her navel and made a trail of kisses as he pulled her shirt over her head.

The trail ended when he reached the lace of her black bra. Biting on the bow in the center of the creamy mounds held up by the black lace cups, he pulled it upward for a second. Her breasts nearly fell out of the bra and he felt them calling to him to release them from the lacy prison.

One hand slid around and unhooked her bra, each breast falling a bit as it was released from its bondage. He went to work, taking one of the nipples into his mouth, his teeth slowly grating against it before changing to the other one.

She groaned deeply from the pit of her chest. Pure desire was apparent as she shivered beneath his fingers.

She arched her upper body toward his mouth to bury his face in her breasts; he made a dent in her wanton need before her hands went to his waist.

Her nimble fingers unclasped the button and slowly pulled down the zipper, his hardness relieved against her soft hands. Pushing deeper inside his pants, she yanked the jeans down his hips, leaving them pooled around his ankles.

Looking up at her, he offered a wry smile and then sat, removing his shoes and socks quickly before depositing his jeans beside them. She sat up and gazing into the deep sea of his eyes, she pulled his shirt over his head.

He stood, bringing her with him. Once again, he gathered her into his arms and started kissing her, the hardness of his cock pulsing against her belly.

"Do you want to go to the bedroom?"

"If you want to. I don't care as long as I have you."

Without a word, she turned on her heels and led him towards the bedroom by the hand.

*

Standing beside the bed, she felt some satisfaction at having lit so many candles as it provided a very romantic atmosphere for them. He wasted no time in unfastening her jeans and pulling them down her legs. Kneeling, he began nibbling and kissing her inner thighs, slowly making his way to her sex.

He stood and eased her to the bed. "I want to do this right this time," he said.

She nodded, her body trembling with the need to be touched. She watched as he slipped off his boxers, revealing his erect cock, obviously in search of her.

"The condoms are on the night stand," she said softly. She'd known all along that they'd end up in this place.

He offered her a grin and then took one out and slid it on. Slowly, he moved his body over hers. He seemed to take her in for a moment, his hand stroking slowly up and down from her hips to her shoulder. Then, he dipped into the front of her thong.

"I love thongs," he grunted. His fingers pressed into her sex, and then he yanked away the flimsy material. With some wiggling from her, he slid them down and off. "Can I keep these too?" he murmured.

He buried his tongue in her mouth before she could answer. Arching her hips against him, she begged him to enter her, fill her. With relish, he indulged her, starting softly.

Her knees parted, welcoming him, almost begging for more than the gentle pace at which he moved. Wrapping her legs around his, she brought him deeper inside her, pushing her own hips up to find a quicker rhythm to match the beating of her heart.

"Slow down," he urged. "I want to savor this."

"I need it faster," she groaned.

"You'll get exactly what you need, don't worry."

He cupped a breast with his hand, slowly massaging it. Then he moved to the other. All the while, he thrust into her just enough to keep the movement for a slow building orgasm.

It wasn't enough for her. She wanted it harder. Faster.

With her palms on his chest, she used all her force to turn him over to his back, rolling on top of him and straddling him. Despite the movement, he remained inside her. Surprise seemed to gleam in his eyes at her taking control of him.

"I guess you like to be on top?"

"Not usually." She'd never taken over like this in bed before, usually opting for the missionary position. But she wanted it this time. For once in her life, she had to go get what she would please her.

Moving with the expert grace of dancing abilities she didn't know she possessed, she explored new rotations, motions to touch each spot she wanted aroused. With his hands firmly clasping her hips, he followed her and matched her. She didn't care if every inch of her body ached tomorrow. She would do whatever she could to have her desires met.

It seemed a perfect compromise for the moment. She pushed him deeper inside her and he slowed her movements down to keep it going as long as possible.

New sensations burned through her, up her stomach and creating tingles through her body. Digging her fingernails into his chest, she pushed harder for more. He didn't resist and gave her exactly what she needed.

"Ohhh," she moaned with her first sweet release.

She wasn't near done. Now that she'd discovered that she didn't have to fake orgasm, she wanted more. And she got it. With a smile of satisfaction on his face, she

continued to ride him, going as hard as she possibly could. Her heart beat so fast she could feel the pulsing in her ears.

Grabbing his hands, she laced her fingers through his and pushed his arms back above his head, finding yet another area she didn't know needed pleasing.

Feeling her toes curl and her lower half tightening, he complied without any hesitation. Oddly, he seemed content to let her have her way this time. And to her, it made him more of a man.

"This time, we'll come together." He grinned.

She nodded, breathing too hard and fast to say anything. Her blood pumped hot, nearly burning as it moved. A slow, deliberate burn, careful to hit every necessary spot it seared.

He bucked upward and froze for a moment and from the way his eyes went hazy, she knew he'd climaxed. At the exact same time, that orgasmic fire shot through her once more.

Partly from exhaustion, she collapsed at his side, panting hard. Exerting herself had never been so good. Despite her usual workouts and pushing her body to the brink of physical pain, this was different. That fluttering in her stomach was met with pure satisfaction.

"You certainly surprised me," he told her in a husky tone. He propped his head up with his left elbow resting on the cushion of the bed beside her, continuing to release steam into the air around them.

Her eyes closed and she made a soft moan as he placed a hand on her stomach.

"Hmmm," she finally replied to him. Moving that right hand to her hip, he hooked it and pulled her into him to place a soft kiss on her forehead.

She had opened up, and for once in her life shared her body without any qualms or expectations.

I think I could get used to this.

Maybe this was how sex was supposed to be. Here, she'd thought their previous coupling had been a fluke. No, it was more than that. It was real.

Chapter Eight

They finally ordered their pizza, which they ate sitting around her coffee table, candles providing their only light. Max gave in and took a glass of wine with his dinner.

"This is a hell of a lot better than going out to eat," he said.

Lexie nodded in agreement, her mouth full of pizza. She'd certainly earned every bit of fat and calories in the extra cheese and pepperoni.

He'd pulled on his jeans and she'd covered with a robe for their impromptu dinner date. Though nothing like a four-star hotel, it seemed perfect for their needs.

"Oh," Lexie said after swallowing. "I forgot to tell you. I met your grandfather the other day." It seemed strange to mention him considering what they'd just shared. But, she didn't know when else she'd get the opportunity to tell him.

"Pappy?" he questioned with a lift to his voice.

"Yeah, it seems he and my aunt Milly are 'friends with benefits'," she said with a smile.

Max groaned. "She must be the new lady friend he spent Christmas with."

"I guess." Lexie shrugged. "He offered to set me up with you."

*

Max chuckled at the irony of it. "I'm surprised he didn't ask you out himself."

"Well, he had my aunt on his lap at the time. It hardly would have been appropriate."

"Trust me. It hasn't stopped him in the past."

"Really?" Her giggle was mixed with curiosity. "What happened to your grandmother?"

"She died when I was little. And Pappy kind of went a little wild afterwards. He was always prepared to die first I think and then he reinvented himself by rediscovering his youth. You wouldn't believe some of the things he taught me when I was a teenager."

"Like what?" Lexie wiped her lips with a napkin, and they seemed red and delicious, begging to be devoured. Later. He'd devour them later.

"When I was sixteen, he bought me a copy of the Kama Sutra and a manual on tantric sex." For the first time, such an admission didn't seem strange. Now, he realized it might be best to thank his grandfather for it.

Lexie laughed again. "I can't imagine a grandfather doing that."

"Well, Pappy did." Max sighed. "I think it sent my parents to an early grave."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she murmured. "I lost both of my parents within a year of one another not long after I married Billy."

"Billy's your ex, right?" Suddenly, Max felt as though there was some sort of sully of the mood, but he wanted to know more about her. Unfortunately, her ex was part of her past, which was part of her.

"Yeah," she groaned. "He worked over at the county until a year ago. He got fired for sexual harassment. So, he moved over to Oak Ridge to do security for one of the plants up there."

"Sounds like a stand-up guy," Max muttered sarcastically. He'd heard bits and pieces about Billy Lambert from Jake and other guys at the jail. From what he'd gathered, Lexie was better off with him gone. And Max certainly was glad Billy was out of Lexie's life.

Lexie rolled her eyes. "You have no idea." She shook her head as though she attempted to shake him out of her body. "Let's talk about something else."

"No problem." Max didn't really like the idea of talking about her ex-husband in the first place. He wanted to know Lexie better, and the thought of another man touching her the way he had infuriated him. "So, Aunt Milly is your only relative?"

"That lives around here, yeah. Her kids don't pay much attention to her."

"That's too bad." Max couldn't imagine doing the same if his parents were still alive.

"I know. It's like they don't really comprehend what they've got." Lexie shook her head with obvious disgust at her cousins. "Anyway, Aunt Milly has kind of been like a stand-in for my parents."

"Pappy's been the same for me." He nodded.

"Isn't it strange that they've hooked up?" She wondered aloud, speaking exactly what was on his mind. It certainly was a small world.

"Yeah, it is."

"I really wish I hadn't walked in while they were doing it the other day," Lexie grumbled.

"Oh," Max sighed. "Why did you have to bring that up? I have enough problems thinking of Pappy as a player that I don't need you to bring *that* up."

"Well, I didn't exactly walk in on them. I just heard it."

"Eeww." As much as Max enjoyed sex, especially with such a gorgeous woman like Lexie Lambert, he didn't want to think about Pappy's encounters. That was one thing Pappy managed to keep to himself—at least the identities of his partners anyway. Damn Viagra. And damn the doctor who prescribed it to Pappy.

"Hey, if I had to deal with it, so should you." A big grin lit up her face and her green eyes sparkled with mischief. He could get used to her smile. From the lack of smile-lines around her lips, he doubted she'd smiled a lot during her marriage to Billy.

Max nodded. She had a point. "Maybe we should do our own benefiting," he suggested, leaning in to whisper in her ear. He thought he detected the slightest of shivers on Lexie's part. Between the heat they'd worked up and being covered by that bulky robe, she couldn't be cold. Certainly not.

She moved her head just enough to face him and let him in for a soft, sweet kiss on the lips. The remnants of pizza and wine mixed with her unique, intoxicating yet sweet, flavor. And he had to taste it. She'd taken control earlier by going faster than he'd really wanted. As touching her once again brought the constriction back to his crotch, he intended to savor it this time. This time, they were going to do it his way.

"Well, you had your turn," he said huskily against her lips. "Now, it's mine."

She leaned back a little, confusion clouding her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Do you keep a set of handcuffs here?" If not, he'd find a substitute. But all things considered, handcuffs would work just fine. A cop worth her salt should spend some time in handcuffs.

"Yeah," she replied with a hint of skepticism.

"Where are they?"

"In my closet. They're my spare set."

"Show me."

Slowly, she stood, took his hand and led him back into her bedroom. Switching on a light in her closet, she quickly found them and they dangled from her hand as she showed

them to him, a sly smile decorating her face.

"Let me have the key." He held out his hand, palm up. Removing it from where it had been on the lock, she handed it over, her fingers practically shaking against his skin as he took it. He slid it into his pocket. "And now the handcuffs."

She handed them over, her gaze locked with his, the cold steel filling his hand.

"You see," he started slowly. "I want to savor this and make you absolutely insane with ecstasy."

She nodded. She seemed entranced and he loved it. He wanted to possess her as much as possible.

With his free hand, he pulled the tie of her robe, revealing her creamy skin. She shrugged off the robe and he sized her up for a moment. From the soft curves of her breasts down to the triangle of her sex, he wanted to make love to every inch. And this time, he would go at his pace.

Taking her right hand, he clasped the cuff around her wrist. Leading her to the bed, he eased her down and pulled her arm up to the bar of her footboard. She clamped on it, holding her to the bed. Her free hand rested at her side.

He moved on top of her, brushed away a lock of hair from her forehead. Kissing the center, he felt her body buck a bit against him.

"Slow down," he ordered. "You'll get exactly what you want and more."

"Okay," she whispered. Slowly, her hips relaxed into the cushion of the bed.

"Can you just trust me?"

"I trust you," she assured him. Obviously, she had some clue about what would happen since she freely handed him the cuffs and key. Or maybe she was ready to submit.

He laced his fingers through her free hand, using it to hold her down. She complied by keeping the rest of her body perfectly still.

First, her red swollen lips seemed to beckon him. So, he complied, taking in the very flavor he'd become addicted to. With more kick than a rich red wine and more sweetness than cotton candy, she had something he couldn't get enough of and he didn't intend to stop anytime soon.

He pulled away for a breath, feeling her panting beneath him.

"If I remember correctly, your pussy tastes just as sweet," he moaned.

"I want something else there," she managed to say.

He tightened his grip on her left hand. "Didn't I tell you that it's my turn? We're going to do it my way."

"Oh ... o ... okay," she stammered.

He felt her body tremble beneath his as he prepared to accept her submission.

Blazing a trail of kisses down her neck, he stopped at her breasts. With one, he took the nipple in his mouth, lightly grazing his teeth over it. Suckling and licking, he felt it harden. Then, he moved to the next one and repeated the action. Her skin had the same sweetness as her kisses, completely intoxicating and addictive.

He lay down beside her, keeping one hand clasped in his. His free hand roamed down to the delta of her sex. She welcomed him with a warmth that nearly burned him. Yet he kept two fingers probing in and out of her pussy.

Watching her face, he saw her eyes close.

"Open your eyes," he demanded.

She did, moving her body against his hand. Her lower lip folded between her teeth

and he could almost see her cutting off the blood circulation.

“Ohh, God,” she moaned. “I’m not sure how much of this I can take.” Her back arched a bit, her ecstasy apparent. “Please, please,” she begged. “Please go inside me.”

“I am inside you,” he reminded her. He wanted to touch with his fingers and let them feel what his dick had.

He continued to explore between her slick folds, grateful she did shave to help him give more skin-to-skin contact. And it seemed to add additional energy for her as the twitching of her hips indicated.

“Ohh.” Throwing her head back a bit, he could feel her release with a rush of heat. “Please, please I need you inside me.”

She panted, and he felt the intensity of her heartbeat all the way through to the inner walls of her clit.

He removed his fingers and slid his hand to the inside of her thigh. Planting a kiss on her mouth, she surprised him by fiercely pressing her tongue against his. It seemed to be urging him faster along. He responded with softer, slower movements. Soon, it helped her slow down as well.

His hand stroked back up her body and then stopped over her heart just beneath her breasts. Her heartbeat slowed, reassuring him that she’d had one orgasm. Now he had to give her another.

Breaking free of the kiss, he knelt and pushed her legs upward a bit so they were bent. Parting her thighs, he leaned in and buried his mouth into her sex.

Yet another dessert was to be had.

Like any man, he enjoyed oral sex when it was performed on him. But, he hadn’t always been real good with performing it on a woman. With Lexie, it seemed so natural. And she tasted so damn good that he couldn’t resist. Besides, it seemed to please his dick just as much if the constriction was any indication.

She gripped his hair with her free hand and bucked her hips a bit so he knew he was touching the right spots with his tongue. With each passing moment, the delicious became even sweeter. She creamed, rich and thick.

He felt his cock hardening even more in response. It wanted inside her. But there would be time for that. And it would be all the better once he slid in. She’d be ready for him.

“I can—can’t be—believe this,” she sighed between breaths. “This fe—feels so good.”

She mounted into an undeniable climax, and with it came a slow release. Her hips lowered and she released the hold on his hair. Sitting back on his heels, he saw her face streaked with perspiration and her chest rising and falling with full, slow breaths.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered. Despite his rock-hard erection, he managed to walk to the bathroom where he gargled some water so she wouldn’t taste herself once he kissed her again. He also took a few sips of water to make up for some of the fluid loss from sweat.

He returned and she looked defeated and almost exhausted. Yet, there was more to be had.

He picked up another condom from the nightstand and moved back to the bed. Pulling her body against his with her arm still cuffed, he took her in for a full-mouthed kiss. He felt her response.

“It’s almost time,” he said between kisses.

Rolling to his back, his shaft speared the air. Ripping open the condom, he slid it down. Then, he moved back between her legs. This time, he eased his pulsing cock inside her. Her warm welcome almost made him come right there. But he held on to it.

Moving at his pace, he only allowed her to match his rhythm without speeding things up. Once again, he laced his fingers through her free hand, keeping her upper half pinned to the bed.

Her eyes clouded with wanton need. A need he seemed to be fulfilling. More than anything, he wanted to satisfy her.

“Oh God, here it comes again,” she said huskily. She held her hips against him, her leg lacing around the back of his calf.

Stealing another kiss, he felt as though he stifled her, and allowed her to buck against him at a faster pace.

“Ohh,” she sighed once he broke free of the kiss. Her hips lowered and her head fell to one side, her breath ragged. He continued to thrust into her. The walls of her pussy tightened around his cock.

After biding his time, he sped up, his release coming hard.

Collapsing beside her, his body was coated with perspiration.

“I ca—can’t believe how good that was,” she panted.

“What’d you expect?” he managed to ask between his own slow breaths.

Hearing the clang of the metal against the wood of the bed, he wondered if she was ready to be free of her confines.

Leaving the bed, he found his jeans and pulled the key from the pocket. Sliding the key into the lock of the cuff on her hand, it clicked open. She shook her hand a bit and let it fall to her side.

He returned beside her and gave her a slow kiss.

“Do you want to spend the night?” she asked.

“Now, how can I turn down an offer like that?” It was the best one he’d had in years. Besides her apartment was a hell of a lot better than his motel room.

* * * *

Lexie awoke long before Max. She turned on her side and watched him sleep. Unlike before, she couldn’t sneak out because they were in her own house. It felt so good to share her bed with a man again and she intended to enjoy it, if only for a few moments.

His breathing was slow and even and her skin tingled as she remembered the blue of his eyes, still hidden by the closed lids. She’d settled for less when she’d married Billy, she now understood. After all, Billy had brown eyes and had never turned her on as much as Max did.

God, she’d never realized how great sex could be until Max. Her stomach did a flip at the memory of how many times she’d climaxed the previous night. She hadn’t even been able to keep count. Hadn’t even known something like that was humanly possible. Here she’d thought the idea of orgasm had been exaggerated all these years. Nope, they were real. Very real.

His eyes fluttered and then opened. “Do you always stare at men in your bed while they sleep?” His voice was thick and husky.

“No,” she replied. “I don’t have many men in my bed.”

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true," she insisted. "You're actually the first since—since..." She didn't want to sully the moment by mentioning *his* name.

"Since Billy," he finished for her.

"Yeah," she confessed, feeling her cheeks heat a bit with embarrassment.

"Did you ever make those noises that you made last night for him?"

"No," she whispered. She almost felt a sense of humiliation at the reminder of those noises. She'd always thought they were cliché and overused, but she hadn't even remembered she'd made such sounds until she started to drift off to sleep in Max's arms the previous night.

With a small movement, Max gave her a morning kiss on the lips.

"Your bed is so comfortable." He sighed. "I think I could stay here all day."

"What time do you have to be at work?"

"I'm off."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm, what?" He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. His arms encircled her body and her legs tangled with his.

"You can stay here all day."

"What about food? If we stay here all day, I'm going to need some kind of nourishment."

"You like eggs?"

"Yeah."

"Good, because I make a mean omelet."

"Are you going to give me breakfast in bed?"

"I guess you deserve it," she said with a tease. Giving him a quick smack of her lips, she got up and went to the kitchen. "The remote is on the nightstand if you want to watch some TV while I make breakfast." She nodded to the black remote amongst several empty condom wrappers. She might have to do some shopping.

She'd never cooked naked before, but it felt liberating. Another new experience. And she managed to fry a skillet full of bacon without it splattering hot grease on herself. Luckily, she had some of those frozen biscuits that cooked quickly while she folded veggies and cheese into the eggs. She also brewed a fresh cup of coffee.

"It feels good to cook for someone," she said softly to herself. And it did.

Putting two plates filled with eggs, bacon and biscuits freshly buttered, she put them on the breakfast tray she'd gotten years earlier as a gift. She poured the coffee into a carafe and added packets of creamer and sugar she'd collected long ago.

"Breakfast is served," she announced as she entered the bedroom with the tray.

"I don't think a naked woman has ever served me breakfast before," Max replied with a grin.

"I guess we're experiencing a lot of firsts together."

And she had to confess that her eggs had turned out pretty damn good.

Chapter Nine

As Lexie suggested, they spent rest of the day in bed. There was no need for clothes or anything else. The supply of condoms she'd bought before their date were quickly being depleted.

It was late afternoon before they arose for more nourishment. This time, it was Max's turn to get food. He heated up the leftover pizza they'd ordered and once again, they sat in the middle of bed to eat.

"I'm picking up some really bad habits from you," Lexie muttered as she swallowed her last bite. She reached for her bottled water and took a swig. The huge gulp felt good going down to her stomach. But not nearly as good as the way Max made her feel.

"It doesn't seem like a bad thing." He took her paper plate and stacked it above his. She watched as he retreated from the bedroom, his taut, curved ass catching her eye.

Everything seemed to have happened so quickly. Too quickly. She still hadn't quite found her breath. She wasn't sure she ever would. It all felt so surreal. She'd known Max Davis little more than a week and he knew her body more intimately than any other man ever had.

Sure, she'd been married, but Billy had never known her. He'd never taken the time to ensure her physical pleasure before his own. It had been all about what he wanted and needed. Never Lexie. What she wanted had never mattered.

Until now. Max seemed to have some unspoken plan to fulfill all her deepest desires and let her have just as much of the thrills as he did.

She felt the corners of her lips tilt upwards with a smile when Max walked back through the room. With Max, she felt comfortable seeing a man walk naked around her apartment while being naked herself. She appreciated it. Too bad it wouldn't last forever. Like everything, this would come to an end eventually. She'd enjoy it while she could.

Plopping back on the bed beside her, he kissed her lips quickly. "Ready for some dessert?" he asked slyly.

"Mmmm," she moaned. Thus far, his idea of dessert had been very good. And brought a lot less flab to the hips. "Can we use the handcuffs again?" It had been such a new, exciting experience and one she'd always fantasized about. It had been amazing and she wanted to use them again.

"I don't see why not." His voice was husky.

"Sure you don't mind wearing them?" Her index finger trailed against his chest muscles.

"Me?" Confusion floated through his blue eyes.

"Yeah, you." She watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

"I guess," he agreed.

"Haven't you done that before?"

"I've never been handcuffed before."

She assumed that meant he'd handcuffed another woman. Despite a short twinge of jealousy, she didn't let it ruin her mood. "There's a first time for everything," she teased.

The handcuffs still sat on her nightstand. Since they didn't see much use, she felt as though she'd spent good money on them for once. Leaning past him, she picked them up.

This was the most use her spare pair had ever seen.

With practiced grace, she slid one side around his wrist. The feeling sent a different thrill through her than that of cuffing a criminal.

"Which way do you want me?" he asked with a mischievous smile.

"That way," she said, pointing to the head of the bed.

He lay down as she bid and put his arm up to one of the front posts. Crawling on her knees, she clamped the free end around the wooden part of the headboard.

"You know this means that you have to be the one to perform oral sex."

She looked at him, performance fear beginning to pump through her blood. The one thing she didn't have a whole lot of practice at loomed in front of her.

"As I see it, we're overdue," he continued. "I've gone down on you twice and you haven't given me head once."

Trying to keep from shaking, she nodded. Slowly her gaze traveled along his chiseled chest, past his six-pack abs down the trail of hair. His cock waited for her. Primed and ready, standing at attention for her to do whatever she wanted.

She enjoyed it inside her so much that she hadn't considered giving a blow job could be just as pleasurable. Considering the amount of time he'd devoted to her pleasure, it seemed only fair for her to dedicate some time to his satisfaction.

All the blow jobs she'd ever given were because of Billy's guilt and manipulations. As a result, she'd never been able to do it very well. Billy had always been ready to remind her of her inadequacies. She didn't want to disappoint Max. If she wasn't any good at oral sex, it could bring their fling to a screeching halt.

She stared at Max's huge erection and was unable to move.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," he assured her softly.

Glancing up to his face, she saw genuine sincerity glowing in his eyes. He wasn't manipulating or putting guilt on her.

"It's totally up to you," he said. And she believed him. She had him in the cuffs, and she was in control.

She nodded and looked back down at his cock. At that moment, she realized she wanted it. She wanted to take him into her mouth and bring him to orgasm.

"I—I'm not very good at it," she stammered. "I don't want to disappoint you." Not that they were involved in any high stakes here. Of course, the one-night stand had turned into a fling. There weren't any guarantees or promises for the future.

"Don't worry about it. You could never disappoint me."

He seemed to have a confidence in her she didn't have in herself when it came to sex. She had to admit that he brought out a daring side of her she'd never known existed.

Leaning down slowly, she first took his cock in her hand and ran her palm along the shaft. He was so hard that he twitched in her grasp. Moving downward, she caressed his balls for a moment and then held his shaft at the base.

Going down, she slid the tip in her mouth, running her tongue over the top to lick away the salty bit on the edge. She liked the taste, which surprised her. With great care, she took him deeper into her mouth.

Wrapping her lips around him, she felt his free hand grasping her hair at the roots. She continued to slide her lips around him, moving at a comfortable rate.

"You're doin' great, baby," Max sighed.

Confidence fueled her. And she loved it. She wanted to make him happy.

From the way he arched his hips and gripped her hair, she knew she was on the right track.

"I'm going to come any moment, baby," he panted. "You can take it out at any time."

She continued.

"Oh God, here it comes," he cried.

At just the right moment, she pulled away and his seed spilled onto the sheets. She watched in amazement. She had done that. She had brought him to orgasm.

"Who the hell told you weren't good at that?" he demanded. He clenched his fists and she thought he might punch someone for her.

"Billy," she replied quietly. Once again, the bastard had to taint their bliss.

"He's a damn fool," Max snarled. "But I already guessed that since he let you get away."

She offered him a smile and moved upwards towards his face.

Cupping his cheeks, she kissed him full and hard on the mouth. For the first time in her life, she enjoyed taking control and giving away control all at the same time.

Reaching down past his torso, Lexie found Max still hard.

"You've got good stamina," she murmured against his lips.

He laughed. "I guess being in the military was good for yet another thing."

"So was it okay?"

"Didn't I say you were?"

"Yeah." She sighed and moved to his side.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing, Lexie. I can't help that Billy treated you like shit. Don't make me pay for it." His voice was harsh and cold.

"I'm not." Her voice was almost a shriek.

"Then prove it."

"I already have." She sat up with angry fire pulsing through her veins. She couldn't believe that talk of Billy had made him so angry. "I gave you a blow job, didn't I?"

He didn't answer, but his long exhale was loud enough to speak volumes.

"I want you, Lexie. You're beautiful and vivacious. Why can't you just enjoy it?"

"I don't know," she said softly. Maybe there was too much uncertainty about what their relationship was. Or wasn't.

"Do you want me?"

"Yes." She hoped she sounded sincere.

"Then, that's all that matters for the moment. Everything else will work out." His voice was soothing and soft. At the same time, he sounded so powerful.

"How can you be so sure?" She straightened her spine and blinked to avoid the hot tear stinging the corner of her eye from falling. Nothing ever seemed to work out for her when it came to men. Everything always ended in disaster. Why would it be any different with Max?

He shrugged, which was an awkward task since one of his hands remained cuffed to the bed. Yet, he didn't seem to mind it. As she glanced up at the post with the other end of the cuff around it, she saw the metal straining against the wood. Following his tanned skin down to his shoulder, his thick muscles rippled in his arm.

She'd never had a man handcuffed to her bed before. Hell, she'd never had a man this good looking in her bed before. She didn't want it to end.

"If you want me to leave, all you have to do is uncuff me," he said with a light voice.

She didn't want him to go. For the first time in a long time, she didn't feel lonely. Even when she'd lived with Melissa, a part of her felt empty. In truth, a part of her had always felt empty. Yet, with Max around, she felt fulfilled.

On her hands and knees, she moved over, straddling him at the waist, sitting on his stomach. "Do you want to leave?"

"No." The simple syllable spoke volumes.

"Good."

She kissed him full on the mouth and moved her hips downward, guiding his erection inside her. Sitting up, she rode him, fast and hard, the way she wanted. He matched her speed with his own rhythm. She was still in control and he didn't seem inclined to slow her down this time.

They went at her speed. Her first climax came quickly, but she didn't voice it—her tunnel tightening around him. She kept moving.

"I don't have a condom on," he reminded her between breaths.

She didn't care. Knowing for a second how reckless that could be, she kept going. "Just let me know when."

Pulling out wasn't a foolproof birth control plan, but she didn't want to stop now. Besides, the skin-to-skin contact rocked her deep to the core. It touched a different spot inside her. A spot even Max hadn't found yet. Until now.

Grinding against him, he filled her. The tip touched her womb—tickling areas she didn't know even existed in the depths of her pelvis.

She'd never enjoyed being on top, having spent so much time in the missionary position. Yet another thing Max Davis seemed to change in her. Damn, he was good.

Her orgasm mounted again and she tossed her head back with the ecstasy.

"Now!" he screamed.

"Huh?" Her neck snapped up.

"I'm about to come," he explained with his lips pressed together in a firm line. They were almost white from the tension.

After one last thrust, she moved off him and he spilled again. Geez, he made the stuff by the gallon. With the amount of semen he'd spilled in the last twenty-four hours, he could have repopulated a small country.

If things worked out between them...

No, she couldn't think about that. If she'd learned anything in the last few years, nothing was certain.

She collapsed with exhaustion at his side.

"Can I ask you a favor?" His voice was deep and filled with desire.

She glanced up at him.

"Can you undo the cuffs so I can hold you properly?"

Her lips curled into a smile, she reached over him and retrieved the key. Unlocking the cuff to his wrist, she released him. It continued to dangle from the bedpost. After all, they might need them again. It would save time to keep them hooked on the headboard.

"Aren't you going to undo the other side?" he asked as she put the key back on the nightstand.

She shook her head. "Never know when I might want to use them again."

He gathered her in his arms for a kiss and then held her through the night. She slept with a smile on her face, contentment and exhaustion from their multiple couplings keeping her in a deep slumber.

* * * *

Because Lexie was working throughout the day on Monday, she got together with Karen and Melissa on Sunday for brunch.

"Dear God, you are huge," Lexie said in surprise when she saw Melissa. Despite being seven months pregnant, her friend had a glow about her and she looked absolutely adorable in a pair of maternity overalls.

"I know," Melissa groaned, patting her swollen stomach.

"I can't imagine having a little person inside me," Lexie wondered aloud.

"It's certainly an experience," Karen agreed. Karen had a four-year-old little boy, Tyler.

"I can't wait," Lexie found herself saying. Her cheeks flushed as soon as the words escaped her lips. She hadn't thought about being a mother since her split with Billy. Their marriage had been so rocky that the subject of children had never seemed appropriate.

"Ohhh," Karen crooned. "Things must be going well with Max."

"I didn't say that," Lexie said defensively and then bit her lower lip.

"Soooo, how are things with Max?" Melissa asked. She leaned down to take a sip from her Sprite.

Lexie shrugged.

"Oh, come on, dish," Karen urged her. "We never keep secrets from you."

"Yeah, but I never ask ya'll about your love lives." They always told her whether she wanted to know or not. And usually, she didn't want to know. Some things needed to stay between the two people that shared it.

"Aha, so there is something going on," Melissa said with a smile as she patted her belly.

"With Max's beautiful blue eyes and your face, you two will make beautiful babies," Karen said dreamily.

"Don't be ridiculous," Lexie said. She and Max hardly knew one another. It was a little early to talk about having babies. But the prospect made her stomach flip. It seemed right somehow. Lexie Davis had a nice ring to it.

"Just promise to have a real wedding," Karen warned her, rolling her eyes.

"You didn't miss out on much when I married Billy," Lexie said with a sigh. The wedding had been an impromptu event and they'd gone to a Gatlinburg wedding chapel and ordered a "package" marriage that included a few snapshots of them in their jeans and matching "Bride" and "Groom" tee-shirts. Hardly a romantic event. Not that she wanted a big wedding where she was the center of attention. But it would have been nice to at least have a new dress for the occasion. Something that would bring a smile instead of a groan when she remembered it.

"I think it's great about you and Max," Melissa beamed.

"There's nothing between us," Lexie reminded her, reaching for reality herself. "It's just—just sex."

"It's a good start," Melissa said. "That's how Spencer and I started."

“You were friends before that, though,” Lexie pointed out. Of course, friendship had turned to “friends with benefits”.

“Yeah, but we had a lot of sex before we had a commitment.”

“As I remember, it took a lot of arm twisting to get that commitment.”

Melissa shrugged. Glowing and happy, it was obvious that whatever trials she and Spencer had been through to get to this point in their lives had been worth it. They were happily married and expecting a child. What could be more perfect?

“Do you want a commitment from him?” Melissa asked, narrowing her eyes in concern. Her compassion made her a good reporter. At the same time, it had often been a weakness.

“I—I don’t know,” Lexie stammered. And she didn’t. There hadn’t been enough time to consider that their relationship could develop into more than just sex.

“Enough about you guys,” Karen interrupted. “Remember, I have some news.”

Lexie couldn’t help but giggle. Karen loved to be the center of attention. Since Lexie hated being in the limelight, she and Karen were a perfect fit as friends.

“Okay, okay,” Lexie said, holding up a hand. “So what’s your big news?”

“I’m leaving Steve,” she announced with a huge smile.

“What?” Lexie nearly screamed. Despite all of Steve’s infidelity, Karen had stood stoically by his side. She heard Melissa cough and choke, obviously from her Sprite going down the wrong way. “Are you okay, Lis?” Could a violent coughing jag bring on labor?

“Yeah,” Melissa said patting her chest. “What—what happened?”

“I just got tired of his shit,” Karen said with a shrug.

“There’s something more,” Lexie pried. She had her sights on one day being a detective. For a woman like Karen with a big mouth, she was keeping her lips pretty tight with the details. And that wasn’t Karen’s style. She confessed everything.

“Why would you say that?” Karen looked around. She got a short reprieve when the waitress brought their food.

Melissa immediately dug into her omelet and bacon. Her friend’s woes were obviously not as important as eating for two. Despite the stack of pancakes calling to Lexie, she wasn’t as quick to devour her food.

“Because you have been putting up with Steve for so long now that I can’t imagine you’d just suddenly decide to give up.” Lexie purposely narrowed her eyes to let her know that she was on to her. In fact, Karen had always seemed determined to make her marriage work despite all the issues plaguing them.

Karen shrugged again. “I just don’t want my son to grow up with so much fighting in the house.”

“Yeah, it’s so much better to have a broken home,” Lexie countered with sarcasm. She hadn’t intended to sound so bitter. She didn’t like how divorce often affected children. They were the innocents in adults’ issues. And there wasn’t a fair way to make things right.

“No, he deserves for his parents to be happy,” Karen insisted. Lexie had to admit—at least to herself—that she had a point. If Tyler lived in a home with two miserable parents, he would grow up to be miserable too. It was much better to see his parents happy even if they were apart.

Lexie sighed. For a moment, she considered that Karen’s decision might be a tactic

to shift attention from Melissa to herself. After all, in the last year, Melissa had gotten married and pregnant and now seemed to garner a lot of attention with the baby months away from being born. Though Lexie knew Karen was happy for their friend, she knew it was hard for Karen to sit back and stay quiet.

Not answering Karen's comment, Lexie dug her fork into the stack of pancakes and took a large, luscious bite. She had worked up quite an appetite over the last few days and she certainly had burned enough calories to warrant the thick butter and syrup.

"Are you moving out or what?" Lexie asked. Between the house and custody of a child, a divorce wouldn't be a quick process.

"Not yet. We're in separate bedrooms right now. Actually, I'm bunking up with Tyler. I told him I wouldn't leave until the divorce was final. Mom wants us to move in with her, but I don't know."

"I have an extra room," Lexie offered. Though her apartment was hardly big enough for all of them. But they'd make do if necessary. With Lexie's crazy hours, she'd probably be gone much of the time when Tyler and Karen were there.

"I'm hoping I'll be able to get a place with my settlement or that I'll get the house."

"Good luck, I guess." She didn't know the proper thing to say when something like this happened. In the long run, Lexie's divorce had been a good thing. She'd fulfilled her dream of becoming a cop and found a way to live on her own without a man.

And if Lexie could do it, Karen certainly could.

Chapter Ten

Lexie had been on the first stint on evening shift for nearly two hours when her pager went off at 5:17 p.m.

"COME SEE CHIEF ASAP," went across the screen.

"Shit," she muttered as she pulled out of her speed trap on the highway and went in the direction of the station house. Her heart beat rapidly as she walked into the office with as much grace as she could muster under the circumstances.

"You wanted to see me, sir," Lexie said from just outside Chief Johnson's office. She didn't talk to the chief much, except for a "hi" every once in a while and getting a "good job" from him each year after her performance evaluation.

"Ah, Lambert, thank you for coming off patrol to meet with me. Why don't you come in and have a seat?" He motioned to a chair across from his desk. "And close the door behind you."

Uh oh. This wasn't good. He'd called her "Lambert" when he normally addressed her by her first name.

Lexie did as the chief had directed. Suddenly, between the high collar of her uniform shirt and her protective vest, her body seared with fear. She couldn't speak.

"I understand that you wrote a ticket about a week ago. To a—a Max Davis. Is that correct?" His gray-flecked eyebrows rose with question. Chief Johnson had been quite the detective in his youth.

Lexie nodded as his steely-gray eyes peered at her. Suddenly, a sharp chill replaced the uncomfortable heat she'd felt moments earlier.

"And you never filed it," he continued in a stern voice.

"Right," she practically whispered.

"Yet he paid the ticket." He held his mouth in a straight line, showing neither disgust nor pleasure. Therefore, she had no idea how to react to him.

"Yes." Lexie stared down at her hands folded in her lap.

"As you probably know, there's some talk as to what exactly happened. And I want to clear the air." With an open palm, he slapped the top of the desk.

"Okay." Her breath caught in her throat.

I wonder if fired police officers can get a job at McDonald's.

"What type of relationship do you and Mr. Davis have?" The chief's eyes were narrowed, which she noticed as she stole a quick glance at his face. He placed his palms on the top of the desk, waiting patiently for her answer.

"We're—we're friends," Lexie managed to stammer. The heat returned for having told a bit of a fib.

"Did you become friends after you issued the ticket?" he questioned for obvious clarification.

"Yes, sir." If she was going down, she might as well do it politely. She gazed upward and locked with his eyes.

"I was concerned because you never filed the ticket when all the tickets from the days before and after this particular incident have been filed."

Oh, shit.

“As you know,” he continued. “Since you never filed it, Mr. Davis had to pay the full amount.”

She nodded.

“And because the infraction happened during his probationary period at his job, it has been extended by thirty days.”

“It has?” Why did she say that? She already knew this. Playing dumb certainly didn’t suit her or make her feel good.

“Yes.” The chief leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head. “So you can see why I’m concerned?”

She just stared forward and didn’t say a word. She couldn’t. Anything she said would only make the situation worse.

“So I’m going to ask you again.” The chief added a terse tone to his voice. “What is your relationship with Max Davis? Are you intimately involved?”

“I don’t know. It—it just happened. I didn’t ask him to pay the ticket. He did it on his own.” Her stomach flipped with nervous energy. Any further churning and she would puke.

“Why have you still not filed it?”

Lexie shrugged. “Since he paid it, I didn’t see the point.”

The chief exhaled slowly. “I don’t believe idle gossip. And while I know you are a very attractive woman, I find it difficult to believe that you would have agreed to drop the ticket if he slept with you.”

“What?” The accusation had been ridiculous. Fury pounded through her. The idea of an officer doing such a thing appalled her. Though, considering some of the guys on the force, she wouldn’t put it past them to offer sex as a way for an attractive woman to get out of a speeding ticket.

“Well, yes. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Did you drop the ticket because he slept with you?”

“No,” she nearly shrieked. “He paid the ticket before I had a chance to even file it.”

Dear God, I hope he can see I’m telling the truth. Otherwise, I’m screwed.

The chief looked down at his desk, which as Lexie saw with her own eyes, had the photocopied ticket and a receipt for the payment lying there.

“I gave him the ticket my last time on day shift. I filed all those tickets once I returned to work after my four days off.”

“But you didn’t file Mr. Davis’s.”

“Because he’d already paid it,” she reminded him. “You can check the schedule. I didn’t work the days between the ticket and his paying it.”

He glanced at another sheet. Lexie inhaled deeply and waited.

“You’re right,” he said. She exhaled, relief flooding her.

“I’m sorry if I insinuated anything.” His eyes turned soft for a moment, showing genuine regret over accusing her of anything.

“I understand, sir. I know that gossip sometimes gets out of control.” She offered the chief a smile when he rolled his eyes.

“Yes,” he groaned. “But you understand that I had to check it out. If there had been any misconduct, I would have had to take action.”

“I know,” she said with a nod. She respected him for his devotion to duty.

“By the way, you seem to have a nice glow about you. Have you been working out?”

Do sex marathons count? “Yes, sir.” She couldn’t help but smile at that. “But no more than usual.” *At least not at the department gym.*

“Well, if it is this Mr. Davis who had brought this light to you, you should continue seeing him.” If only it were that easy.

Lexie nodded.

Right after I strangle Jake Blankenship, I’ll see to my own happiness.

“Is this all you need, sir?”

“Yes. You’re a good officer and we certainly want to keep you.” Chief Johnson jutted his chin forward and puffed his chest out with a bit of pride.

“Thank you.” Lexie stood. “I apologize for any confusion.”

The chief waved his hand and shook his head. “No need to apologize. Most gossip turns out to be unfounded. If I took action against every officer I heard gossip about, I wouldn’t have any staff here.”

Lexie nodded. She’d believe it too. Considering some of the things she’d heard over the years, she knew only a handful were true. And personally, she’d hate the job of weeding out the truth from the exaggerations and flat-out lies.

Lexie left his office quietly, stepping to the records area. Looking over the half door where Karen and the other clerks sat, she called to her friend. “Is Blankenship scheduled to work tomorrow?”

“Nope,” Karen answered promptly, not even having to look at the schedule. Strange how well she knew his shift. If Karen hadn’t been the one to make them out, Lexie might have considered it suspicious. Then again, sometimes the woman had a photographic memory when it came to the officers’ time on duty.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he is today, would you?” Lexie asked, her fingernails digging in to the wood. She’d like to be piercing Jake’s skin and teach him a lesson for gossiping. Not that it would do any good.

“At home I guess,” Karen replied with a shrug, keeping her eyes on the paper.

“Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.”

Lexie stormed out of the station and got into her cruiser. The buzz on the radio was quiet, which gave her an opening to confront Jake once and for all.

His apartment was a few blocks from the station. He lived there for free because he was a city officer. The complex had three apartments reserved for officers for off-duty security purposes.

Lexie banged on his door.

“Who is it?” Jake asked from inside.

“It’s me. Open up,” she ordered.

The door opened and she found Jake standing there wearing nothing but a pair of worn sweat pants.

“You have a big mouth, you know that?” she raged the second she connected with his eyes. Pushing past him, she entered his tiny, dingy living room and stood with her arms crossed below her breasts.

“What the hell is your problem?” Jake raked a hand through his sandy hair and collapsed into a chair.

“I just got done talking to the chief,” Lexie said with an intentional roll to her eyes. “Apparently, there was some accusation that I dropped Max’s ticket because I slept with him.” She knew her voice was several decibels above what would stay between the

paper-thin walls.

“So,” Jake said with a shrug.

“So,” Lexie spat. She took several steps and stood directly in front of him. “If he’d believed the shit you’ve been spreading, I could have lost my job.”

“But you didn’t,” he pointed out.

“No thanks to you,” Lexie snarled. She had half a mind to threaten him with her taser. But she didn’t have the energy to fill out the necessary paperwork once she’d shot him.

“Hey, I didn’t try to ruin your career if that’s what you think,” Jake said with a bit of a whine.

“No, but you certainly fueled the gossip fire. I don’t spread your business all throughout town.” Would anybody really miss Jake if she shot him?

“Sorry,” Jake muttered. From his tone, Lexie knew he didn’t mean it. Jake didn’t care about anybody but himself.

“No, you’re not but you are going to be sorry.” She’d lowered her voice to match his regular inside tone.

“Is he really worth it?” Jake asked, cocking an eyebrow upwards.

“What?”

“All this crap.” He waved a hand.

“What crap?” Lexie sighed and finally relaxed her spine enough to sit on the couch. The rest of her muscles remained tense.

“Fighting with your friends,” Jake said as he jutted his chin forward.

“Excuse me, but we’re not friends,” she said sharply. “A friend keeps his mouth shut about another friend’s personal life, especially when he knows nothing about it.”

“And just how do you know that I don’t know anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“You think that just because you wouldn’t admit to what happened that I didn’t find out on my own?”

She didn’t have an answer. More importantly, she didn’t like what he was insinuating.

“Are you really trying to pass this off on Max?” she asked with suspicion. Surely, even Jake wouldn’t go that low.

Jake shrugged.

“I don’t fucking believe this,” she groaned. She didn’t want to play Jake’s games and hear something that may or may not be true. Too many people took Jake’s word as the truth when he usually said what people wanted to hear. She wasn’t about to be one of them.

Lexie stood and stalked to the door.

“Leaving already?” Sarcasm dripped from his voice.

“Yeah, I’d better get back on patrol.”

“It’s not busy. You can hang out here until you get a call.” Jake’s lips turned up in a smile, revealing those dimples that too many women apparently found irresistible.

“I don’t think so.” For some reason, Lexie could no longer see what other people found attractive in Jake Blankenship.

With that, she left. Only, her mind raced about who was telling the truth. Had Max told Jake about their relationship? If so, she couldn’t really fault Jake for spreading

gossip. Everyone knew Jake had a big mouth. Whoever told him would be to blame for giving him the kernel of information to begin with.

As Lexie pulled out of Jake's apartment complex, she saw Karen pulling in driving her black truck. Lexie waved and started to roll down the window, but Karen zoomed past.

"I guess she didn't see me," Lexie said to herself. *Where's she going anyway?*

Maybe she was looking at apartments for when she and Tyler moved out.

The rest of her shift moved on without incident. When she returned home just after one in the morning, her nerves were so charged that she couldn't relax.

Her phone rang as she watched television from her bed. When she saw "Max calling" on the screen, she momentarily regretted giving him her number.

"Hey," she answered.

"What're you doing?" he asked with a steady, sexy voice.

"Watching TV."

"What are you wearing?" His voice was filled with a combination of desire and silliness. It sent waves of heat through her blood.

"My jammies." Her voice was curt, she knew, but she didn't know exactly what to say to him anymore.

"Mmm," he moaned. "Mind if I come help you out of them?"

"Actually," she said steadily. "We do need to have a talk." That statement would likely nip any sexy conversation in the bud.

"Okay, I'll be there in about five."

He hung up the line.

True to his word, he arrived within the estimated time.

She answered the door with trepidation. She didn't like personal confrontations. Particularly when they involved her doing the confronting. She'd had to clean up after too many domestic arguments on the job that she didn't have any desire to fight at home.

Immediately, Max pulled her into his arms and gave her a kiss. She didn't respond and became stiff against him.

"What's wrong?" He released her, and narrowed his eyes, moving past her into the living room.

"Just what did you tell Jake Blankenship?" She put her hands on her hips and cocked her body to one side. Max stood facing her, confusion starting to cloud his face. Even that looked sexy on him.

"What do you mean?" His brows came together with obvious consternation.

"What did you tell him about us?"

"Nothing," he said a little too quickly.

"Well," she said in an even voice. "I got pulled into the chief's office to find out why I didn't file the ticket you paid. Apparently, there was some question about me using the threat of a ticket to get laid."

"Okay," he said calmly. Too cool.

"The chief believed me. But I know it was Jake who ran his mouth."

Max nodded in agreement.

"What exactly did you tell him?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"I told you—nothing," he insisted in a deep voice.

"Well, we should probably cool things for awhile to let this blow over," she

suggested. The idea had just come to her and she hadn't had a chance to think it through. It made sense. Besides, the relationship would probably end sooner or later. Perhaps it was better to do it sooner rather than later.

"You're going to let a little gossip get in the way of our relationship," he said as his eyes turned soft.

"What relationship? All we have is sex." Though she had to admit that if given the chance, those feelings could develop into something deeper.

"Really great sex," he crooned in response. She noticed a sparkle in his eyes and for a brief moment, it sent a shiver through her. She almost melted. She stopped herself.

"That's all it is," she insisted, straightening her stance.

"It could be more." His voice was filled with suggestion and possibility. And for a moment, she believed it could actually work.

"I never wanted more." She hadn't had the chance to think they could have anything more than sex. "And I sure as hell didn't want to be the tramp of the police department."

"You're not a tramp."

"I know that. You know there's a double standard. A guy can get away with having a harem of women at his disposal. If a woman has sex just for the sake of sex, she's a tramp."

"And how do you know we can't have more than sex?" He stepped forward. She could smell him—pure man.

"I don't want anything more than sex."

"Well, I do," he shouted in response.

Well, this was news.

For a moment, she stood frozen in place, unable to respond. His desire hung in the air, waiting for someone to grab it like a piece of loose money.

"And what do you want?" she finally asked softly. Her muscles tensed as she braced herself for the answer.

"You," he said in a matching tone, clasping her elbows.

Her stomach fluttered. "And when did you decide this?" Her voice was quiet. This had all become so surreal.

"A few minutes ago when I saw that fire in your eyes. It's the same fire you get when you have an orgasm."

Her cheeks flushed. His hands ran up her arms and came just below her shoulders. As he kissed her forehead, she forced herself to be a block of ice. She'd be damned if she fell for the line of another cop.

"I think we should get married," he said in a whisper that sent a warmth to her skin. "That will take care of all the gossip."

"What?" Lexie shrieked.

"You heard me. I think we should get married."

"To avoid a scandal?" she asked with disgust.

"That and because I love you."

"Funny, 'I love you' usually comes before a proposal." Lexie rolled her eyes. She couldn't believe what he'd suggested. She felt him clasp her arms harder.

With a swift push, she broke free of him and stepped backward.

"Come on, Lex, why won't you soften up and give it a chance?" he encouraged.

"I'm not going through this again," she vowed, fighting the tears stinging her eyes. "I

want you to leave.”

“Lex, I...”

“Leave,” she ordered. “We’ll have to see each other again because of our jobs. As for the rest of our lives, just act like we’ve never had any kind of a relationship.”

“I ca...” he started.

She cut him up by holding up her hand. “Just leave.”

He did as she bid, the door closing with an echoed slam behind him. Lexie felt more alone than she ever had in her entire life.

Chapter Eleven

The fury mounting in the pit of Max's stomach hit an all-time high when he pulled up in front of Jake Blankenship's apartment. During the ride, he went through the ways he could have fought back against what Lexie had told him so she wouldn't slip through his fingers. It was too late. She'd thrown him out of her apartment and out of her life.

He loved her—he'd realized that before he even saw her that night. The marriage proposal had come out of nowhere, but it seemed right. She wouldn't accept just because Jake Blankenship had opened his big mouth.

He knew showing up so early in the morning could be considered bad manners, but he didn't care. He'd make Jake pay for the damage he'd caused.

Pounding on the door, he felt the wood vibrate beneath his fist.

"Who the hell is it?" Jake asked from inside. Max thought he heard a woman's voice too. Not surprising. How would Jake feel if Max spread his personal life all over town? He was about to find out.

"It's Max. I want to talk to you."

"Shit," he heard Jake mutter. "Just a minute."

Within a few moments, Jake opened the door and he caught the back of a woman's head disappear into the bedroom. If anything, Jake Blankenship wasn't discreet. Then again, he managed to get away with it without getting into trouble.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't beat the shit out of you," Max seethed as he stepped inside with his fists clenched.

"Whoa, man, what's with you?" Jake held up his palms in an attempt to keep Max at bay.

"Lexie just dumped me," he snapped. "Because you couldn't keep your mouth shut and she's tired of being talked about like a whore."

"So there was something going on between you two," Jake said with a singsong tone.

"That's none of your damn business," Max fired back.

"Then why did you come barging in here to rant at me about it?" As much as Max hated to admit it, Jake had a point.

"I don't know," Max groaned, raking a hand through his hair. "You're the only friend in town I got."

"Look, man, give her some space," Jake offered as advice. "She'll calm down."

"I don't know," Max replied quietly. "I think she's done with men and definitely done with me."

"Don't be so sure," a female's voice said from the bedroom door. Max snapped his gaze around to see the woman who'd taken his ticket payment standing in the doorway wearing one of Jake's shirts.

"Holy shit," Max spat as he faced Jake. "You're screwing around with someone you work with and here you are spreading shit about me."

"No, that's not what's going on." Jake became defensive.

Max's gaze went back to the woman. "You're Lexie's friend, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm Karen," she said with a slight smile.

"The one who's getting a divorce?" He remembered Lexie mentioning her and her

on-the-rocks marriage.

“Yeah,” Karen replied looking down at her feet.

“You’ve been running your mouth about me and all this time you’ve been fucking a married woman.” Max turned back on Jake. His hands itched to wrap around his neck. If this wasn’t a case of irony, he didn’t know what was.

“It’s not like that,” Jake said, holding up a hand.

“Look, this has nothing to do with my marriage breaking up.” Karen made several quick strides across the room and stood between Max and Jake. Confusion and fear clouded her brown eyes. A part of him seethed with anger for Jake taking advantage of such a situation. Another part of him sensed that both of them were responsible for what happened.

“That’s your business,” Max said. “But I expect both of you to stay out of mine.”

Max turned on his heels and left the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

* * * *

“Aunt Milly, what did you want to talk to me about?” Lexie called inside her great aunt’s apartment, fearful with the reminder of what had happened the last time she’d been there. Though the door was unlocked, once again her knock went unanswered.

“Oh, Lexie, dear, come on in.”

Glancing through the doorway, Lexie saw that Milly was fully dressed and walked inside.

A bunch of boxes were stacked near the door. “What’s going on?”

“Rupert and I are moving in together.” Aunt Milly’s face glistened with a happiness Lexie hadn’t seen since the birth of her first great-grandchild. It brought a youthful glow to her that seemed to add an extra skip to her step.

“Oh,” Lexie took several small steps inside and stood in the center of Milly’s living room. “Are you two getting married?”

“I don’t know,” Milly replied with a shrug. “Neither one of us is exactly a spring chicken.”

“I’m happy for you.” Lexie offered her great aunt a smile. It was true. Her heart still ached because of what had happened with Max a few days earlier but she was determined to go back to dedicating herself to her job and keeping busy on her days off with friends and family.

“We’re moving into a two-bedroom apartment down the hall. Let me show you.”

“Okay,” Lexie answered gingerly.

Milly took Lexie’s hand and led her through the hallway. “Rupert should be down there. He’s trying to figure out how we’re going to cram all our belongings into it.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it work, Aunt Milly.” Lexie believed that from the bottom of her heart. Despite their advanced years, both she and Rupert had found love again. Lexie didn’t want to mention what Max had told her about his grandfather being a ladies’ man.

A few feet later, they stopped in front of an apartment. The door was cracked open and Milly walked inside first.

“Pappy, there’s no way you can put both couches in here,” Max was saying as they entered the living room which was a few feet bigger than the one in Milly’s apartment. Lexie’s stomach lurched at the sound of his voice.

“Well, why don’t you take my couch?” Rupert suggested, slapping his grandson on

the shoulder. Both of them had their backs to Lexie and Milly and apparently hadn't heard them come in.

"I don't even have an apartment, Pappy."

"I don't mean to interrupt, but I wanted to show Lexie the apartment," Milly called. They both turned. Max stood frozen while Rupert stepped forward and gathered Milly in his arms.

Max's tee-shirt showed his chiseled pecs and finely formed biceps. The black of the material brought out the blue in his eyes. Damn, he looked good. Her stomach fluttered even more.

"You two know each other, right?" Rupert asked.

"Yeah," Lexie said, her voice cracking.

Lexie kept her eyes on Max and he stepped forward. As a reflex, she stepped back. "It's good to see you again, Lexie," he said. That's all he had to say? They'd had sex two weeks earlier and it was just nice to see her again. She couldn't believe that.

"Listen, Aunt Milly, I better get going," Lexie hurried, and turned on her heels. "I'll call you later."

Once she got back into the hall, she allowed herself to breathe again. As quickly as her legs would carry her, Lexie walked down the hall toward the nearest exit.

"Wait, Lex," Max called out as she neared the lobby. He grabbed her upper arm and spun her around to face him.

"Let go of me," she ordered, pulling her arm away. "I told you I didn't want to see you again." Anger at the entire situation boiled up through her windpipe.

"I know," Max crooned, cupping her cheek for a moment before she could shy away. "But I just wanted to tell you one more time that I love you and I really do want to marry you."

Lexie swallowed hard and blinked furiously to avoid the tears from falling down her cheeks. "Max, don't..."

"Listen, just think on it if you want and if you really want to go, then go."

She nodded and left. A part of her felt disappointed that he didn't continue to go after her. Once she reached her vehicle, she let the tears stream down her cheeks.

* * * *

Though Lexie didn't want to admit it even to herself, she'd fallen in love with Max Davis. As she sat in her cruiser on the edge of Chilhowee Park in the wee hours of the morning, she realized it. Still looking for the strength to pick up the phone and call him, she simply sat as still as possible through the moments of her shift.

Besides, she didn't know what to say once she had him on the line.

"Three-forty, are you ten-six?" a dispatcher boomed through the radio.

"That's a negative," she replied pressing the talk key.

"There's a ten-sixty five at eight-oh-five Lincoln Road." That was Karen's house and the code indicated a domestic situation.

"Ten-four, I'm in route."

With lights flashing and siren blaring, she headed for Karen's house. Considering Karen had just announced her upcoming split with Steve, this didn't mean anything good.

Making it there in record time, Lexie parked her cruiser behind what appeared to be Jake Blankenship's truck. "What the hell?" she wondered aloud.

A quick scan of the driveway as she ran up the walk told her both Karen and Steve's vehicles were there as well.

The front door was wide open and Lexie walked in to find everything quiet—too quiet. Karen sat on the couch with her arms folded beneath her breasts. Jake stood at her side, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans. Dear God, who else had their lives ruined by Jake? He had the magnitude of a category four hurricane. And the federal government would likely never recognize him as a natural disaster.

"What's going on?" Lexie asked with trepidation. Something deep in her gut told her she didn't want to know.

"What are you doing here?" Karen shot back and stood. She wore a thick, terry cloth robe. Her eyes were swollen from apparent crying and her hair was a mess.

"I got a domestic call. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Who called?" Karen asked.

"You mean you didn't?"

"No. It must have been Steve."

Just then, Steve pounded into the living room with an armful of clothes and dropped them. "Oh good, Lexie, now you can kindly escort my whore of a wife out of here."

"Excuse me?" Lexie raised her voice a decibel. She started toward Steve as he went back down the hall and Jake jumped in front of her. "Okay." Lexie paused and took a deep breath. "I'm going to ask again. What the hell is going on?"

"Steve must have called you," Jake said.

"I guessed that. Do you mind telling me why?"

"Because I found her," Steve said dropping another handful of clothes on the floor to point to Karen. "In bed with the city's finest pick-up artist."

"What?" Lexie was exasperated. Not only had Jake been caught in bed with her best friend, but the cops had been called to help kick Karen out of her own home.

Lexie's head spun. This was one situation they hadn't taught her to handle at the academy.

"How long has this been going on?" Lexie asked her friend over her shoulder.

"You mean you're going to believe his word over ours," Jake cut in.

"He's the only one who answered me," Lexie replied through clenched teeth.

"Besides, I seriously doubt Steve would call the police unless he had a reason." At this point, she'd believe anybody but Jake. Though Steve Pollack wasn't her favorite person, she knew he wasn't usually a liar.

"I can't believe you're taking his side," Karen said with a whimper.

Lexie turned on her heels and faced her friend. "I'm not taking his side. I just want to know what's going on." She had a duty.

"Well, to quote your boy toy, Max," Jake seethed, which got Lexie's attention enough to turn around. "That's our business."

"Sorry to tell you, bud, but this is my business now that the cops were called." Lexie approached her friend and held her shoulders. "Where's Tyler?"

"He's at my mom's," she answered, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Good. Now I don't think anyone here wants to go to jail. So, Karen, why don't you and Jake leave and you can talk to Steve after you've cooled off a bit."

"You're wrong," Steve jumped in. "I want that piece of shit to be taken to jail." He pointed to Jake and then threw a shirt at him. Even Lexie had to admit it was a good

touch.

“Steve,” Lexie sighed. “I know your emotions are on overload, but you know if I take him in on a domestic charge, he’ll get his badge and gun taken away. Besides, there don’t seem to be any signs of violence.”

“That son of a bitch deserves to lose his job,” Steve ranted, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

“Steve,” Lexie groaned. “You know I have to have some kind of signs of violence before I can arrest someone.” Being a detective, Steve should have known better than to assume that he could get Jake arrested simply by calling the cops.

“If you won’t, then I’ll find someone who will,” Steve vowed.

“Be my guest,” Lexie replied. “Now, Karen, go change your clothes. I’ll take you to my apartment to cool off for a few days.” Karen nodded and disappeared. “Jake, you better go.”

“But...” he started.

“Go,” Lexie ordered him, holding up her hand.

“He may actually hurt her...” Jake started.

“Jake, I can handle it.” After all, she was the only one in the room carrying a taser gun, pepper spray and a handgun. Besides, even Steve wasn’t dumb enough to make a false move that could cost him his job or his life.

“Fine,” Jake grumbled. He picked up the boots standing beside the coffee table and stalked out of the room.

Karen returned to the room wearing jeans and a tee-shirt and carrying a suitcase.

“I think it’s best that you guys just let the lawyers handle the rest,” Lexie advised. “After all, that’s why they’re being paid the big bucks.” Having gone through a divorce of her own, she knew how much it cost. It wasn’t just financially expensive, it took an emotional toll despite how necessary it was.

Steve didn’t say anything, and his already icy glare turned glacial when Karen stopped to stand beside Lexie.

“Come on,” Lexie said putting her hand on her friend’s back. “Let’s go.” With a gentle nudge, Karen went outside first.

Lexie still didn’t have a good answer to her question. What the hell was going on? Maybe she should take a lesson out of her own book. It was their business. Not hers.

Chapter Twelve

It took Lexie a few days to help Karen get everything sorted out. Along with a conference with the chief, including Jake, Karen and herself, they managed to keep the incident under wraps. For once in his life, Jake Blankenship had kept his mouth shut. Lexie figured it was because it involved him. Had it been anybody else, he would have been the first to talk.

Something told Lexie from the way Jake stole glances at Karen that maybe his feelings were deeper than a fling. Lexie thought that Karen was probably the only woman who could possibly tame Jake.

But a part of Lexie felt relieved that she wasn't married anymore.

She still couldn't believe that Max had actually thought they should get married. He probably had some stupid fantasy that they should buy a house in the suburbs with a fenced in backyard and have a load of babies.

Not a bad dream.

Okay, as she'd watched Melissa's belly grow, she had once again felt that ache to have a child. She'd had it four years earlier when Karen was pregnant with Tyler. It eventually led her to have the courage to ditch Billy once and for all. She wanted the kids and house with the picket fence.

"You know, I hear the second time around isn't so bad," Karen said as she came into the living room. Karen and Tyler were bunking up in Melissa's old room until her settlement came through from the divorce.

"Second time for what?" Lexie returned.

"Getting married. And Max is nothing like Billy—or Steve for that matter."

"For now," Lexie replied with a shrug. "I thought Billy was different too before I married him."

"Yeah, I thought the same thing about Steve. I never would have dreamed he'd do me this way."

Lexie bit her lower lip to avoid reminding her that she'd also had an extra-marital affair that had led her being kicked out of the house. Karen had enough reminders of the damage that had caused now that she and Steve were facing mediation of their marital assets and the custody and visitation of their son.

"You love him, don't you?" Karen said with a sweet tone.

"What?" Lexie's neck snapped around to face her friend.

"You love him." Karen's face was soft and she sat beside Lexie on the couch.

"There's nothing wrong with that."

Was Karen right? Did she love him?

"We had great sex," Lexie admitted. "I hardly call that love." Then again, it was a good start. A really good start.

"You think great sex is so easy to come by?"

"According to a man, it is." Lexie avoided mentioning Jake Blankenship as the prime example. She'd agreed not to mention his name in Karen's presence since he was the reason she'd been kicked out of her house.

"Listen," Karen sighed and glanced at her watch. "Why don't you go take a hot bath

and light some candles? Just relax. Maybe you'll have a clear head about what to do after a good night's sleep."

Lexie shrugged. It sounded like a good idea.

Slowly, she stood and padded toward her bathroom.

"I'll open a bottle of wine," Karen called after her.

Geez, if I didn't know better, I'd think she was going to join me.

Lexie shook her head at that thought and entered the bathroom. Taking the lighter, she began lighting the lavender scented tea lights she scattered around the bathroom for a night such as this when she needed a hot bath and relaxation.

A soft knock sounded on the door and Lexie opened it to see Karen holding out a glass of white wine.

"Thanks." Lexie took it and closed the door.

She briefly considered locking it when she noticed the mischievous smile Karen had offered her. What was she up to?

Lexie started the water and steam began to float through the room. She switched on the CD player, which had a custom CD with her favorite soothing tunes burned onto it.

Once the water had reached the mid level in the tub, Lexie pulled off her clothes and stepped in.

"Ohh," she moaned as the warm water touched her skin. It had been a good idea after all.

The fragrance of the lavender drifted through the room. Combining with the steam, Lexie was able let her muscles melt into the calming water.

Pulling her hair into a thick clip atop her head, she then folded up a moist, warm washcloth and placed it over her eyes as she reclined into the tub. Slowly, the tension in her neck and shoulders began to lessen.

She got into the music and breathed deeply.

I could live like this forever.

She moaned softly. This was almost as good as sex. Almost. Better than sex with Billy, but not quite as good as sex with Max.

"Mind if I join you?" a husky voice asked.

Jumping, Lexie let the washcloth fall from her face and hit the water with a splash. Then, she saw Max kneeling down at the tub.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. Surprise had taken over and she didn't care that she sat naked in the tub while he knelt beside her dry and clothed. "How'd you get in?"

"Karen let me in," he said softly. So, that's what she'd been up to.

He reached over and brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. For a moment, he kept his fingertips against her skin and she savored it. Once he pulled his hand away, a sudden chill shot through her.

"Are you ready to talk about this now?"

"Talk about what?" Her stomach began to do flips. She fought to keep from pulling him into the tub with her.

"Us."

"There is no us," she insisted with stubborn pride.

"The hell there isn't," he shot back.

Cupping her cheeks, he pulled her face toward his for a kiss. If ever there was any

doubt about her feelings for him, they were confirmed once their lips locked together. It was more than a union of bodies. It was a union of souls. And she wanted to devote herself entirely to Max Davis.

“You’re gonna tell me,” he said against her lips. “That you can kiss a man with so much passion and not want anything more.”

“We never talked about having anything more.”

“You’re right. That’s why we’re talking about it now.” She knew kneeling on the tile must be killing his knees, but he didn’t seem to mind. “And while we’re at it, I want to ask you properly. Will you marry me?”

“We hardly know each other,” Lexie murmured. Max reached into the water and grabbed her hands. Opening them up, he kissed the inside of both palms.

“We know all the important things. Besides, I figure if we decide we don’t like each other, we can always get a divorce later on.”

“Don’t joke about that. I don’t want to get divorced again.”

“Good, because once you’re my wife, I don’t intend to let you go.”

“Are you sure?” she asked quietly. Her heart screamed for her to say “yes”. Swallowing hard, she feared making another mistake. She’d made enough to last a lifetime.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He offered her a smile. She looked into his eyes and saw them flowing with sincerity. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

“Felt how?”

“I’m in love with you.” He gripped her hands tighter. “I love you, Lexie.”

“I love you too,” she whispered in return.

“Now what about my marriage proposal?”

“I guess it’s a ‘yes’,” she said with a laugh. She knew with all her heart it was the right decision. A man like Max Davis was one in a million and she wasn’t about to let him get away.

“Good,” he replied with a relieved sigh. He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose and finally her lips.

“On one condition,” she added, pressing a finger to his lips.

“What’s that?” He sounded confused.

“You have to take me for a ride on your motorcycle,” she said huskily. He laughed for a moment. “I hear the vibration is great.”

“I guess.” He smiled and shrugged.

“But not as good as you,” she said sweetly.

Max was exactly what she wanted. She didn’t know how she knew that. She just did.

“Now do you want me to come in and join you or are you coming out? Either way, I have to get off my knees here.”

Lexie giggled. “Why don’t you come join me in the bath?”

The End

About the Author:

Erin Katz has been writing as long as she can remember and the dream of being a

published author finally became a reality in August 2005 when she received her first contract from Liquid Silver Books. When she's not writing, Erin is attending school to decide what else she wants to do when she grows up and raises her daughter on her own. Erin lives in East Tennessee and is a member of Romance Writers of America, Smoky Mountain Romance Writers and Passionate Ink.

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