

# Ten Ways To Melt A Man's Heart



Phyllis Campbell

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*by Phyllis Campbell*

**Champagne Books**

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Champagne Books Presents

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*Dedication*

I want to dedicate this book to my beautiful and supportive daughters, Chrystal and Heather, who have always known their mother to write romance and have usually accepted it. Thanks for letting me read my scenes to you—especially from this story, and laughing with me. Also, I want to thank those wonderful critique pals at Writers Passion who helped me with this story.

## One

*One more night—alone.*

Charlene Randall drove her fiery red BMW into the one-car garage and stepped harder on the brake. She killed the engine and yanked the keys out of the ignition.

Tonight would be the one-month anniversary of her breakup with Tim. Her chest tightened just thinking of walking into her empty townhouse. He wouldn't be there. His purebred toy poodle wouldn't be at the front door yapping in a high pitch, ready to tear off her leg.

Okay, so she wouldn't really miss Jaws as much as she would miss the tangy scent of Tim's aftershave. Too bad she liked his scent more than him.

She snagged her leather briefcase from the passenger's seat, stuffed with material she'd have to look over before the morning's meeting with San Diego's Channel Nine Directors, and slid out of the car. A moan escaped her throat. Another night keeping company with news reports rather than a man. People had said, *Charley, life will go on*. But she'd seen little evidence besides the fact that the sun still rose and set—and she was still very much alone.

She grabbed her purse and bumped the door closed with her hip. The two-inch heels clicked on the cement as she hurried out of the garage. She fished around in her purse for the remote hooked to her keys. Figures. She'd just had the keys in her hand and the same magical force that eats socks from the dryer had worked again, sucking the keys to the

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

bottom of her Gucci bag. Her fingers brushed over the key chain and she withdrew the remote, aimed it over her shoulder and clicked the doors locked.

The evening's cool air stroked her cheek. A gentle wind teased the strands of hair that had fallen out of her ponytail and tickled her neck. She flipped off a stray lock with her hand.

Next to her townhouse, shadows danced under the streetlights as throaty giggles floated in the breeze. A movement from the Lexus parked in front of her neighbor's townhouse caught her attention. She recognized the wave of the man's raven hair and the shape of his abundant muscles.

It was Damien Giovanni, her single, Italian neighbor who had turned romancing women into a career. She rolled her eyes. Looks like he was adding another notch to his bedpost.

On tiptoe, she sneaked toward her front door, not wanting to make her presence known. His deep laughter rang through the quiet night and made her pause before she reached her porch. Could his date be over so early in the evening? That man entertained women every night, and they usually stayed for lunch the next day, and sometimes they left just in time to meet the next woman he had scheduled for the evening.

The glow from the streetlight shone upon the figures writhing against each other beside the door of his sports car. She angled to get a better look. They looked like two worms in electric-shock therapy. *How disgusting.*

The little hussy in his arms was his usual five-foot eight, blonde Barbie doll. He laughed again, and the baritone ring sent shivers of desire down Charley's spine. She cursed her

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

weakness, admitting she enjoyed hearing him. Must be his Italian accent. Unfortunately, she couldn't stand men like him who hopped from one bed to the next.

The Barbie wannabe raked her more-than-likely fake fingernails up his chest and linked her arms around his neck. Damien grabbed the woman's curvy behind and pulled her body closer to his before his date tilted her head and his mouth landed on hers. One of Damien's hands moved up and caressed the woman's D cup breast and a guttural sound escaped the woman's throat.

Charley's own breasts ached. She folded her arms to stop the heady sensation trickling through her body and the unwanted desires stirring within her. Damn that man. Couldn't he do *that* in his house? It was bad enough to hear his voice, but to see him in action...

Before she could look away, Damien pushed the woman from him, turned her and swatted her bottom.

"See you later." His voice, still husky from his obvious excitement, stirred butterflies in Charlene's stomach.

Barbie wagged her fingers. "Call me."

"Why? You have my number."

Charley pursed her lips. *The arrogant man*. But it didn't matter. Women still flocked to him like dieters to a chocolate factory ... and devoured him just as quickly.

She clutched the briefcase to her chest and rushed to her front door before he spotted her. Damien would certainly know she had witnessed the quaint scene a second ago, and he would never let her live it down. Her neighbor always



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

enjoyed making snide remarks about the opposite sex. He did it to rile her—and it worked.

Fumbling with her keys, she hurried to find the one that opened her front door. They slipped from her fingers and hit the porch, clanging loud enough to wake the dead. Cursing, she knelt on one knee and swept her hand over the cement, searching for them.

"Do you need any help, *mí amore*?"

She jumped and fell back on her butt. The beating of her heart thundered in her ears, and she placed a hand on her chest. "Damien Giovanni. Why do you always sneak up on me like that?"

He bent over, grasping her upper arm with one hand and her keys with the other. His Levis crackled at the knees as he helped her stand, and the cotton shirt stretching across his magnificent shoulders was just as noticeable.

He grinned. "Because I like the way you jump."

Heat from his touch crept up her arm. She yanked it away. "One of these days you're going to scare me so bad I'll use my can of pepper spray."

His chest shook, deep laughter spilling from his lips. "Honey, if you're as steady with the little can of pepper spray as you are with your keys, I don't see that as a threat."

She fisted her hand and punched his arm, a grin tugging at her mouth. It was hard not to like him despite his reputation. "Just give me back my keys."

He stepped away and folded his arms. "Say the magic words." He wagged his eyebrows in that cocky, infuriating way of his.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Emergency, 9-1-1?"

He tilted his head and laughed harder. The porch light illuminated his handsome features—straight nose, strong chin, and lips that looked like they'd be heaven to kiss ... for other women, of course.

"Oh, *mí amore*, you really know how to tickle my funny bone." He dangled the keys in front of her. A twinkle of mirth still sparked in his eyes.

"Yeah, well, you really know how to ... irritate me." She grabbed her keys and turned to unlock the door before he noticed the grin pulling at the corners of her mouth.

He leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. She dared not meet his stare directly, knowing what she'd witnessed. Her neighbor only had one thing on his mind, which she had adamantly refused the first day they'd met. Now, every time they had a conversation, his bold gaze wandered over her body in a leisurely exploration that unnerved her.

If he were anything but the player she knew him to be, she would have taken him up on his invitation. But she was tired of one-night stands, tired of the love 'em—leave 'em kind of guys. After enduring so many broken relationships, she wanted more. Better. At age twenty-five, it was time she started thinking of her future.

"I've noticed Tim doesn't come around anymore. Did you two break up?"

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Our timing was off, that's all."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Sure?"

She tightened her fingers around the handle of her briefcase. "I don't see why you're so interested. I'm continuing with my life, just as he's done."

He held up his hands and shrugged. "Hey, no need to get upset. You know, one of these days you're going to thank me for being such a nosey neighbor."

She lifted her gaze to his and shook her head. "Only in your dreams, buddy."

He grinned and stroked his finger across her heated cheek. "My dear Charlene Randall, it will be in *your* dreams." With a wink, he turned and walked away.

She pushed the door open and rushed inside, breathing a sigh of relief. That man made her uncomfortable in more ways than one.

As she walked to the bedroom, loneliness stretched throughout the hall. She kicked off her heels and slid each foot into a fuzzy purple slipper. On the nightstand, the picture of her latest flame captured her attention ... slapped her face was more like it. Tim's grin used to make her smile, but now she wanted to spit at the silver framed three-by-five.

How dare *that man* move into her townhouse and sponge off her for three months then leave her for another woman who made more money? And to top it off, he acted like it was Charley's fault for the breakup. How dare he act like he didn't have to find a job and that all he needed was to keep the sofa warm during the day and her bed at night? Usually he entertained the sofa more.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She grabbed the photo, flung it in the small wastebasket a few feet away, and brushed her hands together. *There, that took care of one problem.*

She entered the kitchen and took a TV dinner from the freezer; her usual gourmet meal on nights like this.

After pulling the meal out of the box and setting the timer on the microwave, she turned to yet another order of business ... collecting information on the Internet for tomorrow's news.

She made herself comfortable on the gray swivel chair and turned on the computer. Whistling a made-up tune, she tapped her fingers on the desktop and waited for the machine to boot. Within minutes, she'd logged onto the Internet. The homepage popped up and she scanned the headlines, searching for something of interest. In the top right of the screen, an article grabbed her attention.

*10 Ways to Melt a Man's Heart.*

Her explosive laugh disintegrated to a snort. *Yeah, right. Melt a man's heart?* She'd have better luck giving a mountain lion a haircut.

She ignored the link and searched through several other articles, but her gaze kept going back. What would it hurt? She had a few minutes until dinner.

*Melt a man's heart? No way.* But curiosity got the best of her. What if there was a way? Perhaps this article had the very thing she needed to keep a man in her life. It wouldn't hurt to look...

She clicked on the hyperlink.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

*What do men find romantic? With the help of Jason Stewart, founder of [guyswithemotions.com](http://guyswithemotions.com), we've uncovered just what melts heterosexual's hearts. Below, panelists answer women's questions and bare their souls.*

*She leaned back in her chair, threading her fingers together over her stomach.*

*1. Dark Chocolates. "Milk chocolate is for kids. Dark chocolate is for lovers." The chemical phenylethylamine, found in dark chocolate, mimics the feeling you have when you're in love.*

*She arched an eyebrow. Very interesting.*

*2. Hard-to-find gifts. A gift that requires effort is sure to be a big hit with the guys.*

*3. Compliments. The quickest direction to a man's heart is through his ego.*

*She snickered. Thought it was through their stomachs.*

*4. A night on the town. Take your man on an old-fashioned date. Fix him dinner or go dancing. While in his arms, stare into his eyes.*

*5. Tall buildings. In general, guys like big things. Find a place with a good view. Kiss him under the stars.*

*6. Funny movies. When you can laugh together, you're really connecting.*

*7. Wear his clothes. Meet him when he gets home from work wearing nothing but his button-down dress shirt.*

*8. Surprise intimacy. Men like it when women surprise them with spontaneous sex.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

9. *Great memories. When you're together, make it memorable. Create memories by taking pictures or writing in a journal.*

10. *Tell him 'I love you' in a note. Leave little notes around the house, his office, in his car. Telling him you love him will strengthen the relationship.*

She folded her arms across her chest and sighed. She'd never done any of those things for the men she'd dated. Could that be why she'd never kept them?

The beeping of the microwave jarred her from her thoughts. She pushed away from her computer desk and hurried into the kitchen.

Could this article be a sign on how to keep a man? It wouldn't hurt to try. But who would be her target?

Damien's face popped into her head. She scowled, wishing she hadn't thought of him. He was the last person that would get involved in a serious relationship. The last thing she needed was to give her heart to him and have him trade her in for a newer version of Barbie. She rubbed her forehead and crossed her sex-oriented neighbor off the list. So who?

The aroma of fried chicken wafted through the air, making her stomach growl. For tonight, she'd put off the *10 Ways to Melt a Man's Heart* and concentrate on filling her stomach.

Tomorrow she'd find a man—and with any luck, she'd make the relationship last.

\* \* \* \*

*Close your open trap and wipe the drool off your chin.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Charley snapped her mouth shut, hoping she didn't look like a wide-mouth bass as she eyed the blond hunk walking beside her boss. Fred Murray, Channel Nine's Station Director, escorted *Tall, Brawny, and Gorgeous* down the hall, making introductions as they passed offices and cubicles.

Familiarity nudged her, but she couldn't recall where she'd seen him before.

Charlene jumped from her chair and hurried from her cubicle toward her friend. Just as she'd thought, Amanda's lust-filled eyes followed the pair. Charlene said a silent prayer of thanks Amanda was married.

Fred dropped a paper and the new heartthrob bent over to retrieve it. Even the way his body curved as he did this movement seemed familiar. But why? She glanced at her friend to see if her attention was pulled to the same spot Charley wanted to ogle.

After stopping beside Amanda, Charley bumped her arm. "Stop staring at his ass."

Her co-worker blinked. A knowing smile stretched across her mouth. "That's the new guy, Maxwell Harrington. He's taking Phillip's place now that he's retired."

Charley's eyes couldn't have opened any wider if she wanted. The rhythm of her heart took on a faster beat. This couldn't be happening ... not to her. The dream walking with her boss was Charley's high-school crush. Max was the super jock, super stud, and had the super personality all the girls flipped over. Especially her.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Are you serious?" She looked over the two men, slowly making their way toward Amanda's desk. "He's the new sports anchorman?"

"Sure is."

"Maxwell Harrington," Charley whispered in remembrance. His name breezed across her lips like soothing fingers in a seductive stroke—just like it did in high school. He didn't resemble the boy she'd had a mad crush on for three years. Instead, more muscles rippled on his tall frame, and his hair seemed blonder than she remembered as it swept away from his face. The years had turned him into one fine specimen of a man.

If she'd been the least bit forward, she'd be by his side right now seeing if he remembered her. But that wasn't her style. Not even back in high school.

Shyness had always been her biggest downfall with men, which was probably another reason the past four had moved on to other women. With all of her failed relationships, she'd collected enough material to write a new bestseller, "Breaking Up for Dummies."

The closer Fred and Maxwell Harrington came, the harder her heart pounded. She should be used to this feeling by now. *Give it up, girl. He's out of your league. And if he remembers you, he'll remember the class clown!* Yet, with a man like that parading past her cubicle every day she would continue fantasizing about the unobtainable.

Beside her, Amanda nudged her elbow, snapping her out of her thoughts. "Here he comes," she muttered under her breath.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Fred, a pot-bellied older man with a head full of thick gray hair, stopped in front of them. "Ladies," he began, his smile so extensive it showed most of his pricey dentures. "This is our new sports anchorman, Maxwell Harrington."

Amanda pushed her way to the front, her arm stretched in greeting. "Hi, Maxwell Harrington. I'm Amanda Shepherd, Executive Producer."

A smile spread across the man's face. "Please, call me Max."

His deep voice made Charley want to sigh. Familiar tingles ran through her. She moved her gaze from his astonishing eyes to Amanda's hand as he shook it. Her friend flirted, using her fingers in an obvious caress of his large, tanned fingers. Charley boiled inside, wishing she could be so forward. But then, married or not, flirting was what Amanda did best.

"So Max, what brings you to Channel Nine?" her co-worker asked with a sultry purr.

"I've been working in a Chicago station for the past six years, and thought it was time I came back to my home town."

Max let go of Amanda's hand and turned toward Charley. She opened her mouth to speak, but she experienced a brain freeze. Her tongue seemed to swell and her voice locked up. She swallowed to moisten her dry throat and began again.

"Hello." Her voice released an embarrassing squeak. She cleared her throat. "I'm Charley Randall."

No spark of remembrance lit his eyes, but she didn't give up hope.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Nice to meet you, Charley." Max's smile widened, and his eyes twinkled. Her heart fluttered.

He paused as if waiting for her to say something else. All she could do was stare into his brilliant, sea-blue eyes—eyes a girl could drift away in.

"What do you do at Channel Nine?" he asked.

She focused on the conversation. "I'm the *Presearch Roducer*."

Beside her, Amanda snorted a laugh. Charley's cheeks heated, and the sinking dread in her stomach descended lower than the Titanic.

She cleared her throat. "I mean, I'm the Research Producer. I'm Amanda's assistant."

His lips twitched as if holding back a laugh. "Well, I hope we'll work together soon."

As Fred and Max continued down the hall, she released a mouthful of air, the awkward moment now past. Her gaze dropped to Max's backside and enjoyed the way his gray, pin-striped pants molded the wonderful curve of his tush ... a tush she'd memorized before high school graduation.

But an ache formed in her chest. *He didn't remember.* Then again, why would he? They'd never really talked in high school. She was always the shy and clumsy girl with chicken-legs who followed the jocks around like a rock-star groupie. Back then, boys like Max didn't have time to look at unpopular girls like Charley.

When he turned down another hallway out of her view, deep disappointment washed over her. "Wow. He's one fine-looking man."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Yeah." Amanda nudged her arm. "And you know all the available women here at the station will be after him."

Charley cocked her head at her co-worker and frowned. "So? What does that mean?"

"You know your track record with men is not the best." Amanda shrugged. "It's common knowledge."

"Common knowledge for whom?"

"The whole office knows you can't keep a man longer than a couple of months, Charley. In fact, wasn't Tim the longest?"

A cold knife ripped through her chest, threatening to dislodge her heart. "Are you saying you don't think I have a chance with Max?"

A sorrowful expression clouded Amanda's eyes. "Well..."

Charley flipped her hand through the air. "Don't say it. I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. The reason I haven't been able to keep a man for longer than a couple of months is because I choose not to." Stubbornly, she lifted her chin and folded her arms. "I was bored with the others. Max is different." Of course it helped that he didn't remember her in school—and because he didn't know about the other men and how she lost them.

Amanda patted her shoulder. "But wouldn't you lose interest in him as you did the others?"

The shield Charley had tried to build around her heart crumbled, but she hid her distress behind a forced smile. "I don't know, and I won't know until I try."

"Then I wish you all the luck in the world." Amanda turned and sat behind her desk. The look of pity on her co-worker's face was obvious.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Anger surged through her and she clamped her hands by her side. How dare Amanda doubt her ability to hold a man? She supposed Amanda meant well. After all, her co-worker had observed all of her failed relationships.

She turned and stormed back to her desk as her dreams of catching Max increased. As much as she wanted to believe *she'd* been bored with the other men, the plain and simple truth was *they* had tired of her. Keeping a man for a long period of time was not her forte, but this time she would prove she could catch Mr. Heartthrob. And keep him.

When the others had walked out of her life, they'd never really explained why. Wasn't she adventurous enough in bed? Did they get annoyed with her clumsy ways as she tripped over herself to please them?

But Max was different. He didn't remember her from school, and he certainly didn't know the woman she was now. She could show him a better side of her personality than she'd shown before. She'd prove to her co-workers she *could* keep a man.

And that man would be the boy she'd dreamed of having for three years in school. The boy she wrote about in her journal every night, and cried over when he took another girl to the dance. The boy she wore black for when he left to go to college in Chicago—the one she never thought she'd see again.

Was fate finally being kind to her?

She slid in her chair and swiveled toward the computer. Exhaling, she stirred the lock of hair over her forehead and looked at the stack of papers on her desk. *Augh.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Just like most mornings, she checked her email before starting work. Besides, the small television on her desk tuned on a national news station wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. She adjusted her chair then gripped her computer mouse and clicked the Internet link.

Thoughts of the article she'd read lifted her spirits. What were the chances of making Max her target? She rolled her eyes. Probably as good as getting a visit from Ed McMahon holding a check written for ten million dollars.

She went to her email. Thirty-one messages? She groaned. Without looking, she knew most of them came from her mother. Would that woman ever stop nagging her about finding a man? Couldn't she at least give Charley better encouragement besides, *there are other fish in the sea*? Obviously, her mother hadn't been fishing in a while. The water was low and the bait outdated. That didn't make a good combination for awkward women like her.

She checked her mail then closed out of the program. That ridiculous article lurked on the edge of her thoughts, making it impossible to think of anything else.

Out of the corner of her eye, Max strolled into the room that would be his office. Another co-worker poked her head inside and made a comment that made him smile. Charley's heart leapt. She'd do anything to see him smile that way at her.

She thought back to the ten steps. Should she give it a try? She couldn't bear thinking of another failed relationship, but with the *Ten Ways* to help her, what could go wrong?

Perhaps this was fate's way of telling her to *go for it*.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

With a firm decision, she smiled wide. Give her a couple of days and she'd figure out something intelligent.

*Watch out Maxwell Harrington. Here I come!*

## Two

*Dark chocolate is for lovers.*

Charlene's hands shook with nervous tension when she opened the door to her office building. She balanced a box of See's chocolates on her arm and withdrew her key from the lock. The clock on the wall confirmed she was on schedule—one hour before work started.

She walked into the building, stopped and listened. The night team who ran the early morning news was still there. They were few in number, and nowhere near her desk or Max's.

Her heels resounded through the building like a cannon in the Sistine Chapel. She cringed and lifted her feet one at a time, sliding off her two-inch heels. After picking up her shoes, she tiptoed down the hall. Laughter of the early morning crew broke out from the break room, and she jumped. Over her shoulder she peered down the hallway, but was thankful nobody had come out.

Another noise caught her attention and she sucked in a breath. *Where is that loud incessant thumping sound coming from?*

Her ears strained as she listened closer. The noise matched her heartbeat, perfectly. She scowled. Why did the rhythm of her heart have to be so loud?

She peeked around the corner of a wall. The rows of offices appeared empty, lights off and doors closed. She

breathed a relieved sigh. Yup, the others were all in the break room.

With the box of candy clutched in her hands, she hurried toward Max's office. At his door, she turned the knob and went inside.

He'd been working at the station less than three days now, but his woodsy scent hung heavy in the warm air and surrounded her. With every breath, it invaded her lungs. She stopped in the middle of the room, closed her eyes, and exhaled a soft moan. *Oh, what a man.*

Shrill laughter floated down the hall and plunged her to reality. She shook away the sensual images and set the box of chocolates on the corner of his desk. She pressed the card open to make sure he'd see the message.

*Your sweetness makes even chocolates jealous. Signed, Your Admirer.*

As she stared at the box, she visualized Max's reaction. He would saunter into his office in that sexy way of his, dressed to kill in his form-fitting slacks and a white button-down shirt that emphasized his muscles. When he saw the box, his eyes would grow wide. He'd snatch the card and read it. A smile would spread across his lips, making his blue eyes twinkle. He'd open the box and pop a chocolate into his mouth. The dreamy expression on his half-closed lids would let her know the chemical phenylethylamine had worked.

The compound in the candy would give him feelings of love. He'd stop, turn, and look her way. Their gazes would meet and cling. His fingers would touch his lips before blowing a kiss her way. She'd catch it and hold it against her



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

heart. He'd motion with his head for her to come into his office. She'd follow like a person spellbound, not even feeling her feet touch the ground as she floated to him. The door would close, making their meeting private, and he'd take her in his arms...

A loud clank from down the hall jolted her from her daydream. She rushed out of his office and stopped, listening to see where the sound had come from.

She sighed. It was the old furnace kicking on. But it didn't matter. Time to hurry to her desk before someone came.

Lost in thought, she smacked her nylon-clad toes against the wall. Holding a curse under her breath, she hopped around on one foot and grabbed her throbbing toe. Tears stung her eyes and she gritted her teeth against the pain.

She placed her foot on the floor and limped back to her desk, scanning the offices on her way. *Whew*. She hadn't been caught.

Once at her desk, she turned on her computer. Needing to appear as if she'd been working, she scattered a few papers over the top.

Her forty-two co-workers arrived within the next thirty minutes, but she waited for one in particular. When Max walked in, the whole room seemed to beam just as it used to do in high school. And as like in yesteryear, people greeted him with waves. He nodded, giving them his ear-to-ear smile. She sighed.

He stepped into his office with his coffee cup in one hand and his briefcase in the other. She leaned forward on her

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

desk, resting her elbows on top as she stared at him through his office window and waited.

His head turned toward the box as he set his cup and briefcase on his desk. After hanging his coat on the rack in the corner, he moved back by the box and slowed his step. His gaze dropped to the candy. She held her breath. Her hands shook so badly she clasped them together and held them between her knees.

He flipped his finger against the card, opening it wider. He stared at the card for a few seconds then turned and looked out his office door.

Heat rushed to her cheeks and she shuffled through the papers on her desk, hoping to appear busy. She picked one up as if studying it, peeking over the edge at him.

He didn't look her way, and her heart sank. The dream wouldn't happen the way she'd imagined—not yet, anyway.

When he sat behind his desk and turned on his computer, she scowled. *Isn't he going to eat a piece of chocolate? He has to!*

Glancing at the clock every five minutes didn't help the hour pass any quicker. Every time he moved from his desk, she jumped and her heart quickened in hopes of him eating a piece. He remained impassive to the chocolates.

After a few more hours crept by with her mind everywhere except where it should be, she growled and pushed away from her desk. She needed a Coke, or something that would keep her mouth and hands busy.

The clicking of high heels echoed on the floor near her desk before she smelled Amanda's heavily perfumed body-

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

spray. Her supervisor plopped her butt down on the edge of Charley's desk, crinkling a paper beneath her silk skirt.

A smile stretched wide across the other woman's face. *Now was not the time for grins.* Amanda's long, thin leg thumped against the side of the desk, swinging in an uncalculated rhythm. The incessant noise irritated Charley's already frayed nerves, like fingernails grating down a chalkboard.

"So, Charley. Have you talked to Max lately?"

Charley scowled. "Lower your voice. I don't want the whole damn office hearing you."

Amanda's eyes widened. "Why? You are after Max, aren't you?"

"Maybe, maybe not, and *if* I am, it's my business, not the office's concern."

"Just wondered if you wanted my help." Amanda extended her arm, her attention moving to her cherry red manicured nails as she waggled them through the air.

Charley took a deep breath and in her mind counted to ten. Although it made her happy to know her friend wanted to help, now wasn't the best time. She was still too anxious about Max not eating the chocolate.

"Thanks, Amanda. I'll keep your offer in mind."

Amanda shrugged and slid off the side of the desk. "Holler if you need me." She turned and slinked back around the corner toward her own desk.

For the next several hours, her gaze skipped toward Max's desk. The box of chocolates remained untouched. His hand passed right by them when he reached for his coffee, and she

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

wanted to scream when he didn't pick up a piece and plunk it into his mouth.

By the end of the day, her chest burned with a frustrated cry she couldn't wait to release. What was wrong with him? He could at least eat one.

She kept her eyes on him until after the ten o'clock evening's broadcast, and still, he had yet to eat the candy. He gathered his personal items then stopped and looked at the box of chocolates. Her heart sped and she caught her breath. He picked up the box and walked out of his office. He scanned the area, then his gaze rested on her.

Wearing a smile, he headed her way. The closer he came, the hotter her face burned.

"Hey, Charley? Do you like chocolate?"

She swallowed hard. "Ummm ... yes."

He set the box on her desk. "You can have these. I'd hate to see them go to waste."

She nodded, opening her mouth to ask him why he didn't eat them, but Frank came up behind Max and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You did a great job on the air, Max."

Max turned and walked away with Frank, and just like that, he was gone.

Over his shoulder, he called out his goodbyes, passing the others on his way out the door. Tomorrow was his day off, and she'd have to wait yet another day to see what other of the *Ten Ways* she could try on him.

In momentary defeat, she grabbed the box of chocolates, her purse, and her briefcase and left the building. Her bottom

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

lip drooped lower, and she was sure she'd step on it sooner or later.

The time it took to drive from work to home passed by quickly. She didn't even remember how she'd arrived at her townhouse. The place seemed darker than usual, but she brushed off the prickly sensations raising the hairs on the back of her neck as she climbed from the car.

Out of habit, she reached in her purse for the garage-door remote and clicked the button. The cool night breeze fanned her face as she turned and walked toward the front door. She dug through her purse to find her keys, balancing the box of chocolate in her arm. Cursing under her breath, she stopped to set the box down, but before she could turn, a crack resounded through the air. Above her, the porch light bulb shattered into tiny pieces.

She yipped and jumped back to keep from getting cut. The box of candy and her keys slipped from her hand and hit the ground. What in the hell just happened?

"Damn it." She blinked, adjusting her eyes to the darkness so she could locate her keys.

The streetlight was semi hidden behind her garage, making it almost impossible to see. She used her foot to do her looking, moving it around the porch. Something jingled next to her shoe, and she sighed.

As she bent to retrieve her keys, a shiver ran up her spine and teased the hairs at the base of her neck. Moments later, the wind had stopped blowing on her face. Her heart sank, her breathing slowed. Somebody was beside her.

Could it be Damien Giovanni again?

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She scowled and jumped up, ready to face her neighbor. But when a hand snaked out from behind her and clamped over her mouth, and a body shoved her against the brick wall, she cried out. Damien wouldn't be that rough.

The hand pressed against her mouth and nose didn't smell anything like Damien's sexy scent. Instead, the odor reminded her of raw onions—and an unwashed clod.

Her body shook and her heart had almost given up beating for lack of oxygen. Her limbs even weakened.

"Listen lady," the man's raspy voice whispered in her ear. "Do as I say and you won't get hurt."

She managed a small nod.

"You stay against the wall just like you are now, and I'm going to reach down and get your purse."

Swallowing hard, she nodded again.

After what seemed like an eternity, he removed his hand, but the pressure from his body remained against her. She peeked over her shoulder, but all she could see was his black garb, and the facemask hiding his identity.

Was this really happening? Tears stung her eyes, panic consuming her.

He opened her purse with one hand, but kept glancing up at her, his free hand extending toward her as if to ward off an attack. Her breaths quickened, her lungs burned to keep in air.

"Shit, lady, where's your wallet?"

Collecting the courage she'd didn't think she had, she raised her foot and kicked as hard as she could. Her shoe

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

connected with his hip and knocked him down. She turned, jumped over him, and yelled for help as loud as she could.

The man coughed, but was faster than she'd anticipated. His hand caught her ankle in her pursuit. She tripped and landed on her knees, her hands caught the cement in effort to break her fall. Pain ripped through her, and her wrenched muscles screamed in agony.

"You bitch," he hissed, scrambling toward her.

She rolled to her back and brought her legs up to kick at him again. From the shadows, a new form appeared. Like a scene from a Superman movie, another man flew across the porch and landed on top of her attacker, knocking him to the ground. She crawled out of their way.

The men rolled, but the larger one pinned her attacker on the grass. Her Superman raised his fist and plowed it into the other's face. The sound of bones cracking echoed through the air, and she cringed. Hopefully, it was the other man's nose and not her rescuer's hand.

Through the breeze, she detected a man's musky cologne. *Damien*. Her heartbeat accelerated.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Charley, my cell phone is clipped to my waist. Call the police."

She hurried over to him, and with shaky hands tried to find the cell. Her hands brushed across his tight stomach, then found the cold plastic of the phone.

She clicked it open and her trembling finger pushed 9-1-1.

When the voice came over the other end, she let out a ragged breath. "This is Charley Randall at 4010 Meadows Drive. I've been attacked. Send someone quick!"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

While a squeaky-voiced woman on the other side of the line probed for more details, Charley's gaze remained leveled on Damien. The man beneath him struggled, but her neighbor tightened his grip and pushed the other man's head into the ground. Through it all, Damien glanced her way. He nodded and gave her a reassuring wink.

After the police questioned them and hauled her attacker to jail, Charley finally crumbled. Her body shook as tears gushed from her eyes. Damien gathered her in his strong arms and she rested her head on his chest. His body heat surrounded and warmed her, but it didn't diminish the sobs that wracked her body.

Damien had actually saved her. She owed him her life. She nibbled on her lip and glanced up at him. Her protector had dealt with the situation and was her support. Had she been wrong about him? Had he been the good guy all this time and she'd just refused to believe it?

He helped her into her townhouse and locked the door. Treating her as if she were a precious piece of glass, he walked her to the couch and assisted her as she sat. He leveled himself beside her.

"*Mí amore.*" He swiped a lock of hair off her forehead. The softness in his gray eyes made her chest tighten. "Do you want me to fix you some coffee?"

"No."

He leaned back, his eyes creased at the edges. "Are you sure?"

"I don't want coffee."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Then what do you want?" His finger trailed down her cheek, wiping away some moisture. "Would you like me to stay with you tonight?"

If he had said that yesterday, she'd have known what he meant. But now ... She frowned. Had the man with sex on his mind returned?

"No, Damien, I'll be just fine."

"I can sleep on the couch, just to make sure you're all right." He patted her hands.

She gave him a weak smile. "That's not necessary. Please, go home."

"Do you want me to check your house first to see if everything looks safe?"

Emotion tugged at her heart. He was being her Superman in every way. Why did he have to be so sweet? Why couldn't he be the Prince Charming she'd been searching for? But she suspected he acted this way only because of what happened tonight. He'd be back to his normal sexist-self tomorrow.

"Thank you. That's a good idea. Go ahead and search my house, but when you're done, you can leave. I'll be fine."

He squeezed her hands before moving away. His dark blue Levis had white and green scuffmarks where he and the other man rolled on the cement and grass. The light blue cotton shirt molded to his muscles, bunching with his movements.

She stood and on unsteady legs, made her way into the kitchen for a glass of water. It wasn't coffee she needed tonight, but a sleeping pill.

His heavy footsteps boomed throughout her home, stopping at each room. When he bounded down the stairs,

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

she pulled away from the kitchen counter to meet him at the bottom step.

He touched her shoulder. His eyes, soft with tenderness. "Everything looks good."

She sighed. "Thanks again, Damien. You saved my life." She shrugged. "I don't know how to thank you."

The corner of his mouth lifted in an assured grin. "I'll think of a way ... tomorrow. Tonight, you get some rest."

She frowned. His one-track mind was back.

"Thanks again, Damien."

He caressed her cheek then turned and walked out the door. Although he'd never be relationship material, he at least made a good neighbor and friend. For now, that was all she wanted from him.

\* \* \* \*

Maybe she should have gone to work. But after last night's episode, her frazzled nerves wouldn't let her. Besides that, it was Max's day off. Good enough reason to stay home and recuperate.

Sleep hadn't come easy last night.

She growled and punched her fist into her pillow. The memory of that damn mugger had kept her awake most of the night. Her attacker had been thrown in the slammer, but she still worried there was another man out there just waiting to pounce on her.

She shivered and pulled the blanket up to her chin. Perhaps she should have taken Damien's offer and let him

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

stay on her couch. No, because with him in the house, she was assured a completely sleepless night.

She slipped her legs off the bed and sat and stretched her arms above her head. The only things she planned on accomplishing this morning were to shower, dress and eat. And maybe not in that order.

The morning passed too quickly, and in between catnaps, the afternoon had disappeared. Seven in the evening came fast.

She plopped on the sofa and curled up in a ball. After she'd pushed the mugging incident behind her, she thought about yesterday with Max. What a disaster it had been. Tears gathered in her eyes, and if her throat tightened any more, she'd have to call the paramedics.

She was nothing but a pathetic loser. What was wrong with her? It seemed she had strayed back into the old pattern with men. Could Amanda be right? Maybe she couldn't attract the sort of man she wanted.

But other men were not the issue right now. This was Max—someone who she'd loved when she was a teenager—someone who didn't know about her past failures. So why couldn't she get him to notice her? Sure, she thought of herself as a frog, but even toads mated, didn't they?

They did.

With other toads.

*Perhaps I've set my sights too high? What I need to find is a small, green, slimy kind of guy, and then I can live happily ever after ... in the swamp.* She groaned and slumped headfirst into the throw pillow.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She wiped her eyes, fighting for control. Depression wouldn't consume her. There had to be something she could do.

A quick knock sounded at her front door. She popped up straight like a jack-in-the-box that'd been wound too tight, and finished drying her eyes with the back of her hand. She hurried over to the door, but hesitated to place her hand on the knob.

"Who is it?"

"Your protective neighbor."

With a heavy sigh, she opened the door. Damien leaned against the wall, his shirt emphasizing his bulging muscles as if he were the center attraction at a model school. He folded his arms across his wide chest. His familiar crooked grin warned her he wanted something she wasn't going to like.

She gave him a hesitant smile. "Hello, Damien."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I ordered Chinese, and you know they always bring too much. It's sitting on my table as we speak. I thought you could help me eat it."

She wanted to turn him down, but her grumbling stomach accepted before she had time to open her mouth and refuse.

He chuckled and glanced at her midsection. "Boy, I've never had such a quick response before."

She smiled. "Okay, I'll eat with you, but I have a feeling eating isn't the only thing you have planned tonight."

He held up his hands in surrender. "You have me pegged, *mí amore*."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She nodded. "You know I'm not interested in *that*."

He shook his head. "You have it all wrong. I've thought of a way you could pay me back for helping you last night. I have something to make you relax, yet at the same time it will give you pleasure."

She gasped, her hand flying to her throat. "Of all the low-down, inconsiderate—"

He pulled on her arm until her hand dropped from her neck. "It's not what you're thinking. I want to try a new product from work on you."

She crinkled her forehead. "What are you talking about?"

"I work at GIO Products, and we're trying out a new product for women. I want you to be my guinea pig."

"What's the product?"

His gray eyes sparkled and he winked. "It's a surprise. Now come on before the food gets cold."

Her heart hammered. He grasped her elbow and led her to his townhouse. She'd actually get to see how the playboy lived. Although his intensions still made her leery, her palms were moist with anticipation. Would he treat her like one of his Barbie dolls?

Did she want him to?

### Three

Damien held his breath, waiting for her refusal. Since he'd met her six months ago, she'd been declining every invitation he offered. Of course, most of the time sex had something to do with it.

Could he help it? She was a very attractive woman; had the right curves and those hypnotic blue eyes could bring any man to his knees. And the cute way she became riled made her irresistible. She could make him laugh no matter what mood he was in.

Charley grabbed her keys and locked the door, then followed him to his townhouse. Two steps into his place, she sucked in her breath and her eyes grew wide.

Perhaps he should have warned her he'd just redecorated, but he wanted to see her reaction. Instead of the brown carpet like she had in her front room, there were large black and white domino-tiled shapes on the floor.

She blinked. "Wow. What is this? A freakin' museum?"

He chuckled and walked ahead of her, motioning with his hand for her to move into the living room. Her gaze snapped to a red chair with a beige cushion that stood against the wall. He really liked this chair because its back curved perfectly to fit a human form.

She shook her head. "I *know* I've never seen furniture like this before unless it's been in a Dr. Seuss book."

"That's called a Pelican chair." He nodded in the direction of her stare. "Christensen and Legaarct designed it, not Dr.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Seuss." He pointed to a cherry wood chair. "And that's a Chieftain's chair, made by Hansen and Sorensen."

Her gaze rested on the final piece of furniture, a black and white sofa.

He pointed. "And that's a Ross' sofa, companioned with Ross' coffee table. Notice how the brushed stainless steel legs have wooden toes. The veneered tabletop is also stainless steel and has matching vases."

Turning her attention to him, she cocked her head. "Let me guess, Ross made them?"

He laughed. "No. Hansen and Sorensen."

She nodded, her mouth twisting into a quirk. "Aw, my mistake."

Paintings hung on his walls, too, but she didn't ask him about those. She then turned her gaze to the assortment of potted plants scattered on shelves, and to the large pots sitting in the corners of the room.

She arched an eyebrow. "Why do you have so many plants?"

"GIO Products is starting a new line of herbal shampoos and conditioners. I've been studying plants lately, and most of these are for testing."

She stood next to his couch, running her fingers along the edge. As much as he'd love to see her lounging across it, the overwhelming scents of Chinese food beckoned him to pull her toward the kitchen. There'd be plenty of time to enjoy the couch later if his plan worked.

Just like his living room furniture, his brown and black dining room set was just as fancy.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Did Hansen and Sorensen make this, too?" she asked.

"No. Nanna Ditzel did. This set is a Tobago Café."

She arched her eyebrow, her eyes devoid of recognition.

"Hmmmm, I can see why."

He chuckled, knowing she didn't understand anything he had said.

The heavenly scent of Chinese food hung thick in the air. Her stomach growled and he grinned.

She inhaled and closed her eyes. "Ummm ... what's the specialty tonight?"

"I hope you like sweet and sour chicken and lo-mien noodles. There's also a couple of egg-rolls and fried prawns."

She opened her eyes and stared at him. "Really?"

"Yes, why?"

She shrugged. "That just happens to be my favorite."

His chest swelled. At least they had the same taste in food.

"Good, it's mine, too."

He moved to the chair and pulled it out. She gaped with wide eyes.

"What?" he asked.

"You ... you pulled out the chair for me."

"So."

"So most men don't do that."

He winked. "You'll soon discover I'm not like most men."

Tearing her stare away from him, she turned and planted her cute little backside on the chair. She wiggled her bottom on the seat.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think? Is it comfortable?"

"Yes. I can't believe it, but it is."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He turned to his cupboards and removed two plates, bringing them over to the table. She closed her eyes and inhaled the sweet and sour scent he placed in front of her. Her tongue slipped out and wiped across her lips.

Did she know how lovely she looked right now? How his desire for her climbed a notch? But he'd have to take it slow with Charley. Obviously his charm hadn't won her over yet, so he must choose a different path.

"So, who's the new man in your life?"

She snapped her head toward him and glared. "What makes you think I have a new man in my life?"

He shrugged. "I saw you'd brought home a box of chocolates with you last night. I just assumed..."

"Well, you assumed wrong."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Just trying to make small talk."

She relaxed and drew in her claws. When she smiled, it softened his heart.

"I'm sorry I got upset. The truth is, you're not too far off. Although I don't have a man in my life, I *am* trying."

He walked back to the counter to fix his plate. "Who's the lucky guy?"

She chuckled. "He'd been my high school crush. Now he works with me. His name is Max Harrington."

His hand stopped midway to the box of sweet and sour chicken, his breath catching in his throat. Did she just say the name of the man he'd been trying to forget since college?

He looked back at her. "Tall, blond, and built like a quarter-back? That Maxwell Harrington?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She smiled. "You know him?"

His jaw hardened, his fingers tightening around the fork.

"We were in college together."

"Well, he doesn't know about my track record with men, so I'm going to try a different way in winning him over."

He arched his brow. "What way is that?"

She explained how she'd run across an Internet article that told women how to melt a man's heart it 10 ways ... and she kept a straight face the whole time. He couldn't do the same. The corner of his mouth twitched as he tried to hold in a laugh. "So that's what the box of chocolates was for?"

"Yes."

"How did it go?" He sat beside her and twirled his fork in the noodles.

"Not as well as I'd wanted."

"What happened?"

She shrugged. "He didn't even open the box. How can he detect my mating scent if he doesn't get that chemical in his blood? Hell, it was like blowing a moose mating horn to a deaf moose."

He chuckled. "Perhaps he's not a moose."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I wish I knew what kind of mating call he likes, but unfortunately, I don't." She sipped her water. "Then again, maybe I read the article backward. Maybe it said eat chocolates in the dark instead of eating dark chocolate."

"What if this chemical is a hoax and it doesn't work?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She arched an eyebrow. "But what if it does? Besides, I checked it out on the Internet. Apparently, there has been tests done that support this theory."

"Maybe he'll eat the candy tomorrow."

"No. He gave them to me without knowing I'm his admirer."

He crinkled his forehead. "Oooh, not good."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Did he give a reason why he didn't eat them?"

"No."

"Then you need to think of another way to get that chemical in his blood."

"You're not telling me anything new, but I don't know what to do. My brain is running on empty." She shoveled a pile of rice on her fork before pushing it in her mouth.

He scratched the side of his face. He really didn't want to help her win Max. No girl deserved such punishment, and *he* didn't deserve to be tortured by watching it happen ... twice in a lifetime. He couldn't stand the rejection. Women *always* picked blond hair and blue eyes over Damien Giovanni.

Although he didn't want to help her, he did like being around her. So maybe if he volunteered to help, she'd allow him into her heart as a friend ... and eventually more.

They ate in silence. As hard as he tried not to think of a way to have Max eat the chocolates, her sad eyes tugged on his heartstrings and he wished he could kiss away her frown. The only way to make her smile was to help. Hopefully Max would show his true colors soon and she'd move on to another man ... and he'd be standing next in line.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"I think I know a way."

Her gaze snapped to his face, her eyes widened.

"Does he still drink coffee in the morning?"

"Yes."

"All right, here's what you'll do. When he leaves his room, sneak in and replace it with hot chocolate." He took a swallow of his water to wash down the annoyance rising inside him.

"When he sips his drink, he'll drink the hot chocolate instead, and the chemical will enter his body."

Color came back to her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled to a healthy sapphire. She grasped his hand and squeezed.

"You're the best."

He winked. "I know."

"This will work. Oh, thank you."

"Sure, anytime."

She smiled wide. "Does this mean you'll help me win Max?"

He stared blankly at her. *Help her?* He didn't want to help her with Max, but then if it meant spending more time with her and watching her eyes light up, he'd do it. He'd also be by her side to make certain Max didn't hurt her.

He nodded and she released a big sigh.

"Can you sneak into his office without being seen after he's put his coffee on the desk?" he asked.

She paused, her forehead creasing. Within seconds, her eyes widened. "Yes. Every morning there's a meeting for the producers and anchor people. The old sports anchorman was usually only in there for a few minutes. If Max follows the same schedule, I can switch the drinks then."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Damien lifted his water glass. "Then let's toast to a successful day."

She raised her glass, clinking it against his. The twinkle came back into her eyes and his chest ached to think it wasn't for him. Why had he offered to help when he should be keeping her away from men like Max? Under the table, he bunched his hand into a fist, wishing he could kick his own ass instead.

He debated telling her the truth about his former friend, only because he didn't know if Max had changed from when Damien knew him in college. He'd ride it out and see what happened. With any luck, she'd get tired of Mr. Sportsman quickly.

"Okay, now that we have dinner out of the way, I have something to try on you." He pushed away from the table and held out his hand for her to take. She hesitated, her forehead creased.

"Try on me?"

He chuckled. "Yes, the new GIO product." He paused, then asked, "Don't you trust me?"

The corner of her mouth lifted, but she didn't answer. Her eyes narrowed slightly and he grinned. He took her hand and pulled her out of the kitchen, through the front room and toward his bedroom. It thrilled him to be bringing her this way, only because he'd been trying to seduce her since the first day he moved next door. Of course, it was his own fault she thought poorly of him and fought his every move.

He'd change that ... slowly but surely.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

When he first met Charley, he suspected she was like most money-hungry women—like his ex, but Charley didn't act impressed when he showed her his new furniture. Usually the women asked him about what he did for a living and how much he made by now. For some reason, Charley didn't care.

He'd always thought she was one fine looking woman, and when he told her so, she didn't like his flirtatious manner or his sexual remarks. Every time he saw her, he wanted to see the fire in her eyes ... wanted to make her melt in his arms. So far, that hadn't happened.

She became a challenge, and now with Max in the picture, it only made the challenge that much more important. Over the past six months, he'd seen the men in her life come and go, and he'd noticed how much she hurt. She couldn't mask the pain in her eyes. He didn't want his old college friend be the next to break her tender heart.

When they entered his room, Charley stopped and stared at his bed with wide eyes. "Is this bed from Scandinavia, too?"

"Yes. Hans Sandgren Jakobsen designed it. He calls it Grandlit."

His bedroom was made for sex, and he wanted it to be an invitation to her. Light blue satin sheets, satin pillows—satin everything, just what women liked ... just what he liked to have around his naked body while laying beside a woman. If only he could experience that with Charley. The little side tables attached to the single mattress bed, supported by cherry wood, only enhanced the bed's mystery.

She grimaced. "It doesn't look very comfortable."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Oh, believe me, it is." He paused for a second. "Do you want to try it out and see?" He wagged his eyebrows.

A flush of pink stained her cheeks, and he bit back a grin. It wasn't very often he was privileged to get this reaction from her. And damn, if he didn't like it.

"No, I don't want to try it out and see." She glanced at the few pictures hanging on the walls and walked to them. "So, you like the outdoors? Mountains, streams, waterfalls?"

"Yes."

She threw a skeptical glance over her shoulder, her eyebrows lifting in a mock laugh. "Didn't figure you were the type."

"And what type is that?"

"The rugged outdoors-man."

He shook his head in non-belief. To him, a man couldn't consider himself masculine unless he loved the wildness of the great mountains.

He took hold of her arm once again and pulled her into his bathroom. She gingerly ran her fingers over his counter, touching his razors, shaving cream, and a bottle of cologne. There were also many GIO brand hair gels, hairsprays, and combs organized along the top.

As she stared at his products, he wanted to share with her the truth. This wasn't merely just any old testing they were going to do. He owned the damn company, and tests like this were important. But thanks to some women like his ex, he bit his tongue and confessed nothing. He was tired of women only seeing him for his fat wallet and enormous bank account.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He motioned for her to sit on the small, black-cushioned stool near the garden tub.

When her bottom rested on the seat, her back stiffened and her eyes met his. "What are you going to do to me?"

He picked up the hair dryer with a long rod on the front off of the counter and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"GIO has come out with a new toy. It's a combination hair dryer and curling iron. I'm trying it on you to see if it works."

She crinkled her brows. "And what if it doesn't work? Will I get a lasting perm?"

He tipped back his head and laughed. She didn't join in with the humor. "It's already been tested, if that's what you're worried about."

"Has it been tested on people or dummies?"

"People."

"Were the people dummies?"

God, he loved how she could make him laugh. "No."

"Did their hair still look the same afterward?"

"No. It looked better."

"All right, but I'm warning you..."

"Charley, please trust me."

Her jaw hardened and she nodded.

He walked behind her, reached over to the wall and plugged in the cord. "First off, let's get your hair a little damp."

He grabbed the water bottle and sprayed her hair. She raised her hands to block the mist from getting in her eyes.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

After he'd completed his task, he brought the new contraption over and flipped on the button.

As he played with her hair, the scent of her strawberry shampoo drifted upward, swirling around his senses. Even the hint of berry-scented perfume she liked to wear excited him. Beneath his fingers, the warmth of her skin sparked something inside him, making him want more. Much more.

He smiled. She was nothing like his ex. Charley actually cared about people, and he dreamed of the time she would care deeply about him.

Like most women, she probably suspected he'd never settle down ... like good 'ole Max Harrington. Inwardly, he growled. Out of the two men, *he* would settle down sooner than playboy Harrington.

With the threat of Max looming over his head, his chest tightened. Why hadn't he worked faster in trying to get Charley to like him? Would it matter to her now since she'd set her sights on Max? No. She'd been in love with Max since high school.

But he couldn't give up. Charming her would be different from the other ladies. He must become her friend first to gain her trust.

He didn't want to see Charley hurt, and he'd do anything to protect her. But what if his old college buddy had changed? What if Max wasn't the womanizer he'd been back then?

Silently cursing, he gripped the blow dryer harder. Charley had been sexually teasing him for quite some time whether she knew it or not. The way she looked at him when she stepped out of her townhouse, pretending she didn't see him

with another woman. The way she turned her cute little nose up as if it didn't bother her. But especially those times he could make her laugh.

She'd grown on him, and he liked it. But how could he make her feel the same way about him? If she'd been the least bit interested, she would have succumbed to his flirtations. She would have gone out with him by now.

His heart sank. Once again, a woman picked Mr. Blond Hair and Blue Eyes. Once again, they picked Max. Torture—that was the word to describe all of this.

His chest ached knowing he wouldn't be the one to hold her, feel her lips in a heated kiss, experience the touch of her hands gliding lovingly over his skin, feel her lying naked beneath him while they made love.

His stomach clenched and so did his fingers in her hair. Charley let out a whimper and he loosened his grip. "Did I hurt you?"

"Just a tiny bit. It's okay now." She moved in her seat, her shoulders relaxing.

Damien rubbed his forehead, hoping to relieve the pounding in his skull. Thinking about Charley eased the pressure, and although he didn't want to help her win Max, he did want to see her happy.

But would the sportsman really make her happy? Several years ago he and Max parted enemies, and Damien had wanted revenge. Revenge didn't matter any longer, but saving Charley from another heartache did. Would she understand or would she think he only wanted her because of

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

what happened back then? Mr. Sportsman would definitely think wanting Charley was done out of vengeance.

Damien was stuck because he'd offered to help. But he'd make sure Max wouldn't use Charley. If it looked as if his former friend was up to his tricks again, he'd barge in and save the damsel in distress.

The mere idea nearly made him laugh out loud, but he bit his bottom lip and kept the humor inside. That's exactly what he'd do. Then, at the right moment, he'd confess his feelings for her and hope to hell she didn't hate him. What could go wrong with a great plan like that?

\* \* \* \*

Hot chocolate steamed in the foam cup sitting on her desk as Charley kept her attention glued to Max's office. She prayed he wouldn't take his stainless steel coffee cup into the meeting. He couldn't. Then what would she do?

When eight-thirty neared, he pushed away from his desk and picked up his notepad and pen. He stood and stopped, glancing back at his desk.

She held her breath. *Don't take it!*

Within seconds, he turned and walked out of his office—without his cup.

She released a pent-up sigh.

"Amanda," he called out. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

Charley's redheaded friend nodded, her eyes glued to the small television on her desk, watching a national news flash. Amanda's fingers gripped the pencil tight as she wrote notes.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Charley waited until eight-thirty-five before she made her move. Acting as if it were an everyday occurrence for her to walk with a cup of hot chocolate in her hand, she smiled, trying to steady her wobbly legs. She continued into Max's office and closed the door. She quickly slipped off the second foam cup she'd put underneath the first, and disposed of Max's coffee. Then she poured the hot chocolate into his stainless steel cup. Placing the now empty cup underneath the full one, she opened the door and casually walked back to her desk as if nothing happened.

She scanned the room for anyone throwing curious stares her way. Surprisingly, nobody questioned her, or even lifted a brow. She'd pulled it off. Of course, now she'd have to sit and wait until he drank it, and that would be the hardest part.

The clock on her desk ticked by as if it were in slow motion. She kept checking to make sure the batteries were working and realized the hands still moved. Ten minutes passed with her limbs shaking uncontrollably. She sipped Max's stolen coffee. Grimacing, she swallowed the bitter liquid. How could anyone like stuff this strong?

She wrung her hands and watched the conference room down the hall. When the door opened, her breathing accelerated. Max stepped out and she thought her racing heart would kill her.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to remain calm, then quickly took another sip of his coffee. *Cold. Yuck.*

Max walked into his room and sat behind his computer. He flipped open the notebook and glanced at the pages. His hand moved toward the cup.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She inhaled ... and held it.

As he continued to read, his fingers drummed on the side of the cup.

*Drink it, damn it!*

Finally, he picked up the cup and brought it to his mouth. Her own lips puckered as if trying to help him. He sipped.

Within seconds, he choked and spit out the liquid, spewing it across his desk. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Taking off the lid, he peered inside and sniffed. His curse whipped through the air from across the room.

He jumped away from his desk and grabbed the drink, hurrying down the hall toward the break room, his eyes wide, his face losing color.

*Why did he look so panicked?* Had he choked? Did he need help this very minute?

Now that he had digested the chemical, she needed to put herself in Max's way. She wanted to be the first person Max saw when the chemical began working.

She pushed away from her desk and tried not to run down the hall. Slowing her steps, she took her time, stopping at Amanda's desk, but her friend was busy on the phone. When Amanda looked up, Charley smiled and continued on.

Her legs shook the closer she walked to the break room. Her hand trembled when she reached out and opened the door. Then she froze. Max leaned over the sink splashing water on his face—a face that looked too puffy to be his.

He turned and gazed her way, his lips now swollen and losing color. She gasped, ran to him, and grabbed his arm.

He coughed. "Call 9-1-1."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Max? What's wrong?"

"I'm ... allergic to ... chocolate."

The blood left her head, and the room tilted around her.  
Her heart sank.

*What have I done?*

## Four

*She could have killed Max.*

Charley paced the floor in her front room, biting down on her lip. Her temper threatened to release at any moment like a volcano spewing hot lava. It was all Damien's fault. If he hadn't suggested switching the drinks, none of this would have happened. Yet, she was the one who asked for his help, wasn't she?

Grrr ... She hated this confusion.

Threading her fingers through her hair, she lifted the bulk off her shoulders. Although her flesh was hot, cool air touched her neck. She marched to the thermostat on the wall. Oops, she'd forgotten to turn up the heat. But right now it didn't matter.

She huffed and turned around. The box of chocolates from the other day still sat on her end table, untouched. Her heart lodged in her throat and tears threatened. Why didn't anything go as planned?

The knock at the door made her jump, and she spun around, glowering at the barrier as if it were something evil. When another knock sounded, she marched over and flung it open.

The man in front of her wore a sexy grin and looked as muscular as Adonis. She glared at him. "It didn't work, Damien."

The light in his gray eyes diminished and his smile disappeared. "What do you mean it didn't work?"

"Just what I said." With a sharp turn, she moved away and continued her pacing across the living room floor.

Damien came in and strode to the couch. When he sat, his relaxed position and nonchalant attitude made her clench her teeth. Of course, he looked too damn sexy, which made her temper raise a notch higher. The red cotton polo-style shirt stretched across his wide chest, and black corduroys fit his tranquil posture too perfectly.

She folded her arms across her bosom. "Why didn't you tell me Max is allergic to chocolate?"

Stretching his arm along the back of the sofa, he tilted his head and looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Max is allergic." She pointed to the box of chocolates. "That's the reason he didn't eat any yesterday."

"Really?" His voice lifted.

"Don't tell me you didn't know."

His eyes widened. "Honestly, Charley, I didn't know." He shrugged. "I thought everyone liked chocolate."

She stopped in front of him, moving her hands to her hips. "He's allergic."

His brows knit together. "And I tell you again, I didn't know."

"But you were his friend."

"I don't remember him being allergic to anything while we were friends in college."

The tone of his voice was harsh. She cringed, cursing her quick temper. It really wasn't his fault. He'd only been helping.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She exhaled deeply and plopped down beside him on the couch. His hand moved to her neck and massaged her tight muscles. Her first reaction was to push him away, and she stiffened, but the heat from his body blended into hers.

Second by second, her muscles relaxed, and she tilted her head forward to let his magical fingers do their work. Although he relieved some of the stress in her body, the havoc in her mind wouldn't rest.

Why couldn't she get anything right? She'd messed up from the very beginning. And why was Damien suddenly being a sweet guy when just last week she'd been judging him harshly? Life wasn't fair.

"Damien, I could have killed him." Her voice broke, and she fought the remorse threatening to consume her. Guilt spread through her chest, making it hard to breathe ... at least that's what she thought was the reason. It couldn't be that her gorgeous neighbor was just a little too close, his touch a little too personal.

She sniffed. "How am I supposed to melt his heart if I make him sick?"

Damien tenderly squeezed her shoulder. This incredible alpha-male was actually sitting beside her trying to comfort her. He wasn't to blame for Max's unfortunate accident with the chocolate. A tear slipped down her cheek and she wiped it away.

"Hey," he said. "Come here."

She glanced at him just in time to have him wrap her in a tight hug. Once again, she stiffened, ready to resist, but when her cheek pressed against his hard chest, the steady rhythm

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

of his heart relaxed her. Her traitorous body had a mind of its own and slumped against him. But then, being cuddled by this big, strong Italian wasn't that bad ... was it?

"Don't worry, *mí amore*, we won't mess up the next one."

"What should I do now?"

"Does he know you were the one who replaced the drinks?"

"No."

"Keep it that way."

She lifted her head and peered into his dark eyes. Up this close, she detected the mint scent in his breath, as if he'd just gargled. "Don't worry. I'm not stupid enough to announce my mistake."

His fingers stroked her cheek. The softness in his eyes confused her. Why was he looking at her like that? Certainly different from the *come-hither* stare he'd always given her. But the look soothed her, and her heart cried out for more.

Realizing where her thoughts had wandered, she pulled away. Damien was *not* the man she wanted to melt. *Max, not Damien.*

"How is he doing now?" he asked, reaching over to the end table and taking a piece of chocolate from the box then plopping it in his mouth.

"The paramedics gave him a shot before rushing him to the hospital. Everything must have been fine, because he came back to the office a few hours later. The bosses sent him home."

"I'm sorry."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

The genuine concern in his gray eyes thawed her heart and removed her anger. Her throat choked with a sob. Crying like a baby seemed like a good idea, but she blinked, fighting the tears.

She shook her head. "I'm the one who's sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you."

He grabbed another chocolate. "Here, eat this. It'll make you feel better."

She tried not to smile, but the corner of her mouth tugged upward. How did he know chocolate made her happy?

He brought the piece of candy close to her mouth as if wanting to feed her. Heat consumed her, warming her in the most sensitive places, making her squeeze her thighs together.

Once again, she reprimanded her thoughts for wandering in the wrong direction. She snatched the piece of candy before she was tempted to open her mouth for him.

Damien leaned back in the couch. "But now we need to do something else to get him to notice you."

"Can't you just fix us up on a blind date? After all, you are friends."

He shook his head. "No, we *were* friends."

"Why aren't you friends any longer?"

"Let's just say we didn't keep in touch after college."

"But couldn't you just—"

"Charley, it'd look better if you attracted him on your own. Besides, guys don't like to interfere with their friends' relationships. That's a woman's job."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She scowled. But he was right. Guys didn't do things like that. She relaxed into the cushion. "Okay, then, whatever I do to get his attention can't be something that might hurt him."

He chuckled. "No, we won't do that. We'll do something on that list of yours. What's the next way to melt his heart?"

She shrugged. "I'm a little stumped on this one."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to get him a hard-to-find gift."

"Hmmm..." He scratched his chin, his gaze moving around the room. Then it stopped and his eyes widened. "I have it."

"You do? So soon?"

"Yes. This is perfect." He leaned toward her and clasped her hands. "You'll get him a plant."

She drew her brows together. "A plant?" She curled her lips in distaste. "Why a plant?" *Men don't like plants, do they?* Then she remembered the plants decorating Damien's front room.

But men who had plants nurtured them, cared and loved them so they wouldn't die. Damien didn't seem the type of man who'd do something like this. His plants looked too well cared for to be just a work experiment.

"What do you usually buy people who are in the hospital?" he asked. "Don't you get them flowers?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm certain Mr. Jock-Strap wouldn't go for flowers, so I'm suggesting a plant."

Charley hesitated, biting her lower lip. "And guys like plants, right?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He cocked his head, his stare still holding hers. "Does he live alone?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

"Then he'll probably need something to decorate his apartment. Look at my townhouse. The plants brighten up the place. I've studied a lot about plants due to the inventions of GIO Products, and I've learned that they do more than just decorate. Some actually send off a scent that will make a person feel better."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"But I have to get him a hard-to-find gift. Plants aren't that hard to find."

He nodded. His finger tapped against the cute little dimple in his chin. "Then don't get him just an ordinary plant. Get him a tropical plant."

She lifted her brows. "A tropical plant? That sounds good."

"I know exactly where you can find one. There's this little shop in the center of Main Street that'll be perfect. If they don't have what you're looking for, they'll order one for you." He stood and held out his hand. "Shall we go?"

She grinned. *Should I go with him?* It was strange how quickly he came sneaking into her life. Right now he acted like her best friend. But finding a plant for Max was something she wanted to do on her own.

Sighing heavily, she shook her head. "I can do this myself."

He shrugged. "If that's how you want it." His hand dropped to his side, his smile falling with it.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Her heart twisted. She'd hurt his feelings, and although they were still new friends, she didn't want it to be over so soon. She jumped to her feet and reached for his hand, grasping it. "Don't be upset with me."

"It's all right, *mí amore*. I just have to find a way to pass the rest of my afternoon."

"Promise you won't be mad?"

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "I promise." He gave her a wink. "Now go get that plant, and make it a good one."

She widened her smile. "I will."

\* \* \* \*

### *Hard to Find Gifts*

"I'll call it the *love fern*," Charley muttered as laughter threatened to escape her throat. She ordered the plant online, then clicked off the computer. Going to the plant shop Damien told her about certainly helped, but the plants just weren't what she wanted. It had to be eye-catching. A plant that would look good on Max's desk. In a couple of days they'd deliver the pretty green and silver fern. This time she signed her name on the card so he'd know it was from her.

She needed to force away her shyness. It wasn't that hard. She'd tell him the plant was for his quick recovery. After all, she was the one who called 911 and stayed with him until the ambulance came ... of course, she thought he was dying at the time.

Although excitement bubbled in her chest once again, she couldn't control her jitters. Hopefully the next few days would pass quickly. In the meantime, she'd try to talk to Max as

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

much as she could ... well, maybe she'd smile at him instead. Just thinking about talking with him made her stomach twist in knots.

No, talking wasn't wise right now. Smiling was good, safe, comfortable. Baby steps ... just take baby steps.

But the next few days didn't fly as she had wanted. Max and the Sports Producers were out of the office a lot filming a segment with the local basketball team. It was utterly impossible to work without seeing his charming grin and the sound of his baritone laughter. She'd also missed smelling his knee-buckling spice cologne. She found herself walking by his office a lot just to sniff inside.

She finally admitted—she was crazy for him. Or was it just lust like it had been in high school? Maybe for now it was, but once she got to know him, her heart would change.

The day she waited for came, and Max sat in his office as though the universe knew her plan and wanted to help. The brown-uniformed delivery driver brought in a large plant wrapped in yellow cellophane. Her hands shook when the driver handed the plant to Max.

His wide eyes made her heart thump out of control, and the smile he wore when he looked upon his gift made her legs tremble. She moved from the file cabinet to her chair so she wouldn't end up on the floor like warm Jell-O.

People gathered around as Max opened his gift. She couldn't see the plant so she rose from her seat, trying to peek over their heads. Laughter filled Max's room, and her cheeks heated. *What's so funny?*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She breathed a sigh of relief when everyone finally left and she could see where he'd put the plant. But she gave a sharp inhale when noticing its color. It wasn't the green-and-silver leafed plant she'd ordered; the leaves were dark green and shiny, with only a couple of flowers budding that were white and yellow suffusing in pink.

Then she noticed he had the card in his hand. No. She couldn't let him read it. Not now.

She pushed away from the desk, rose and started toward his office. She tripped over her small garbage can, but didn't care if papers spilled onto the floor. Explaining the plant's switch couldn't be put off one second longer.

She hurried around desks, making her way toward Max's room, and just as she turned the corner, the Senior Editor cut her off by stepping into his office first. She skidded to a halt and groaned.

Doug Edwards laughed, his beer-gut shaking like Santa's bowl-full-of-jelly when he walked in. "What have you got there, Max?"

"Charley sent me this plant." He glanced at the card. "Says, *for a speedy recovery*."

Edwards shrugged. "Well, I have to admit, it definitely adds color to your office."

She held her breath, waiting for Max's comment. When he gave the older man a scowl, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Doug, it's a great plant. The tag says it's called a Christmas Rose. I've never seen anything like it, and I'm sure Charley went through a lot of trouble to get it for me."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Edwards rocked back on his heels. "Yeah, I bet she searched really hard to find it."

She couldn't stop the smile from stretching across her face. Max liked it. Her heart beat to life again.

Now would be the perfect time to talk to him. But just as she said a silent prayer for courage, Amanda waved to her, motioning her to come over.

Charley shook her head. Amanda pointed to the clock on the wall. Then Charley remembered. They had a deadline. The five o'clock news was approaching fast, with still so much to do. There would be no time to talk with Max now.

She crept back to her desk and turned to her computer. Amanda held out a stack of papers to her. Charley groaned. Yet, she could actually work better now with the plant delivery out of the way. Her mind was clear, and strength had entered her body, taking the shakes away.

So deep in concentration, she didn't see Max walk by until he stopped and turned.

"Hey, Charley?"

"Huh?" She glanced his way. Her heart hammered against her ribs. "Oh, hello, Max. How are you feeling?"

"Just fine, thanks. And thanks for the plant." He gave her a wide smile, then strode back to his room.

Beside her, Amanda nudged her elbow against her shoulder. "Way to go, girl."

Once again, Charley's face heated. "Well, I felt awful about the reaction he had the other day from that chocolate."

Amanda tsked. "Yeah, just terrible, wasn't it? And who knew his allergy was that bad?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Charley shrugged, but kept her mouth closed.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Charley kept busy until quitting time. When Max walked out of his office and turned off the light, he looked her way and smiled. He held up the plant. "I'm going to take this home and put it by my front window."

Her heart leapt. "That's a great place to keep it."

Max had made her day ... and her evening.

She practically skipped out to her car, and when she walked from her vehicle toward her townhouse, the bounce in her step hadn't disappeared. Her face hurt from the constant smile, but she didn't care. Things were working perfectly. She'd have to thank Damien.

Instead of going home, she went straight to Damien's door and knocked. Inside, his musical whistle rang through the house. The tune wasn't familiar, but it didn't matter. She enjoyed the cheerful lift of his voice anyhow.

When he opened the door and looked at her, his smile widened. So did hers.

Happiness overwhelmed her and she couldn't keep from flinging her arms around his neck and hugging him tight. She kissed his cheek and he caught his breath in a quick inhale. His arms wound around her waist, which brought her body closer to his, reminding her once again how incredibly built he was. His musky scent enticed her and stirred flutters in her stomach. Even the beat of her heart quickened.

She withdrew enough to gaze at his face. "Your suggestion worked."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His eyes softened, tenderness evident in the way he looked upon her. Once again, it wasn't the heated look he liked to give—the teasing way he had always devoured her body with his gaze. What could he be thinking? Confusion clouded her mind again.

He pulled her into his apartment and kicked the door closed with his foot. "What happened?" His voice was deep ... sexy.

A spark started in her chest and spread throughout her body, fire consuming her quickly. She pushed away from him and took a step back. His tender look had disappeared, replaced by a familiar one. Lust twinkled in his gray eyes, stirring warmth in her chest. She scolded herself for reacting this way.

Shaking away the perplexing feelings, she clamped her hands and held them to her stomach. "They delivered my plant to Max's office today and he liked it."

Had his smile just wavered? No, it couldn't have. He was excited for her, wasn't he?

"Really? I thought you bought it the other day?"

"No, I ordered it. The delivery driver brought it today." She pouted for a brief moment. "Although, it wasn't exactly the plant I'd ordered, he liked it anyhow."

Damien's black eyebrows rose. "Really? What did you order?"

"The plant I ordered was called Hunter's Robe."

"What did they send?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She shrugged. "It was a weird looking plant with shiny green leaves, and a strange white, yellow, and pink flower." She chuckled. "It was definitely tropical."

"Do you know what it's called?"

"Christmas Rose, I think."

His eyes widened, then he bit his bottom lip. "Christmas Rose, you say?"

"Yes, why? Have you heard of it?"

He nodded. "If it's the plant I'm thinking about..." He paused and covered his mouth.

*Is he hiding a smile?*

She smacked his shoulder in a playful punch. "Damien, tell me. What do you know about this plant?"

"Charley, honey? I think you gave him a ... a ... a poisonous plant."

Her heart hit the floor, her smile switched to a frown. "What?"

He turned to walk into his den. She followed, her mind frozen. On the far side of the wall sat his computer desk. He bent over the machine, his fingers flying across the keyboard. Within minutes, he'd found a site for poisonous plants. Another click displayed the picture of the Christmas Rose.

"Is this it?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Oh, my God," she muttered. "I've done it again."

## Five

Color faded from Charley's face and she brought her shaky hands up to cover her cheeks. Tears swam in her eyes, wrenching Damien's heart. Her body swayed, and he reached out to clutch her shoulders, steadying her.

"Charley, it's going to be all right. We'll just call Max and tell him—"

"No." A sob tore from her throat. "We can't call Max. He can't know I made a mistake ... again."

"You didn't. The mistake was made by the shop."

"You don't understand. I can't mess up with Max. He's supposed to be different." She pulled away from him and sank into the swivel chair by the computer, her blank stare focused toward the screen.

He knelt beside her and ran his fingers over her knee covered by her tan slacks. "Although the plant is poisonous, I'm sure he won't eat the leaves or the flowers. That's the only way it can hurt him."

She leaned forward, her gaze moving across the screen as she read the Internet article. "It also says it may cause a rash."

He sighed and swiped his fingers through his hair. "True, but I don't think he'll be playing with the leaves, either."

"But what if—"

"Charley, please stop worrying."

She swung her head around to face him, her eyes wide. "We have to do something."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"What do you suggest?"

Her face remained passive while she stared into his eyes. His chest constricted from the sadness touching those blue orbs. He wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her ... and yet the sexual yearnings of his body urged him to do more. But he wouldn't. Not this soon. He wouldn't be able to stand a rejection from her.

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. "We could go get it from his house."

Damn, she was cute, even when she wasn't trying to be funny. He smiled, despite the warning in his heart. This wasn't the right moment to be humorous. "And what would you say to him when he greets you at his door?"

"Well ... I was thinking ... we could wait until he leaves, then get it."

He blinked and shook his head. "I don't think I heard you right. Are you talking about breaking and entering?"

The corner of her mouth raised in a grin. "Maybe."

"You are serious." He chuckled.

She lifted herself from the chair and paced the length of his front room. Her bottom lip pulled slightly between her teeth, doing the little nervous nibble he liked seeing.

"Actually, I *am* serious." She stopped and met his gaze. "I need to get into his house while he's away and take the plant."

Damien stood and folded his arms. "You've forgotten one thing *mí amore*. How are you going to accomplish this?" He took two steps and stood in front of her. He cupped her chin with his hand. "First off, do you know where he lives?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

The color in her cheeks darkened. "Yes."

He wasn't going to ask how she knew—not yet, anyway. He nodded. "Second, do you know his schedule? How will you know when he leaves his house?"

"I thought about watching him ... a stakeout, so to speak."

"Hmmm ... and who'll be your partner in crime while you're ransacking his house? Who'll watch out for you?"

Her eyes softened and she smiled. She released his hand from her chin and held onto it. "You."

How did he know she was going to say that? Yet, the hammering in his heart gave him the answer. Crime or not, he'd help her. Damn, she owed him big-time now, and he'd find a way to collect.

"Fine." He smiled.

She squealed and threw her arms around him. He buried his face in her neck, inhaling her berry scent. The same smell that drove him crazy.

He didn't want her to leave his embrace, but she pulled away.

"Let me go home and change first. I think we should both wear dark clothes, don't you?"

He chuckled. "You're really getting into this, aren't you?" He shrugged. "I suppose we'll look right at home when the police come to arrest us."

She slapped his shoulder in a playful action. "Would you stop thinking negative? This is going to work. I just know it."

An hour later, they drove up to Max's house. Only one light lit his porch. Charley leaned toward Damien as she looked out his window. Her breasts brushed ever so slightly against his

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

arm. Closing his eyes, he held in a groan. He gripped the steering wheel to keep from pulling her body against his.

"This is perfect. His house is dark and his car isn't in the driveway."

Her soft voice pulled his from his naughty thoughts and he looked at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She sat back in her seat. "Now drive over there." She motioned her hand to a spot on the street shadowed by the large oak tree.

He drove the car alongside the curb and turned off the engine. At midnight, not a lot of neighbors were out and about. He thanked his lucky stars for the privacy of the night, especially the half-moon.

Once his seatbelt was unfastened, he turned and took hold of her hands. Skin, so soft, teased and beckoned him to stroke his fingers over her wrist and up her arm in search of other soft places on her body.

"Are you certain about this?" His tone was lower than he'd wanted and he inwardly cursed the fact that his libido was spiraling out of control.

"Positive."

He sighed. "Then let's go, *Bonnie*."

Her eyebrow rose, as did a corner of her mouth. "I'm right beside you, *Clyde*."

Hand in hand, he tiptoed along side of her as she led the way. When she crouched low, he crouched. When she stopped, so did he. Finally, they stood with their backs against the side of Max's house near the front room window.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She tilted her head, looking at the glass, too high for her to see into. She pursed her lips. "Great. How are we supposed to peek in now?"

He had an idea, a torturing one for him. She'd have to put a certain area of her body next to the back of his head. Yet there was no other way. Excitement leapt through his body at the thought.

He knelt on one knee in front of her and motioned his head over his shoulder. "Climb on."

Her eyes widened. "Climb on your shoulders?"

"Yes."

She walked around him, hesitant when she reached out to touch him. "I ... don't know how."

"Just step on my knee and swing your other leg over my shoulders. Haven't you been on a horse before?"

"Once as a child, but—"

"There's no difference. Hurry, you're wasting time."

When she placed her black tennis shoe on his knee, he helped her with the other leg, swinging it around his neck. The moment she was in place, he groaned. *Damn!* Warmth from between her legs speared his skin and made him hot. Very hot!

As Charley adjusted herself on his shoulders, he clamped his hands around her legs and moved over to the window.

"Can you see it?" he asked with a tight voice.

"Not yet."

He gritted his teeth. *This was agony.* So close to her and yet knowing her heart lay elsewhere. Her fingers clutched his head so she could steady herself, but it didn't hurt. The only

thing that hurt was the swollen plumbing trapped in his tight jeans.

"I think I see it," she whispered.

"Where is it?"

"By his television."

"Is it by a window?"

"Yes, but really, Damien, I don't see how we're going to get it without breaking in. Too bad this wasn't the middle of summer. At least a window might be open."

Funny. Despite it being mid-December, he couldn't be any hotter. The heat of her body kept the chill away.

"Damn," he hissed.

She wiggled against him and he held back another groan, squeezing his eyes closed. Images of Charley naked floated through his mind. They would be so good together...

"Let me down."

He snapped out of his dream and lifted her legs off his shoulders. As she slid down his side, the light material of her jacket didn't protect her breasts from brushing against his head, his shoulders, and his arm. He sucked in a breath. *How could fate be so cruel?*

He set her on the ground and fisted his hands to keep from touching her again, knowing if he did, it would be in a purely erotic way. More than anything he wanted to kiss her to distraction. He wanted to push her up against the house with his body and devour her mouth with his tongue until she couldn't think of anyone but him ... him and only him.

He cleared his throat. "So, what do you have planned now?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"I don't know, but I know I have to do something. I can't let him keep that plant in his house if it's poisonous. If he touches it, he'll get a rash, and God forbid if he should try and taste it." She shivered.

"Only an idiot would eat it, Charley."

She elbowed him in the ribs. "You know what I mean."

He sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "I think you'll just have to walk up to his door and explain to him the shop mixed up the plants."

"No. I can't."

Worried lines creased her forehead as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. God, how he wanted it to be his mouth nibbling on that lip, his tongue stroking with hers while he cradled her body against his. How he wanted it to be *his* name she called out. Not Max's.

"Why can't you do that?" he asked, his voice deeper than expected.

"Well ... because I'll have to talk to him."

"So, talk to him."

She shook her head. "It's too soon." She grasped his hand. "You go talk to him."

"Honey, I'm not the one who sent him the wrong plant."

She scowled. "It was by mistake."

"Exactly, so I don't see a problem."

Her tempting mouth drooped in a frown, her sorrowful expression tugging at his heartstrings again.

He shrugged. "Maybe I can pick the lock to his front door."

Her eyes widened. "Can you do that without getting caught?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He smiled and stroked her cold cheek. "Aww, you do care about me."

She rolled her eyes. "Damien, please concentrate. What are we going to do?"

From up the street, the roar of a car engine boomed through the silence of the night. He grabbed Charley around the waist and pinned her body with his against the side of the house. This was the position he'd wanted them in a few minutes ago ... except their lips should be joined. But now was not the time for his luscious thoughts. Especially when the car pulled into the driveway. He cursed.

Just his luck. Max was home.

The increased pounding of his heart threatened to make more noise than the vehicle. Max couldn't spot him. Not now. It was too soon.

After the car lights turned off, he ducked and tugged on Charley's hand, leading her around the corner to the large bush bordering Max's property.

She gave a sharp inhale. "Damien, that's Max."

"I know."

"Do you think he saw us?"

He crouched low, pulling her with him. "Shhh, be quiet."

She snuggled against him, her arms tightening around his upper arm. "Can you see anything?"

He peeked over the bush. "Only shadows." He kept his eyes on the sidewalk. Soon two figures appeared. Damien's interest perked. "Somebody's with him."

"Who is it?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He waited until the clicking of woman's high-heeled shoes touched the cement. Narrowing his eyes, he studied the slender feminine figure. When Max and the woman stopped underneath the porch light, Damien breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't the woman he'd expected. Of course, he hadn't seen *that* particular woman in a long time, but the betrayal was still as raw as if he'd seen them together yesterday.

Beside him, Charley tugged on his arm. "Answer me. Who is it?"

"A woman," he said softly.

Her body stiffened and his heart clenched. It hurt to see how much this bothered Charley.

"Is it his mother?" she whispered.

Damien switched his attention back to the couple at the door. The curvy young woman certainly didn't look like anyone's mother.

"Well?" Charley asked, her voice rising.

"Unless he was conceived when his mother was five, I seriously doubt it."

She released a deep sigh, and another pain shot through his chest. Why couldn't he get her to like him in that way?

"So, she's an older woman?" she asked.

"Can't exactly tell, but she might be."

Damien waited until the door closed and another light glowed inside the house. Standing, he brought Charley with him. He hooked his arm around her shoulders and pulled her next to his body as he crept back to the window.

Her arms remained around his waist as if she didn't want to let go. The softness of her cuddled against him was almost

his undoing. He tightened his jaw. *Easy boy. Now isn't the time.*

"Damien? Can you see what's going on?"

Since he was taller, he didn't have to climb on anything to see inside. Right away he spotted Max and the woman ... and realized what they were doing, and he couldn't keep from smiling. No longer was Max the victim in Charley's stunt-gone-haywire, but his date who stood by the flowered plant, stroking the leaves as she pressed her nose in close to the bud for a sniff.

"Damien," Charley repeated. "Can you see what they're doing?"

"Yes, and it's not good."

Once again, Charley's body stiffened. "Is she in his arms? Are they kissing?"

"Well ... not exactly."

She tugged on his black Levi jacket. "What exactly are they doing?"

"He's showing her his..."

"His what?" Her voice squeaked in irritation.

"His plant."

She slapped his butt. The warmth of her mark didn't stay long, and disappointment washed through him.

"The woman is looking at his plant?" Her voice held a hint of sarcasm.

"Yes. She's touching it, smelling it, and pretty soon, she'll get sick."

Charley chuckled, but her laughter grew, so she turned and buried her face in his chest. Closing his eyes, he

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

tightened his arms around her and breathed deeply, loving the feel of her warm breath on him. He stroked her hair. "I think you should go in and break it up."

She lifted her head. "Break it up? This is exactly what I want to happen. *I* want to be his new love interest, not *that* woman."

A lock of hair had fallen over her forehead, so he swiped it back behind her ear. He smiled at her. "You're not being very nice."

She shrugged. "All's fair in love and war, right?"

He cocked an eyebrow. Was the real Charley showing through? He rather liked this vicious, yet very passionate side to her. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"So come on, let's go home. I'll tell him about the plant tomorrow."

He laughed. "What if Max starts touching and smelling the plant?"

"That's a chance I'll have to take, huh?"

He gazed into her intoxicating eyes. The moonlight touched them, making them sparkle like diamonds. Her tongue slid out and moistened her lips.

What had this woman done to him? His libido was still in an uproar from her body being pressed against him. Especially when he pictured her naked, lying in his new bed.

He cursed his wandering thoughts and shifted his stance. "Come on, let's go before we're caught."

\* \* \* \*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

When Max arrived at work a half hour late the next day, looking like he had the chicken pox and wore blue lip balm, Charley knew it was time to tell him about the plant. But once again, she didn't dare. It wasn't her fault. Would he think that way even after she explained?

She tried to force herself off the chair and away from her desk, but her feet remained rooted to the floor. Luckily, her fingers still worked—which was why they created email.

Pulling up his email address, she typed him a quick note. *Max, the shop I purchased your plant from just contacted me that there was a mix-up. Instead of the fern I'd ordered, they sent you a poisonous plant. Please use caution and don't touch the yellow and pink flower. Also, don't keep the plant indoors as it might cause nausea. Please forgive me for this mistake. I've already contacted the owners of this company to complain. Let me know if there is anything else I can do for you. Your friend always, Charley.*

She re-read her email before sending. Closing her eyes, she massaged her forehead, praying he would understand and forgive her. But what if he didn't? She snapped her eyes open and stared at the computer screen. No, that wasn't an option. He *had* to forgive her.

With a deep sigh, she decided to let fate fall where it would. If Max forgave her, that would be her sign to proceed with the remaining eight ways to melt his heart.

Her phone rang and she jumped. Placing a hand over her crazily beating heart, she answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, *mí amore*."

"Damien?"



"Either that or Santa Claus."

His deep sexy voice stirred emotions in her she didn't exactly want right now. Just like what happened to her last night. The main purpose for going to Max's house was to get the plant, but she found herself enjoying Damien's company much more than she'd expected, especially the warmth of his solid body.

"Hi," she replied, breathless.

"Well? How did it go? Did you talk to Max?"

What's wrong with his voice? Too soft and deep from what she remembered. Had he caught a cold while helping her spy last night in the frigid winter temperatures?

"Yes and no. Yes, I let him know about the plant, but I haven't talked to him."

"What did you do this time?"

She chuckled over the rise in his tone, sounding like a father scolding a child. "I emailed him."

"What did you tell him?"

"Just the truth ... that the store mixed up the plants and sent him the poisonous one. I told him what effects he might get, but by looking at him today, I can see he's already figured that out."

Laughter pealed from the other end. "You don't sound very upset."

"Of course I'm upset, but ... well ... he deserves this, I think."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because he took out the wrong girl last night."

His laughter became stronger, and she smiled.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"He'll learn," she told him.

"You're awful, Charlene Randall, just awful."

When she hung up, she was still smiling. Lately, Damien had been making her grin like a damn idiot. Good thing they were only friends.

She drew her eyebrows together. *Friends?*

Were they friends? She relaxed. Yes, he was her friend. He was no longer the sexist playboy next door, but the man she could confide in. The man that didn't mind taking the chance going to jail with her.

Her smile stretched. Regardless of what could have happened if they'd been caught, last night had been fun.

She extended her neck, releasing the kinks, then turned back to her computer to get some work done. Through the screen, a shadow appeared behind her. Seconds later, Amanda's voice made her jump.

"I have it all planned out."

Charley swiveled in her chair and faced her co-worker. "What do you have planned?"

"How I'm going to hook you and Max up at the office party."

A nervous fluttering grew in her stomach, and her hands moistened. "Oh, really?"

Amanda's smile spread from ear to ear. "Do you want to hear about it?"

Several months ago, her co-worker had helped with another soon-to-be boyfriend, and although the results were disastrous, it was fun while it lasted. "Sure. This ought to be good for a laugh or two."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Amanda rolled her eyes. "You'll be thanking me when it's over. I promise."

The more Charley listened, the faster the rhythm of her heart became. Amanda was serious. Charley was going to speak to Max, and there would be no excuses this time.

## Six

*I'm going to puke!*

Charley stared at her pasty face in the mirror and frowned. Her twisting stomach wasn't cut out for catching a man—a hunk of a man for that matter. And she had to really try not to mess things up.

She pinched her cheeks until a raspberry color appeared in stark contrast and made her look like she had a fever. Maybe she did. She placed a hand on her forehead. No. Her skin felt normal. But, if she wasn't sick, then why did her body tremble?

Taking careful, steady steps so as not to disturb her stomach, she made her way back into her bedroom and lowered herself face down on the bed. No way could she go to the company party tonight. But Amanda expected her to show up and had given her hope for an enjoyable evening getting to know Max. Her co-worker even mentioned she had a plan to ruin his date for the party. Apparently, Amanda knew Max's date and could sabotage his evening. A confident Amanda actually had her believing it'd happen. This might be her night.

But now ... she couldn't. What if she passed out? She'd look like a fool. It'd be high school all over again! Maybe the queasiness had nothing to do with her tense nerves. What if something was seriously wrong with her?

*Yeah, like I have the chicken-out disease.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She frowned. Okay, so talking to Max frightened her to death. But damn, that man was way out of her league. She'd faint if he turned his beautiful blue eyes on her. She couldn't lose consciousness at a company party. As shy as she was, there'd be no way she'd be able to show up for work after that. Plain and simple, she just wouldn't go to the party.

Could she give up so soon? She'd definitely be the joke of the office. Her whole purpose for trying the article's 10 Ways with Max was to see if she could keep him longer than three months. And hadn't she wanted him since high school? Wasn't it about time that Charley went after what she wanted?

She stared at the ceiling and the churning in her stomach slowly settled. She took deep breaths through her mouth to ease the rolling tension. As her eyelids grew heavy, she closed them, but a knock sounded at the door and yanked her back to awareness. Her heart beat to life, turning her stomach again.

*Who could that be?* Amanda wouldn't come to her townhouse to pick her up.

"Charley? Are you there?"

*Damien.*

She rolled her weak body off the bed and carefully walked to the front door, her hands splaying over her stomach, hoping to keep it from upsetting again. Shaking, she released the latch and unlocked the door. "Hi."

His eyes widened as his gaze slid from the top of her head to her bare feet. "What's wrong with you? Don't you have a party tonight?"

She groaned and stepped away from the door, weaving her way back to the front room and the couch. She plopped down and sighed. "No, I *had* a party tonight."

He walked inside and shut the door. "Have you caught something?"

"Yes."

He stopped. "Is it contagious?"

"Sure, if you're a chicken."

His dark eyebrows rose. "I don't understand."

He came closer until his knees bumped the edge of the couch. She peeked at him from beneath half-closed lids. Once again, he looked as if he'd walked straight from the new clothes rack. Today he wore sharp-creased gray trousers and a cream-colored shirt that hung looser on him than most of his shirts. With the three buttons he'd left undone, she caught a glimpse of his muscular chest, sprinkled lightly with dark hair. For all she knew, he could have been an eighteenth century nobleman off the front cover of a romance novel.

She covered her eyes, hoping to ignore his sexy image, but mental pictures from the other night floated through her mind. His body had been so enjoyable to lean against, and when she'd climbed on his shoulders, the back of his head had nestled between her legs and caused tingles she didn't want to think about. Even now, a warm stirring came from that place.

His hand touched her forehead, and she jumped.

"You don't feel like you have a fever," he told her.

"I'm sick because I'm scared of going tonight and making a fool out of myself."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

His chuckle made her sneak a peek at him from between her fingers. His gray eyes sparkled. "*Mí amore*, you have nothing to worry about. Once Max gets to know the real you, he'll fall head over heels."

She lowered her hands and scowled. "I doubt it."

The corner of his lips quirked in a knowing grin as he bent over and grasped her arm. "All you need is a little encouragement."

"No, all I need is a fairy godmother."

He laughed. "Will a fairy godfather do?"

"I guess, since you're the closest thing I have to it."

He grabbed her hands, and she allowed him to pull her up. Surprisingly, her stomach didn't protest this time.

"I assume you've already taken a shower." He leaned into her and sniffed her neck.

Warmth spread through her body and she had to hold herself back from leaning into him and enjoying it. Goose bumps ran over her arms and she giggled.

"Yes, you have," he said. "You smell like berries, but I could get you a perfume from my work that compliments your body."

She cocked her head. "You think GIO products are better than what I use?"

He shrugged. "You'll never know unless you try them."

He pulled her into the bathroom and positioned her in front of the mirror. Her pale skin shone like a beacon, making her blue eyes appear much larger. *Ugh!*

"First thing we need to do is let down your hair." He pulled her cloth-covered scrunchy free from her ponytail. A piece of

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

hair came with it, and she yelped. Frowning at his reflection in the mirror, she rubbed the sore spot on her head.

He picked up her brush and ran it through her hair. The gentleness of his actions made her close her eyes and relax. Soon his fingers threaded through her locks, massaging, stroking warmth back into her scalp. *Oh, he's good.*

When he took her by the shoulders and turned her around, she looked at him. Up this close, his eyes appeared darker than she'd first imagined, almost black.

He pushed her over to the toilet seat and made her sit. Thankfully, the lid was down or she would have fallen in.

"Now be still and let me do my job."

Once his fingers made contact with her hair, she closed her eyes again. He used gel and hairspray, ratted and pulled, but she still enjoyed the tender way he relaxed her ... just like the other night when he worked on her with that new GIO product. She sighed. *Wonderful.*

Fluttering sensations moved throughout her body, making her remember the night with him outside Max's house. Mentally, she shook her head. *Think about Max.*

She imagined Damien's hands were Max's. What would Max wear tonight? Would he talk to her, dance with her, take her outside to walk in the moonlight? Would he kiss her? Should she make the first move? No. He'd definitely have to do it.

She could almost feel the texture of his blond hair as she twirled her finger around a strand. She could almost smell his musky scent of all male. She envisioned him unbuttoning his shirt, her hands running lithely over his skin. Her heart



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

quicken at the image. But then just as quickly, Max's face and body were replaced with Damien's. Now her hands burned with fervor while skimming over his bare chest. Hmmm ... so tight.

Damien's eyes would be closed as she touched him, while a satisfied grin pulled at his mouth ... a mouth that she wanted to kiss and consume with passion like never before.

"Now that's done, let's move on."

His voice made her dream disappear and she almost let out a disappointed moan. He stepped away. Forcing herself back to reality, she opened her heavy lids in time to see Damien snatch up her make-up case. He pulled it over closer on the counter.

She blinked and shook her head. "You're going to do my make-up?"

He folded his arms across his massive chest and tilted his head. "You don't think I can do an adequate job?"

"I didn't say that."

"You certainly implied it." He grinned. "Do you trust me?"

"I let you do my hair, didn't I?"

He laughed. "Close your eyes and let me help."

Once again, she let her eyelids drift closed and she concentrated on the sense of touch ... his touch. Soft. Gentle. Warm. Very intoxicating and hypnotic.

He used the sponge to dab on her foundation. The brush breezed across her cheeks when he applied the blush, although she didn't think she'd need it tonight. It took a little longer for him to stroke the eye shadow across her lids and use the eyeliner.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She tried to imagine Max again—this time his lips touching everywhere Damien's hands did. But as before, it was Damien's dark gray eyes disturbing her thoughts and causing heat to spread throughout her body. His masculine scent of spice lingered in the air. She wanted to bury her face in his neck, rub her lips along his collarbone while her hands caressed his body.

"Here. I'll let you do this."

She jerked back from his voice and snapped her eyes open. She cursed herself for letting her thoughts get carried away, once again. What was wrong with her, anyway? Why couldn't she focus on Max instead?

He held the tube of mascara in front of her. She stood and faced the mirror—then froze. *Wow*. Good thing he wasn't charging her. Looking this good probably cost a fortune in the salons.

She leaned closer to the mirror and thickened her eyelashes with the mascara brush. When she was finished, she turned to face him. He took out a lip pencil and glanced at her lips.

"Pucker for me, baby."

She laughed.

"That's not a pucker."

"Then quit making me laugh."

He was adorable—cute enough to cuddle. Yup, he'd make some girl really happy when he decided to settle down.

Therein lay the problem. Would he ever settle down? Probably not. By the amount of women that frequented his bedroom, he was definitely not the marrying kind.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Relaxing, she puckered for him and stayed still while he outlined her lips. When he took the tube of lipstick and brought it to her mouth, she relaxed her lips and let him apply it. His eyes narrowed as he worked, but his face softened.

"Perfect." He stepped away, giving her a cocky grin.

She rolled her eyes heavenward. "You're boasting."

He clasped his hand around hers and pulled her into the bedroom. "Now let's pick out a dress."

"Nothing too fancy. I don't want to stand out."

"Oh, but I think you should."

She grimaced. She was afraid he'd say that. "Really, Damien, I don't think—"

He stopped suddenly and she bumped into him. A scowl took over his handsome features.

"Now listen, Charley. Do you want my help or not? I thought we were trying to get Mr. Jock-Strap to notice you."

"Jock Strap?" She snorted.

"Yes. That's my nickname for him."

She chuckled. "If you say so. But I won't tell him you think of him that way."

He narrowed his eyes. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't. So, do you want my help?" He held up his hands.

She shrugged. "Well, that was the idea."

"Then you're going to have to wear what I tell you."

She expelled a heavy breath, her heart racing once again. "All right."

He wandered into her walk-in closet and sorted through her hanging dresses. She stepped just inside the room to see

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

which one he'd pick. When his hand stopped on the glittery red satin gown, her heart sank and she couldn't contain the groan. She hadn't worn it since her mother purchased it for her two years ago for Christmas.

He brought it over to her. "I like this one."

"Then you wear it." She folded her arms across her chest.

"It's not my size. Now go put it on."

"Damien, I can't—"

"No, you *won't*. There's a difference between the two words."

"But you don't understand. That dress is ... is..."

"Is what?" He held it up, his attention on the bodice.

"Revealing?"

"Exactly. The slit up the skirt goes way past my knee, and the bodice—" She drew an invisible line down the front of her tee shirt between her breasts. "I don't have enough cleavage to show off, anyway."

His smile widened. "This dress is perfect for tonight. Go put it on."

She huffed. "No."

"If I have to dress you myself, I will." He stood firm.

"Charley, we don't have long to argue. The party starts in half an hour."

"But—"

"No buts. Just go put the dress on."

When she didn't move, he grabbed the end of her shirt and pulled it up. Before it reached her breasts, she clamped her elbows to her side to keep the material from riding up any farther. Her heart pounded out of control and her nipples

hardened as desire shot through her. She glared at him, yet the softness illuminating in his gray eyes made her want him to undress her.

"I mean it, Charley."

She swallowed hard and mentally shook away those thoughts. "Fine! Give me the damn dress."

She yanked it out of his hand and marched into the bathroom. Grumbling curses under her breath, she stripped off her clothes and pulled on the evening gown. There was a small hook in the back to hold it together, leaving most of her back bare. Long straight sleeves gloved her arms, but the bodice wasn't as tight. It practically hung off her chest. She wasn't blessed with large breasts. They'd be hard to find if anyone tried to look. She tugged together the deep opening down her bodice.

Sliding her leg out, the slit displayed almost her whole thigh. She groaned. Nylons were definitely needed tonight. She glanced at her bodice and pulled it together again. Too bad she couldn't wear a bra.

She had to admit, though, the red dress brought color to her face. The untamed hairstyle Damien had fixed looked good on her. It didn't fit her personality, but now she looked extremely sensual, so the bold dress matched perfectly.

Max might actually take notice. She smiled wide.

"You're taking too long," Damien called from the other room.

"Keep your briefs on. I'll be out in a moment."

"Actually, I'm a boxer's man."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She groaned. He shouldn't have said that. Now she could picture him in nothing but a silky white pair of boxers ... and damn if he didn't look hot!

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped out. Damien's gaze moved over her slowly, resting only seconds on the deep cut of the bodice before continuing down over the rest of the dress.

He whistled and shook his head. "Damn, woman. You're stunning."

Her cheeks burned. "Thanks." She held out her hands away from her body. "But this is your creation."

Grinning, he stepped over to her and touched her chin, his thumb gently stroking the skin. "Just make sure you're back by midnight. You'll turn into a pumpkin if you aren't."

She laughed, then threw her arms around him and gave him a hug. "You're the greatest. Do you know that?"

"Yes, but I get rather bored telling it to myself all the time."

She placed a light kiss on his cheek. His body stiffened and he sucked in his breath. Fire shot through her, touching every nerve ending in her body, especially when she could tell he enjoyed it. *What am I doing?*

She quickly pulled away. "I owe you for this." Her voice shook.

For a moment, his eyes had darkened the way she liked, as if he had experienced the same spark of desire as she had. But then he cleared his throat and the expression disappeared.

"Are you ready?" His voice was lower than before.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Let me just put on my nylons and I'll be ready."

"Now remember, men love compliments."

Suddenly, she recalled the Internet article. *Give a man compliments*. "That's good. So what do you think I should say?"

"Tell him how sharp he looks in his suit. Tell him how the color compliments his eyes. Tell him you like his smile, enjoy hearing his voice when he's on the news, and most importantly, tell him..." His grin widened, but he remained quiet.

"What?" she urged.

"Tell him what a nice ass he has."

She slapped his arm, but laughed at his remark. It was so close to the truth. "You're awful."

"No really. Guys like it when women tell us we have a nice ass." He laughed. "Okay. I'm going now." He kissed her cheek. "Have a good time at the ball, and if you need a designated driver, you know my number."

She shooed him with her hands. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't drink."

He left her bedroom and she finished getting ready. Her heart pounded in a different rhythm now, but she didn't know if it was the exchange she'd just had with the Italian Spice, or because she was going to force herself to talk to Max tonight.

She breathed slower, convincing herself the excitement bubbling inside her was for Max. In less than fifteen minutes she would see Maxwell Harrington's reaction to the new Charlene Randall.

\* \* \* \*

*Give him compliments*

These damn heels made her ankles wobble. The last time her legs shook this bad was last summer's earthquake that had trembled for what seemed like hours.

Charley walked into the Richmond Hotel and headed toward the ballroom. She handed her coat to the coat-check lady, while sounds of the party drifted around her, clinking glasses and voices raised in laughter. Smells of cinnamon and pine assaulted her senses, which made her sneeze.

She followed the Christmas music coming from a room down the hall, the sounds growing louder the closer she came. Humming to the familiar tune, she stepped inside. People from her office filled the space, but there was no sign of Max. Did he have to work? No. Amanda assured her he'd be here.

"Charley? Is that you?"

She turned toward Amanda's voice. Her co-worker stood amongst a cluster of other employees, all holding drinks. Charley gave them her best smile even though her lips twitched in a nervous gesture, and walked their way. "Hi, Amanda."

"Oh, heavens. Look at you."

Charley's cheeks heated. "Yes, I'm aware I'm out of character, but—"

"You look fabulous." Amanda grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed. "You're going to knock 'em dead tonight."

Charley let out an uneasy laugh. "Oh, let's hope nobody dies. That wouldn't be a good thing, especially with my luck."



She scanned over her friend's attire. Amanda always looked great in dark colors, and the silky forest green dress fit her personality. Although the dress covered most of her neck and arms, the satiny material was still sexy. A hint of black lace and panties was visible from underneath the thin material.

"So, Charley, have you seen Max yet?"

"No. Have you?"

"No."

Charley frowned and clasped her hands against her stomach. "I hope nothing has happened to him."

Amanda laughed and waved her hand through the air. "Oh, you know Max. He's got to make a grand entrance." She reached out and touched Charley's sleeve. "But I think you've taken that special moment away from him. You look damn good."

Charley placed her hand over the deep opening in her bodice, hoping it hid her almost non-existent cleavage.

"Thank you." She shrugged. "This is my neighbor's creation."

Her friend's eyes widened. "Really? Is he gay?"

Charley snorted a laugh. "He's far from gay. He just works at GIO Products, so he knows all about a woman's needs."

Amanda shook her head and whistled softly. "He's good."

From behind her, someone called out Max's name. She sucked in a breath. Had her heart stopped beating, too? Slowly, she turned, and as her gaze rested on his form, she exhaled a sigh.

Max looked as if he'd just walked off a magazine cover. In the latest style of clothing, his navy blue jacket and matching

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

trousers practically shimmered. He naturally took the spotlight. His white straight-collared shirt complimented his tanned skin, and when he smiled at his friends, her heart raced. What could she do to get him to look at her like that?

But best of all ... he was without a date. Amanda's plan must have worked.

He stood not more than ten feet away. She longed to walk over and talk to him, but the more she stared at him like a rock-star groupie, the more she lost her nerve. *Just like high school.*

He moved away with his friends to the punch bowl. *Damn! Missed my chance, again.*

Amanda nudged her arm and Charley glanced over her shoulder. Her co-worker nodded in Max's direction. "Go over and speak to him."

Charley scowled. "I can't. I wouldn't know what to say. It's not like we chat on a daily basis."

Amanda rolled her eyes heavenward. "You may not know him personally, but you know Fred and Gary. Act like you're going over to talk to them."

Charley's heart hammered against her ribs like a tom-tom. Her throat tightened and she couldn't swallow. *It's that chicken-out disease again.* But what did she have to lose? If she didn't go over, she'd be upset with herself. And if Max shot her down, at least she'd know he wasn't interested.

Besides ... this wasn't high school anymore. The woman she'd turned into was more self-assured. Right?

She nodded to Amanda. "Wish me luck."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Taking a deep breath, she pulled back her shoulders and began her walk across the room, trying her hardest not to look like the coward she'd always been. Max's deep baritone voice rang out in laughter, and tingles shot up her spine.

*Give him compliments. Tell him he looks nice. His hair does look good tonight. And yes, God help me, I still like his ass. Thanks a lot, Damien.*

When she drew near, Max's gaze touched and vibrated through her. His attention roved over her, from the top of her wild hairdo to the toes of her squishy heels. She couldn't breathe. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

She was going to faint. But no, she couldn't. Too embarrassing ... but then again, if she did, he'd come pick her up, take her in his arms and hold her against his body. Since her lungs didn't work, he'd have to give her mouth-to-mouth. The thought made her lightheaded. But it was just a thought, right?

She groaned and closed her eyes. Dizziness overwhelmed her and her stomach lurched. *Please no! Not here. Not now. Not with Max nearby watching.*

Before she knew what was happening, the room tilted and her legs gave way beneath her. Her head connected with the floor like a bowling ball starting its run down to the pins.

Sounds faded except for the ringing in her ears. Someone slipped an arm beneath her shoulders, lifted her, and lightly tapped her cheek.

She raised her heavy eyelids and focused on the person who held her. *Max!* Wishes do come true. She smiled.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Worry etched a crease in his brow. "Are you all right?" His voice reached through the bells chiming in her head.

She nodded, ignoring the pain shooting through her temples.

*Give him compliments. Tell him he looks nice. His hair looks good ... his butt—*

"Max, thanks..." She paused, trying to think of a compliment. "Uhm ... did I ever tell you ... I think ... your butt has an intoxicating smile?"

That didn't sound right. Had she said it wrong? Why weren't her mind and mouth cooperating tonight?

Max's eyes widened, and snickers exploded from the crowd who had gathered. Oh gads! Why hadn't she noticed the others?

*Think!* She had to say something to cover herself. "Uhm ... I mean, your smile is outfitted in style ... I mean your butt looks stylish." She shook her head and inwardly groaned. "I think you really look good tonight."

*Open mouth—insert foot.* Heat flooded her cheeks, spreading quickly down her neck. The corner of his mouth lifted in a grin. She struggled to sit, but he tightened his hold.

"Charley, I think you hit your head pretty hard. You might want to rest a second before standing."

She squeezed her eyes tight. *Where's the nearest hole?* Maybe if she thought hard enough, she'd be back home and all this would be a bad dream. *This can't be happening.* Mentally, she tapped her heels together three times. *There's no place like home, there's no place like home.* Then she realized her squishy heels were not ruby.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

From the whispers around her, more people had gathered. Amanda's voice boomed loud and clear. "Here, Charley, drink this. You'll feel better."

Without opening her eyes, she reached blindly for the drink, then curled her fingers around the glass stem. The chill of the flute soothed her hot skin. Another hand helped raise the glass to her lips, strong fingers guided it to her mouth.

The arm behind her shoulders lifted her. She peeked underneath her lashes just as the glass touched her lips. The strong scent of alcohol assaulted her senses mere seconds before the liquid slid into her mouth. She didn't drink alcohol, yet spitting out the vile stuff wasn't a good pick-up tool when flirting with men either.

She swallowed hard, trying not to gag. The liquid burned her throat, cutting off her air. Gasping, she sat up, clutching Max's arm as she continued to choke.

"Oops," Amanda said, giving Charley an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry."

Charley cleared her throat and glanced at Max, who thankfully, still held a concerned gaze on her. His forehead creased. "Are you feeling better?"

She shook her head. "Now the burning in my throat is competing with the throbbing in my head."

His expression relaxed into a grin. "You've got your sense of humor back. That's good."

Her heart picked up rhythm. *He thinks I have a sense of humor? Cool!*

She looked around at the large crowd and groaned. Her hand massaged her temple. "I'll be fine in a minute."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Here, let me help you over to the table."

The moment she'd dreamed about for weeks came when Max's arm slipped down her back and hooked around her waist. Hesitantly, she circled her arm around his neck, holding him close as he helped her off the floor. As soon as her feet touched the ground, her weak legs buckled and she stumbled into him, her face pressing into his neck.

*Oh, he smells good—so incredibly male.* So like Damien. Did they buy their cologne from the same place?

He pushed her back slightly and helped her stand. Together, they walked over to the nearest table, and he guided her onto a chair.

He crouched beside her, his hands resting on her knee. Warmth spread from that spot throughout the rest of her body. "How do you feel now?"

"A little better, thanks."

His gaze bore deep into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

"You still think my butt has an intoxicating smile?"

He grinned, and heat consumed her face again. She closed her eyes, covered her face with her hands, and groaned. His chuckle made her peek at him between her fingers.

"That's okay, Charley." His hands grasped hers and pulled them away from her face. The touch warmed her again. "I appreciate the compliment no matter how it came out. I have to admit, nobody has ever said that to me before."

Through her embarrassment, she forced a smile. "Well, anytime you want to hear something out of the ordinary, you know where my office is located."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Yes, I do." He laughed. "You know, I haven't seen a fall like that since the 1980 US Olympic Hockey team took the cup."

"Oh, thanks. I feel so much better."

He stood. "Take it easy from here on out, okay?"

She nodded and watched him walk away. Her stare automatically dropped to his rump. Giddiness sprang to her chest. *It's working!*

## Seven

Charley nibbled on another carrot, not caring if she looked like Bugs Bunny or not. She leaned her hip against the buffet table then quickly pulled away before the table came crashing down and the food decorated the floor in a huge mess. Her night had been full of blunders so far, and she didn't want to chance another one.

Out on the dance floor, smiling couples moved together with the rhythm of the music. Others wandered from group to group, visiting. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

Everyone except her.

She'd been left alone. Even Amanda had abandoned her, chatting with a group of editors on the other side of the room. Her co-worker batted her long eyelashes and let out a husky laugh from time to time. *Why can't I be as carefree?* And to think it didn't even matter if Amanda wore a wedding ring.

She turned her attention from her friend's crowd and searched for Max. He was in another woman's arms, dancing in the middle of the ballroom. The bubbly blonde who worked upstairs in sales had her head resting on his shoulder, a wide, satisfied smile pasted to her mouth.

*That should be my body pressed against his while we dance.* But no, she had to embarrass herself and faint, just because he smiled at her.

*I'm an idiot.*

She reached for another glass of punch, but on second thought took the champagne and sipped. Max hadn't looked



her way since he'd left her at the table. Perhaps she should faint again, just to have him come to her rescue.

She scowled. *How pathetic.*

The musky scent of a man's cologne teased her senses before she heard the baritone voice behind her.

"You're not going to catch men if your mouth is pulled into a frown, *mí amore*."

She gasped, jumped, and spun around, almost spilling her drink down her dress. Her eyes could have popped out of their sockets for as wide as they opened.

Damien stood nearby, looking twice as yummy as he had earlier this evening. Wearing a dark colored suit jacket and trousers, he appeared to be going to his own elaborate function. "What are you doing *here*?"

He shrugged. "Just passing by."

As she scowled, she folded her arms and tilted her head. "Since when do you pass by this way?"

"Since I couldn't stop wondering how your evening was going."

Heaving a big sigh, she shook her head. "Not as well as I'd wanted." She looked over her shoulder at Max still dancing with the blonde who'd obviously had work done in the chest region. "As you can see, he's over there, and I'm here."

Damien leaned to the side, looking around her toward Max. He snickered. "You know, they must put a lot of makeup on him so he can appear handsome on the television. He doesn't look anything like he does at ten o'clock."

She slugged his shoulder. "Be nice. You're insulting the next man in my life."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He frowned. "Sorry."

"So, really, Damien, what are you doing here?"

"It's like I said, I came to check on you, perhaps give you a little nudge in the right direction."

She shook her head. "You could shove me clear across the room and it wouldn't help."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Sort of."

His gray eyes widened. "And? What happened?"

"Instead of making him melt, he made *me* melt—all the way to the floor."

A smirk crossed his face, and he quickly covered his mouth with his hand. "You don't say."

She hit his shoulder again. "Be nice."

He nodded and dropped his hand. "So what do you want me to do?"

She glanced at Max. "Well, since you're my fairy godfather, could you go sprinkle a little love dust on him?"

"I'll do one better." Slipping his arm around her waist, he pulled her next to him. "Let's make him jealous, shall we?"

She widened her eyes for the second time in five minutes. "You?" She rubbed her head, thinking she heard wrong. "I'm supposed to make him jealous with you?"

His black eyebrows creased in a scowl. "Don't you think I'm handsome enough?"

"Well ... yes ... but..."

"Then let's try, shall we?"

"What about ... uhm ... well, you know." She paused, hesitating on how to say it without sticking her foot in her

mouth. Men like him just didn't do things like this unless they wanted something in return. Perhaps he was just being nice.

"What about your reputation?"

"What reputation?"

"Well ... guys like you only go out with..."

"With?"

"With ... Barbie dolls."

He chuckled as he led her out to the dance floor. "Oh, they've got nothing on you, *mí amore*. Besides, you're my friend. I'd hate myself if I didn't try to help."

She smiled and hugged his arm. "Thanks, Damien. You're the best."

"Yes, I know."

When she tried to link her arms around his neck, he stopped her by taking one hand in his, letting the other hook over his shoulder. It surprised her to see him dance this way. This was how her parents used to dance. But that was all right. Although he looked like a body-builder, he danced with graceful ease, sweeping her around the floor. She hadn't danced this way since her mother taught her as a young girl. The more Damien swung her around like Ginger Rogers, the wider her smile stretched.

She glanced over his broad shoulder as they passed Max. His eyes were wide, glued to her and Damien. Her heart accelerated.

The song ended and a slower one began. Damien kept her in his arms in the same hold, but pulled her body closer. She rested her cheek on his chest, breathing in his seductive

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

scent. Max smelled this good, too. Well, not as good, but close.

"Don't look now," Damien whispered, "but lover boy's watching."

She giggled. "Really?"

"Yes."

She raised her head and looked up at Damien. "So now what do we do?"

He leaned down and brushed his lips across her cheek, then down her neck. Goose bumps rose over her skin and she shivered. Waves of heat filled her body, and she fought the urge to close her eyes and tilt her head back, allowing him to create sensations like that again, and maybe he'd take his lips over her body further.

"That tickles," she said softly.

"Keep still. It's working."

"Why?"

"Because he's coming this way."

She tried not to let anticipation shake her to death, but once again, her legs felt like Jell-O on the verge of dissolving. Why couldn't she remain in control? Why couldn't she just pretend Max was Damien? After all, Damien was a great-looking guy. Damien even had a better body and smelled sexier. So then why didn't she act like a squirming schoolgirl around him?

"Excuse me." Max's voice, so close behind her, made her catch her breath. She looked over her shoulder at him and smiled.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Damien stopped moving, but kept his arms around her. *What a great friend.* It was all she could do to keep from sighing aloud. Why was Damien the one melting her heart at the moment?

She concentrated on Max and tried not to think about Damien the way she had been. "Hi," she said in her most seductive voice.

Up this close, Max looked better than he had earlier. Of course, back then, her vision had been a little blurred.

Max glanced from her to Damien. "Giovanni. It's been a long time."

Damien nodded. "Certainly has."

"Do you mind if I cut in?" Max motioned his head toward Charley.

She looked at Damien, who for some reason didn't appear as happy as he had a minute ago. His lips tightened and a crease appeared in his forehead.

"That's fine." He let go of her and walked away. A chill entered her body and the secure feeling she'd experienced in his arms had disappeared.

She wanted it back.

She dismissed the thought. *Must be the champagne.*

Max didn't pull her into the ballroom hold, but slid his arms around her waist instead. She linked her arms over his shoulders. Right away, she noticed the difference between the two men. Max, a little shorter, was also not as broad through the chest. Although nice, Damien's body still fit better next to hers.

At least Max wore a smile as he gazed into her eyes. He watched her, and only her. Heat rushed to her cheeks. *Was a hair out of place? Do I have carrot in my teeth?*

"How are you feeling?" Max began, the tone of his voice just as sweet as his smile.

"I'm much better, thank you." She chuckled. "I don't know why I passed out earlier. Must have been hungry."

He nodded. "That'll happen."

She fell quiet again, as did he. The urge to speak choked her, and nothing came to mind for them to discuss. If Damien were here instead, this wouldn't have been a problem. Under her breath, she cursed her confused thoughts.

Max glanced over at the punch bowl where Damien stood, and she followed his gaze. Damien's somber stare remained on her, and her heart clenched. *Why does he look so miserable?*

"How do you know Damien Giovanni?" he asked.

"He's my neighbor."

"What a coincidence that you know him. We were friends in college."

She turned back to Max, opened her mouth to comment, but hesitated. He'd asked her to dance out of jealousy? How did Damien know Max would act this way? It must have something to do with the past Damien wouldn't talk about. Now she was even more curious. She'd have to think up a plan to get him to open up to her.

"I didn't know that," she replied, hoping he wouldn't know she was lying through her teeth.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Max glanced back at Damien. "How long have you two been dating?"

*Should I lie again?* "Not for very long." *Well, that wasn't a complete lie.*

"I see he hasn't lost his talent for sweeping the ladies around the dance floor."

"Really? He used to do this back then?"

"Yes." The arms around her waist tightened. "But you dance very well, too."

She laughed. "When I was a girl, my mother taught me the lessons she learned while taking ballroom dancing." She smiled in remembrance. "After the housework was finished on Saturdays, she'd pull out the ballroom records and crank up the volume. We'd dance right there in the front room."

He chuckled with her.

"I remember being so embarrassed. I'd close the curtains so if my friends walked by, they wouldn't see."

"You were an excellent student." His gaze softened. "You dance very well."

"Thank you."

He nodded, but then silence poured over them, once again. Why did he act this way? If she didn't know better, she'd think *he* was shy. Nah! That was her specialty.

He cleared his throat. "I wanted to thank you for your email. I wondered about that plant."

Heat flooded her cheeks again, and she prayed her face didn't resemble a beacon light here in the semi-darkened room. She didn't want ships crashing through the building, mistaking her for a lighthouse.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"I was so upset when I discovered the plant had been switched. I wanted to tell you right away, but circumstances made it impossible." She shrugged. "It was a rather busy day, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I hope no real damage was done."

He shook his head. "It explained why I'd gotten a rash and felt nauseated."

"I swear, I didn't know."

He nodded. "I'm aware of that, and I don't blame you one bit."

She let out a heavy sigh. "That's a relief. I thought you'd blame me for the mix-up."

"No. I understand."

The song ended. Her chest grew heavy just thinking she'd have to step out of his arms. Why couldn't they stay like this all evening? Then again, why couldn't he feel as good as Damien did in her arms? She cursed her thoughts again.

"Thanks for the dance," she told him, hoping to keep him by her side a little longer.

"No. Thank you."

When he turned to walk away, she quickly touched his sleeve. "Hey, Max, are you here by yourself?"

He chuckled. "Although my date canceled at the last minute, I really wouldn't consider myself alone."

"Well ... um ... would you like to sit with me for a few minutes and have a drink?"

He glanced over her shoulder, and then looked back at her. "I don't think Damien would appreciate that very much."



He grinned and squeezed her hand. "But I'll catch up with you later."

"Promise?"

He nodded then turned and walked back to his friends.

*Later! He's going to find me later.* But her enthusiasm dropped when she remembered he'd only danced with her because he was jealous. Should she continue with the little lie? If she didn't, would Max give up?

*Damn.* She shouldn't have led Max to believe Damien was her boyfriend. Funny, the 10 Ways didn't mention anything about making a man jealous.

\* \* \* \*

"Another drink, please."

Damien scowled at Charley's order as she sat beside him on a stool at the bar. Why was she drinking herself into oblivion? He shook his head. "This is your sixth glass of champagne."

She shrugged. "So?" The bartender handed her the drink and she quickly tipped it back and gulped it before Damian could stop her.

He grabbed her elbow. "Damn it, woman. You don't drink, or have you forgotten?" He ground the words out slowly to get it into her sodden brain so she wouldn't make a scene.

He was told Charley had been making a scene since he had first walked into the party. Not only was she dressed to kill, she now staggered into people like a runaway train.

"Damien, leave me alone," she slurred, pushing his hand away. "I'm waitin' for Max to come rescue me."

"Come on, honey, it's time to take you home."

"No." She glared at him. "He promised to dance with me again."

Damien sighed. "I think Max has already left."

She swung her head so fast she unbalanced and slid off her stool. He slipped his arm around her waist to hold her straight.

"Really?" She tilted her head to look at him, her sad eyes pleading for honesty.

"Yes, *mí amore*, really. I saw him leave half an hour ago."

Her brows drew together. "What was I doin'?"

"You were probably ordering another drink."

She glanced back at the bartender who had his gaze locked on her. He nodded at Damien's comment.

"Well, that's a grand idea," she slurred. "Drinks for everyone." She held up her empty glass and would have fallen backward if he hadn't been holding her up.

"Come on, you've had enough." He pried the glass from her hand and passed it to the bartender.

She huffed and a frown marred her face. "You're no fun."

He shook his head. Why hadn't he stopped her before she got this bad? But the truth was he liked the way she draped her body all over him. He enjoyed the glassy look in her eyes when she gazed at him, and he especially liked being able to hold her when she couldn't stand by herself.

As they left the party, she called out goodbyes to her co-workers. By their wide-eyed expressions, they weren't used to seeing Charley this way. He, too, couldn't believe she'd get stinking drunk. Although—he leaned in and sniffed her neck—

she really didn't stink at all. Her berry fragrance caused a fluttering sensation in his chest. Especially now.

Damien helped her to his black Porsche and buckled her in the seat. Her body went limp. Had she passed out? But when he climbed in, she giggled and reached for his arm, cuddling to his side.

"Did you see the way we danced, Damien?"

"Yes," he grumbled. He had watched every second of the time she was enfolded in Max's arms, and at the time he'd wanted to go break up the cozy moment. *He* wanted to be the man holding the beautiful woman. *He* wanted to be the man Charley gazed up at with desire laced in her eyes.

"Max isn't as good a dancer as you, but he still knew how to move his body." She growled. "Oh, baby. He's certainly an adorable man."

Damien clenched his hands into fists. "If you say so."

He moved her aside to adjust his seatbelt. She rolled her head on the headrest and looked at him.

"You really need to find someone special, you know that?"

"Yes, Charley." Finding someone special ... now that was a talent he'd never possessed. Someone to have a good time with fit his lifestyle much better. But for some reason, lately he'd been thinking he was tired of his carefree ways—and Charley was a darned special woman.

"It's not good to go from one woman to another," she continued. "You need that special someone to love ... forever."

He dared to meet her gaze. *Big mistake.* Her heavy-lidded eyes were like erotic moonbeams. Her lips slightly moist,

tempting him to taste her. She stretched her long legs, and the slit up her dress fell away from her shapely thigh, making him want to run his hands over it.

He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

Diverting his stare, he looked out the windshield and started the car, then pulled out of the nearly empty parking lot. The heat of her gaze was still on him. What could she be thinking? Certainly not the same thoughts running through his mind.

"Damien?" Her voice dropped low, seductive.

"Yes?"

"Have you ever kissed one of your friends before?"

He glanced at her with wide eyes. "Hell, no. I'm not that kind of guy."

She scrunched her forehead, but after a few seconds she smiled and giggled. "No, I didn't mean your guy friends. I meant the women you consider your friends."

His heart hammered against his ribs. His throat tightened, and he couldn't breathe. *What was she getting at?* "Yes." He winked. "I've kissed you before, or have you forgotten?"

She flipped her hand through the air. "Not that kind of a kiss. I mean a kiss shared by lov-ers."

He locked his attention back to the road. It wasn't a good idea to look at her, especially when she acted this way. She didn't know how much he wanted to do that very thing. He wanted to kiss her—kiss her until he was the only man in her head—but he worried it wouldn't end until he made love to her. Especially the way he felt now.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Charley, why don't you close your eyes and relax. We'll be home shortly."

"Damien," she whined, "why are you avoidin' my question?"

He gripped the steering wheel tighter, turning his knuckles white. Her suggestions were adding fuel to the already stoked fire ... making him imagine things he shouldn't think about. Especially with as intoxicated as she was right now. "Because I don't see the point in discussing this."

"Are you embarrassed?"

"No, not as embarrassed as you're going to be if you keep it up."

She chuckled again. "Damien." She poked him in the side and he jumped. He grinned at her childlike antics. "You can talk to me about anythin', you know."

"I know."

She jabbed her finger in his side once again, but this time he didn't jump. Her hand fell to his thigh. Now his heart took turns with his arousal in a jumping match.

He covered her hand with his and squeezed. Pressing on the gas pedal, one thought filled his mind—getting her the hell home and fast.

"Then why don't you want to talk to me?"

"What do you want me to talk about?"

"I want to know about you and Max."

"I don't feel like discussing him, but thanks for the offer."

Her fingers rubbed his pants. He masked a groan by clearing his throat. Her touch was too close to something growing larger by the second. He pressed his foot harder to

the gas pedal. *Why in the hell am I catching all the stoplights?*

Curling his fingers around her hand, he stopped her from touching any more of his leg. She sighed and he glanced over at her. A sweet smile touched her lips. Her eyes were closed. She must be thinking about Max. He wished he could take those thoughts away and switch them with images of him instead.

When he drove up to the townhouse, he breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully, she'd fallen asleep. But when he pulled her out of the car seat and adjusted her weight against his body, she wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest.

"Hmmm ... you smell so good," she mumbled.

"Thank you." His voice tightened.

She weighed less than he'd thought she would for being so full of liquor. Usually, people were dead weight, but not Charley. Still light as a feather.

When they reached her townhouse, he leaned her against the wall as he searched through her purse for her keys. After opening the door, he lifted Charley again and carried her to her bedroom.

He sat her on the edge of the bed as he pulled off her coat. As soon as it was removed, she flung back and sprawled out on the pink comforter, resting her arms above her head. The deep opening in her dress had widened, her creamy flesh beckoning to him like candy. Would she taste as sweet? He chuckled. Of course she would, especially because she smelled so heavenly.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

A smile still spread across her mouth, her eyes closed as if in a dream. Should he throw a blanket over her and leave? Or should he do the gentlemanly thing and make her more comfortable?

His decision maker leapt in his trousers. Swallowing hard, he shrugged off his suit jacket and laid it over the single chair in her room. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation, but just as he reached out to touch her, he stopped.

*What am I doing?* He couldn't take advantage of her in this condition. The way his libido had worked into overdrive let him know he wouldn't be able to touch her without wanting more.

He pulled back. No, he couldn't. His willpower had suffered enough for one night. Removing her clothes was out of the question. Instead, he took off her heels and set them at the foot of the bed.

In the front room he found a blanket flung over the back of her couch, so he brought it back into the bedroom. Gently, he covered her body. He stared at her for a moment, wishing he could confess his true feelings. But he'd wait to see what happened between her and Max. There was no way he wanted to compete with Max ... again. Nor would he be able to stand the rejection when she didn't choose him.

Before leaving, he bent and kissed her forehead. Her body jerked and her eyes flew open.

He smiled and stroked his finger along her jaw. "Good night, *mí amore*."

When he withdrew, she grasped his hand. "Don't leave me."

He shook his head. "Honey you're home in bed. It's all right."

"No. I don't want to be alone tonight."

His lungs must have stopped working, because it was difficult to breathe. He sat on the edge of the bed and lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles. "You'll be all right."

"Not if you leave."

"Charley, I've got to go home."

With his other hand, he trailed his fingertips over her cheek. Her gaze dropped to his mouth and his heart came to life again, beating an uneven rhythm in his chest. He traced her lips. They parted. Her fragrant breath touched his skin.

Turning, she propped herself up on her elbow. The opening in her bodice hung away from her chest, giving him a larger exposure of cleavage. Silently, he groaned.

Charley pulled his hand to her mouth and kissed each fingertip. Her sweet lips brushed against his skin. Trickle of delight ran up his spine, and his staff responded with excitement.

"Charley..." His voice was too deep to be his own. But no other words escaped, just quick breaths.

She shook her head. "I know you want me." She took his hand and placed it between her breasts. Heat shot through him from the silkiness of her skin, awakening something deep inside he wanted to keep hidden from her.

"Touch me," she whispered huskily.

His gaze dropped to his hand. God help him, he wanted to touch her so bad it hurt. *Somebody stop me!* Because he



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

didn't think he could do it himself.

## **Eight**

Damien wanted to cup her breasts and stroke his thumbs across her nipples. He wanted to hear her moan and writhe beneath his touch. But this wasn't right. Yet his body and conscience were not cooperating. His hand had a mind of its own and shook when he slid it inside the opening of her bodice.

Her skin was hot, as hot as his, and when he cupped her bare breast, it fit perfectly into his palm. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back and released a soft moan.

The pleasurable sigh plunged through his body, desire igniting even stronger. He wanted to make more of those sounds come from her. Leaning over her, he trapped her on the bed, his torso covering hers.

He ran his thumb across a hardened nipple. It tightened more. She opened her eyes and met his stare. They were so dark he couldn't see the pupils. But right now he didn't want to. All he wanted was to feel her mouth beneath his.

She pushed her fingers through his hair and he closed his eyes, enjoying the magic her caress aroused in him. When she tugged his head down, he looked at her. She stretched her neck to press her lips to his.

A deep groan ripped from his throat as he crushed his mouth over hers. He pressed her deeper into the mattress. Instantly, her tongue darted out and danced with his. He nipped at her bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth. She copied his actions.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She clenched handfuls of his hair as he fondled her breast. When she arched to give him more, he took it, kneading and rolling her nipple between his finger and thumb. He pinched lightly and she gasped into his mouth.

Reaching behind her, he unfastened the dress and pulled the material down to uncover her chest. He broke the kiss long enough to gaze upon her creamy mounds, shaped to perfection and more beautiful than he'd imagined.

He cupped both breasts and she arched again. Bending, he touched the tip of his tongue to one taut nipple. A hoarse moan sprang from her throat and she pulled his head closer. He surrounded one nipple with the wet heat of his mouth. Alternately, he lapped and sucked the rigid peak then moved to the other and repeated the process. Her moans built, her breaths escalating as her body undulated and her hips rose off the bed. This woman was so sexy, so hot, and his arousal couldn't take much more. Already his body burned.

Breaking the kiss, he covered her body, chest to chest, hip to hip. Her smile was lazy when she reached to unbutton his shirt. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her hypnotic eyes. With every button that popped open to reveal more of his chest, her passion-laden eyes darkened.

He shrugged out of the garment and let it drop to the floor. She ran her hands over his heated skin and he closed his eyes, groaning. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his chest. He inhaled sharply. Her tongue traced circles around his aroused nipple.

She pulled back and looked at him. "I want you."  
And he wanted her, badly.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He rolled off her to finish removing her dress. She helped him with her nylons, then she wiggled out of her black-lace panties. He couldn't stop his attention from being drawn to the small patch of hair at the juncture of her legs. Gingerly, he touched her there and she spread her thighs for him. He trailed his fingers down her soft folds and slipped one inside. So wet. So hot. So sexy.

His groan overrode hers.

She threw her head back on the bed and arched her hips off the mattress. Was she offering? God, he hoped so.

He stroked her swollen wetness, and she instinctively moved her hips into the rhythm. Bending over her, he kissed her tight stomach and dipped his tongue to her navel. Her hips bucked faster. He brushed his mouth across her skin to her pelvis, breathing in her musky scent. She released a ragged sigh and separated her thighs even more.

He had to taste her. Had to feel her against his lips. Had to smell her aroused scent and feel her womanly muscles throbbing around his tongue as he drove it into her.

Withdrawing his fingers, he pressed his lips to her wet heat, and lapped gently. Her body stiffened as she cried out and clutched the bedspread.

His thumbs stroked across her swollen flesh and his tongue soon followed. Her convulsions started deep and spread outward as she let out little cries of delight. Her tremors came quick, encouraging him to find his own release. But when she sighed out a name, he stopped.

*Max?* Did she just say Max? He couldn't be sure, but...

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Of course she thought he was Max. The sports anchorman had been the man on her mind. Max was the man Charley wanted. Not Damien.

Pain like no other grabbed his chest and tightened, then spread throughout his body. He jerked away, his heart dying slowly as he recognized the satisfied grin on her face.

Slowly, her breathing returned to normal and her body relaxed as she drifted into sleep. He moved off the bed and pulled the blanket over her naked body.

If she thought she'd made love to Max, he'd let her believe it.

\* \* \* \*

Intense throbbing in Charley's head roused her from a deep sleep. She didn't have to open her eyes to know the sun shone a brilliant path through her window onto her face. She groaned and clutched the edge of her pillow, rolling away from the light. *There, that's a little better.* But the pounding still raged. From the back of her mind came a nagging feeling as if she'd done something wrong.

Through her fierce headache she recalled the party, the dance with Max, and—oh, all those glasses of champagne. Her stomach rolled in protest and she groaned. She'd throw up soon, she just knew it.

Thank heavens for Damien, always there to take care of her, always there to give his aid whenever she needed, and always there...

In a flash, last night's events came crashing through her fuzzy memory. She sat upright, opening her eyes as shock

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

vibrated through her. Her stomach lurched before there was time for another thought to penetrate her blurred brain. She yanked back the blanket and ran to the bathroom, making it just in time to pay homage to the toilet.

She clutched her head, then her stomach, and then tried holding them both. Had she heaved up every organ in her body?

She grabbed the towel hanging on the wall and pressed it to her mouth. Slowly she stood, her legs as wobbly as a newborn calf's. The beat in her head increased, but at least her stomach had calmed. She rinsed her mouth out at the sink before weaving her way back into the bedroom. She headed for the sanctuary of the soft mattress and warm blankets. Cool air touched her skin, and she glanced down at her naked body. She groaned before falling face first onto the bed.

*What have I done? Seducing the very man I've been avoiding? What was I thinking last night?*

Damien had let her do it, knowing she wanted Max. Why?

She climbed underneath the covers and curled into a ball for warmth.

*I had sex with a womanizer.* More importantly, she had sex with her friend, her neighbor, the man she had no intention of getting physical with.

But she remembered the way his hands had worshipped her, the way his mouth had suckled her breasts and between her legs. The intense beating in her head moved to the lower region of her body, reminding her how incredible the tingles

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

had been when they spiraled through her. He'd been so gentle, so loving, and so damn good.

That still didn't answer her question. Why didn't Damien stop things? He knew what condition she was in. Didn't their friendship mean anything to him?

Had he been drunk, too? He'd only had a few glasses of champagne—that she remembered anyway. But she couldn't think of another explanation.

She moaned and pulled her knees to her chest. Would he speak to her today? Would he remember everything as she had? Would it damage their friendship? More importantly, had she been good enough for him to change and be the man she wanted?

She brought her thoughts to a halt. Why did she care if she'd been good? Could it be because she desperately needed to know if *she* was the reason for all of her failed relationships?

The longer she lay in bed, the worse her head throbbed. She needed to get up and eat something, but just thinking about food turned her stomach.

Once again, her thoughts wandered back to last night. Her hazy memory wouldn't let her recall how Damien had looked naked, but she did remember how muscular his chest had been. Even now her hands tingled as she thought about touching the soft black hair sprinkled over his magnificent chest. So why couldn't she remember when he finished undressing and made love to her? He'd given her an earth-shattering climax, yet she didn't know if he had completed his

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

own release, or if she had satisfied him. She swept her gaze around the room looking for condoms. None.

She groaned and held her head. *Why can't I remember more?*

The pounding in her head grew until it sounded like the walls were crashing together. Or was somebody at her front door? She pulled the pillow closer to her ears, hoping whoever it was would go away and take that noise with them.

Footsteps echoed on the hard wooden floor in her front room. Her heart stopped, so did her breathing, and she listened closer. Had someone broken in?

"Charley?"

She sighed heavily. It was Damien. But then the rhythm of her heart took on a different beat. Excitement, worry, and fear of bringing up the incredible night, all in one horrendous staccato that pulverized her body.

As his footsteps drew nearer, she pulled the blankets up to her chin. Silently, she laughed. What did she have to hide that he hadn't already seen and kissed? Her face burned from the memory.

Damien knocked on the bedroom door before he peeked inside and smiled at her. "So, you are awake."

"Barely." Her voice squeaked out the whisper.

He held up a glass filled with red foamy liquid. "I hope you don't mind, but I used your keys to open the door. I've brought something for your hangover." He walked into the room.

"What is it?"

"A concoction to make your recovery smoother."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Did you make it?"

"Yes. It's a family secret that's been passed down through the generations."

"I take it you've had a lot of drunks in your family."

He chuckled and stepped over to the bed. "Do you want it or not? I promise within an hour you'll feel much better."

She nodded and sat, then realized she was still naked. Keeping the covers underneath her arms, she made sure the only thing he could see were her bare shoulders and neck.

He sat on the edge of the bed and tilted the glass to her mouth. "Here."

She placed a shaky hand over his and guided the drink to her lips. Tingles burst through her. Touching him again was wonderful. With her eyes closed, she swallowed. The foam rose instead of heading down her throat, and she gagged. She pushed the drink away. "Yuck."

He laughed. "It's not the best tasting, but it will help. Drink all of it."

She grimaced and shook her head. "I don't want to throw up all over you."

"You won't."

She also didn't want to have to make a mad dash to the bathroom stark naked. She held up her hand. "Please, no more. I'd rather have a headache."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

An uncomfortable silence fell over them. The hooded look in his warm, gray eyes bothered her, especially when it wandered down her neck to her shoulders and bounced back up to her eyes. He smiled again.

"Do you need help getting in the shower?"

Her heart hammered, creating a greater throb in her head. Maybe she should take the drink. "No, I'm fine."

Damien glanced around the room, then back at her. "So, when did Max leave?"

A breath caught in her throat and she couldn't stop her eyes from widening. Max? Why did he think Max was here?

She shook her head. "Max wasn't here."

"Yes he was. He was with you last night."

A greater ache pounded her head. Had she really brought Max home last night? Had it been Max she'd made love to instead of Damien? Her stomach churned.

"Damien, don't play games with me. I don't remember being with Max last night, unless of course, it was at the party."

His brows drew together. "Really? Do you usually sleep naked?"

*Did I dream everything?* Maybe she didn't have sex with Damien. That would certainly relieve her confusion. Then why did her fantasy seem so real? Why could she still feel his hand cupping her breast, his fingers plucking her nipples? And why in the hell could she still feel his tongue doing crazy things to that hypersensitive spot between her legs?

"Um, no I usually don't sleep naked." She scratched her head. "But then again, I was pretty drunk last night. Anything could have happened."

He chuckled and stood. "True." He placed the drink on the stand next to her bed. "Well, I'll leave this here if you change

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

your mind. I've got to get to work." Leaning over, he kissed her forehead. "Aren't you lucky today is Saturday?"

She nodded. "You'll never know how lucky I am. I don't exactly feel like answering questions from people at work today."

He winked, then turned and walked out. She watched his shapely butt until he disappeared into the other room. Scowling, she slammed her fist into the mattress. *What's wrong with me? Why am I dreaming about letting a Casanova like him satisfy my sexual needs?*

\* \* \* \*

Damien gave a polite nod to the people greeting him when he walked out of the elevator and towards his office. The lab technicians at GIO had been working on a new product, but Damien didn't care right now. All he could think about was last night. He couldn't get the image of Charley out of his mind, naked on the bed and writhing in passion. He couldn't stop thinking about the way she'd kissed, the way she'd tasted, and the way she'd moaned.

He also couldn't stop thinking about the name he thought he'd heard from her during the height of her climax. Mistake or not, she'd been thinking about Max.

Yet ... according to her this morning, she hadn't. She didn't even recall bringing the sports anchorman home. So why had she called out his name? Damien would give anything to hear Charley sigh *his* name in passion.

Could he have heard wrong? Could she have sighed out something else besides the name Max?

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

*Doubt it.*

He walked into his office and closed the door. The first thing on his agenda was to fix a stiff drink—to match the other stiffy in his pants that sprang up whenever he thought about Charley. He stopped in front of the golden-trimmed glass liquor cabinet and poured himself a Scotch. Just as he lifted it to his lips, the office door opened.

"Damieno?" The strikingly beautiful woman's tone was natural, sweet and caring. "It's too early to start drinking. There are a million things we need to do, and don't forget about the board meeting with our investors today at three."

He chuckled and sipped his drink. "Which explains why I need a drink so early in the morning."

Shaking her head, she walked over to him and took his glass away. "You're going to need an alert mind." She placed the drink back on the counter. "This can wait."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "It's good to see you care, Mother."

She smiled. The crows' feet around her eyes only enhanced her beauty. Her gray eyes sparkled. "What a charmer you are."

He laughed and stepped behind his desk. "Did Michelle get those documents to you?"

"Yes, she brought them by the house two days ago."

"Good. I'd hate to think I was paying her good money for nothing."

"Stop talking about your baby sister like that. She's a hard worker and you know it."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He raised an eyebrow. "She's only a hard worker if her goal is flirting with single young men."

His mother flipped her hand in the air. "What do you expect from a nineteen-year-old? In fact, why aren't *you* trying to catch somebody's eye?"

"Too busy." He sat in his brown leather swivel chair and opened his briefcase.

"That's not what I heard."

"What did you hear, Mother?" he asked without looking at her. For years now, stories had circulated around the office. None were true, but they were entertaining, nonetheless.

"I heard you've been hitting on your neighbor."

He snapped his head up and caught her knowing smile.

"Is this true?" she asked.

"Who told you that?"

"Michelle. She said you were all dolled up last night just to help out your neighbor at her office Christmas party. She said she'd never seen you look so refined before."

His breath caught in his throat and his heartbeat quickened. He let out an uneasy laugh. "Michelle is making up stories again."

She narrowed her eyes. "So you're saying you don't have a neighbor?"

This was all he needed—his mother to know he had the hots for Charley. "I do happen to have a neighbor who is a woman, but she's just a friend." He shrugged and glanced down at the papers he took out of his briefcase. "She thinks of me as her friend."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His mother let out an exasperated breath and slapped her hands on his desk. He looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"Damieno, you've been lying to another woman, haven't you?"

"Mother—"

"Why haven't you told her the truth?"

"I've told you before. I'm protecting myself from fortune hunters."

"You're also throwing away your social life."

"I have a social life."

She arched a brow. "Sure, with women who think of you only as their best friend. Now tell me, what kind of life is that?"

"It's a life with no heartaches, that's what it is."

Her expression relaxed, the tense lines around her mouth disappearing. "You can't let one heartache control your whole life."

He took a deep breath and slowly counted to ten. "Mother, you're meddling again."

"But Damieno, I just want you to be happy." She reached over and squeezed his hand. "You'll be thirty-three in two months. Don't you think it's time you settled down and raised a family?"

"I do, but I'll settle down on my own time, and the children will come when *I'm* ready for them, and not a moment sooner."

She stood straight and folded her arms across her chest. "You're upset with me again."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He exhaled slowly and ran his fingers through his hair. "No, I just wish you'd stop lecturing me. I've heard this speech before. I know what I need to do."

She nodded, then turned and walked back to the door. When her hand touched the knob, she glanced over her shoulder. "Oh, and speaking of fortune hunters, Liza Scapolli is back in town."

The name struck him like a hammer, inflicting painful wounds in his chest and bringing back memories he didn't want. It'd happened seven years ago. Why was the pain as fresh as if it'd happened last week?

His mother walked out of the office before he could ask more questions. But he really didn't care what Liza and Max had done to him—at least he didn't want to care.

## Nine

The next morning, Charley kept her eyes downcast as she hurried through the front doors of Channel Nine's building. Rushing by, she glanced at her coworkers out of the corner of her eye. None of them looked at her as if she'd grown two heads, thank heavens.

When she reached her cubicle, she slid into her chair. It rocked to one side and tilted. On the brink of plowing face first into her desk, she grabbed the edge and steadied herself. *Phew*. She peeked from underneath her lowered lashes. No eyes had turned her way, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

Within minutes, other workers entered the building. As always, they dragged their feet to their desks for a Monday ... all except one. Max. When that man finally entered there was a bounce to his step and his face glowed. His smile could have melted an iceberg.

Right away, his gaze moved to her desk. She gasped. He raised his hand and waggled his fingers, his smile widening.

She grinned ... at least she hoped her expression was pleasant since shock pretty much vibrated through her body, but she returned the wave. He chuckled before turning and heading toward his room.

*What in the hell was that all about?* She was almost afraid to ask. Why had he looked at her that way? Unless...



She caught her breath and almost choked. Her heart thundered in her chest and she placed her hand on it to keep it from jumping out.

*Had* she slept with Max? Damien seemed to think she had. Her neighbor acted as if he hadn't kissed her body himself and thrilled her like no man had ever done. But she didn't dare jump to assumptions. Not yet. Not before she talked to Amanda.

After an hour passed of taking down information about pressing news from around the world, the office buzzed with chatter. The employees of Channel Nine had left their desks and seemed more concerned with socializing. Some gathered inside cubicles, others wandered outside for their smoke-break. It wasn't hard to find Amanda. Charley rolled her eyes. That woman always stood in the mist of a group of men.

Charley hurried over and yanked on her elbow. When Amanda turned, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "Charley."

Why had Amanda greeted her that way?

*Am I still in my pajamas?*

She glanced at her clothes to double check, running her hand over her mid-section. No, she was dressed in a white blouse and gray slacks.

*Maybe I forgot to brush my hair.*

She reached up and touched the side of her hair, then tucked a stray lock behind her ear. Everything seemed to be in order. So why did Amanda and a few of the others gathered around look at her differently right now?

She met Amanda's wide eyes. "We need to talk."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Amanda excused herself and kept in step beside Charley as they walked to her desk. Once they were out of earshot from the others, Amanda giggled.

"Charley, you're the talk of the office today. Everybody's discussing the Christmas party, and especially your performance."

Her heart sank. *Oh, God! What were they saying?*

Amanda clasped Charley's hands. "Are you going to tell me every juicy detail about Saturday night?"

Charley scratched her head. "I was rather hoping you could."

Amanda's brows lifted and she let out a loud laugh. "Oh, you're funny. Why do you think I'd be able to tell you?"

"You were there, weren't you?"

With squinted eyes and brows pulled together, her friend gave a quizzical stare. "Charley, I don't think we're talking about the same thing, here."

Charley took in a deep breath, clearing her head so she could communicate better. "I want to know what happened at the party."

Amanda laughed. "Oh, let me guess. Those twenty some-odd glasses of champagne made you forget?"

"Twenty?"

"No, just kidding, but I'm sure it was close to that."

Charley rubbed her forehead. "Yes, my headache still lingers."

"So what do you want to know?"

"I want to know who I left the party with."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Amanda tipped back her head and laughed hard, holding her sides with her arms. Charley gritted her teeth, counting to ten slowly under her breath. This was *not* a laughing matter. Her memory was at stake here, and the truth could either make or break her. If she didn't find out who she'd had incredible sex with, she'd go crazy!

Wiping away the tears gathered in her eyes, Amanda shook her head. "I don't know who you left the party with. I'd left before you did."

"Damn."

"You don't remember anything?"

"Not a lot."

"Oh, I wish I could have been a fly on your wall that night."

"What night?"

The male voice caused Charley to jump and swing around. She gasped. Max! How long had he been standing there?

He leaned his elbow on the corner of the cubicle, his relaxed stance enhancing his good looks. Of course, he always looked good in light colors. Today faded Levis hugged the lower half of his body, and the light brown cotton shirt stretched across his chest. She also enjoyed the way his gaze moved over her, from her ponytail down her silk blouse to her creased slacks, making giddiness bubble in her chest. When his blue eyes met hers again, his smile grew.

"What night?" he repeated.

She couldn't let him know she had no clue who she'd spent the night with. She'd rather die from humiliation first.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Charley released an uneasy laugh and flipped her hand in the air. Her fingers accidentally connected with Amanda's face. Her friend yelped and stepped back, holding her nose.

Charley cringed, her face burning. "Oh, God. I'm sorry."

"No problem," Amanda mumbled behind her hand. "I'll be back in a minute." Turning sharply, Amanda hurried down the hall toward the restrooms.

Max laughed. "Way to go, Charley. If you wanted a private moment with me, all you had to do was ask her to leave."

Her stomach rocked with uneasiness. *What is that supposed to mean?*

His face softened, looking extremely relaxed. She wished she could feel as comfortable.

"So, about Friday night..."

She swallowed hard. "What about that night?"

"I think I should apologize."

*I did sleep with him!* Her jittery stomach caused a wave of nausea to erupt. "Why? Didn't you ... um ... enjoy yourself?" She bit her lip. *Why did I say it that way?*

He nodded. "I did, but I don't think you did."

"Of course I did." She forced a laugh. "Why would you think differently?"

"Well, considering all the champagne you drank..."

Her limbs shook, so she sat on the edge of her desk and folded her arms just to keep them still. "Yes, I did get a little drunk."

"A little?" He dropped his arm from the corner of the cubicle and stepped closer. "I'm just surprised you didn't strip down to your panties and dance naked."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She shrugged. "Close enough, I guess. After all, I still gave quite a show, if I recall." *Recall? Hell, I can't remember anything.*

"Yes." He stroked his finger down the side of her face, his gaze softening. "You did give quite a show."

Her palms moistened. She tried acting casual as she wiped them on her slacks. She must stay strong. Confident. Encouraging, but mostly, she must be seductive.

"Did ... um ... would..." She took a deep breath, trying to gather her wits. "Would you like to see a repeat performance?"

His eyebrows rose. "Are you asking me out, Charley?"

She gulped. "Yes."

He ran his thumb over her quivering bottom lip. Why couldn't she control herself?

"What about your heart-throb, Giovanni?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "We're more like good friends."

"I see." He dropped his gaze to her mouth. "Then my answer is yes."

Her heart leapt to her throat. "Great." Her voice squeaked.

He chuckled. "Is the dance included?"

*He wants me to dance in my undies?* "Ummm ... okay."

"How about dinner first?"

Her thoughts screeched to a halt when she recalled the article on how to melt a man's heart. Way Number Four—an old-fashioned date.

She nodded and smiled. "Dinner first, but I'm cooking."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His gaze skimmed over her body again and the corner of his lips lifted higher. "You sure are."

Her body ignited from his compliment. The room seemed to close in around her, making it difficult to breathe. "No, I mean, we'll have dinner at my house."

He nodded. "I'll be over tomorrow night at seven. Do you have that night off, too?"

"Yes. Tomorrow night sounds perfect."

He leaned forward and she held her breath. Was he going to kiss her right here at work? But he withdrew before she had a chance to pucker up. Thank heavens. She didn't want to appear overeager.

He turned and strode back to his office. She stared at his tight rump until it was out of sight.

When she'd actually moved from the corner of her desk to the chair, she stared at her blank computer screen. In the reflection, she wore a smile. As her mind finally began to work, she realized Max never really did say he'd slept with her. All the hints were there, but he'd still left her wondering.

Damn! This was all she needed. Well, she'd make certain there was no alcohol. And, she'd wait for him to make the first move.

What could she make him for dinner? She groaned and rubbed her forehead. She wasn't a chef—that was Damien's specialty. He was always cooking up something special for all his women friends. She could smell it from her townhouse all the time.

She snatched up the phone, quickly punching in Damien's cell number. Drumming her fingers on the desktop, she let it

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

ring four times and was about to hang up when his deep voice answered.

"Hello?"

She sighed. "Oh, Damien, I'm glad you're there."

"Charley? What's wrong?" His voice rising in quick response.

"Nothing's wrong. In fact, everything is right."

"Why?"

She giggled and relaxed back in her swivel chair, twirling the phone cord around her finger. "You'll never guess who's coming over to my house for dinner tomorrow."

There was a long pause. "Me?"

She sucked in her breath. Had she heard him right, or did she detect a sense of hopefulness in his voice?

"No, silly. Max is coming." After she said the words, her chest tightened. Why did she wish Damien was coming instead? She shook away her thoughts and focused on their conversation. "Oh, Damien, I actually carried on a normal discussion with him and nobody got hurt. Can you believe it?"

"No." His voice came soft.

She chuckled. "Yeah, me either."

"So, what are you planning to fix? TV dinners?"

"Ha, ha ... very funny, but you're also very right. That's all I ever eat."

He laughed, his deep voice sending chills up her arms. She rubbed the goose bumps away, trying to focus on Max instead of how her body currently reacted to Damien.

"Anyway, I need your help. In the article, *10 Ways to Melt a Man's Heart*, Number Four says I have to give him an old-

fashioned date. So, I want to cook him a meal." She paused briefly, then added, "I mean what could be more old-fashioned than that?"

"How about snaring a jackrabbit and cooking it over an open fire?"

A hint of sarcasm laced his voice, and she hoped she'd heard wrong. Her chest ached again. Why did he sound unhappy about this? "Does that mean you won't help me?"

Another long period of silence followed on the other end, and with each second, her heart sank. He didn't want to help. But she couldn't do it without him.

A heavy sigh came across the line and he cleared his throat. "Yes, Charley, I'll help you. I'll do anything for you. You know that."

She exhaled in relief, smiling wide once again. "Oh, Damien. You're a lifesaver." If he were standing in front of her now, she'd throw her arms around him and bury her face in his neck...

No. Thinking this way was unhealthy. She had to stop thinking of Damien in physical terms when she was working on Max. But Damien's sexy scent did crazy little things to her stomach as if the butterflies inside were putting on their own production of *The River Dance*. Not only that, but she loved the deep timbre of his voice when he called her *mí amore*.

"Yes, I know," he said with a catch to his voice.

Wrenching emotion called to the deepest part of her. For a single, endless heartbeat, the sound of his breathing came through the other end of the phone. She wanted to rush to



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

his side, to see his face. To know if he hurt as much as he sounded.

Her throat had turned dry and she swallowed. "Thanks, Damien. I'll love you forever for this, you know. What would I do without you?"

His chuckle was weak. "I hope I never find out."

\* \* \* \*

Damien clutched his briefcase and stormed out of his shareholders' meeting, straight toward his office. Women filled the lobby from wall-to-wall. He dodged around the ones stepping in his way to get an introduction. GIO Products had a new promotion going and was looking for a woman model. An assortment of perfumes wafted heavily through the air, but none came close to smelling as sexy as Charley's berry scent. None of them stirred awareness in his chest—a longing to pull that woman into his arms and bury his face in her hair.

When he passed his secretary, she held up a hand to stop him. He ignored her and hurried inside his office, closing the door behind him. *I need a stiff drink.*

He went straight to the liquor cabinet and set his briefcase on the counter. Lifting a decanter, he poured a Scotch then quickly tipped it back into his mouth, not giving the drink any time to sit in the glass. It burned as it coated his throat and stomach, but he needed that right now. He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed deeply.

*Damn that woman for disturbing his thoughts ... again.*

During the hour and a half meeting with the shareholders, he probably only heard six words—*good morning* and *have a nice day*.

Why couldn't he stop thinking about Charley? And why did his gut twist the longer he thought about her and Max together, alone? Their date was tonight, and she expected him to make a meal for lovers ... He didn't think he could do that.

Jealousy gnawed at his gut like a starving piranha. He couldn't allow Max to be alone with Charley. She'd said she loved *him*. Although right now she only loved him as a friend, he'd change that as soon as possible.

But he couldn't tell her how he felt. Not yet. He needed to know if she truly wanted Max, or did she want him because she thought there was nobody else for her?

He'd promised he would help prepare dinner, and he was a man who stuck to his word. It just wouldn't be what she expected. Yes, call him vindictive, but damn it, he wanted Charley for himself. Seeing Max out of her life was his main priority.

So far, Max hadn't given any signs of being different. The man Damien knew in college went after women who belonged to others, and the night at the party proved Max was still up to his old tricks. Max had responded perfectly to the jealousy setup, going after Charley when it appeared she'd been with him. What would stop the bastard from going after the next attractive conquest he saw? Charley didn't need to be hurt again, and he'd see to it Max wouldn't be the next man to break her heart.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He walked over to his swivel chair and dropped into the seat. Out the window and across the street, the tall building came into sight, blocking his view of the park nearby. From what he could see, the blue sky held only a few clouds, but a storm soon headed toward them. By the way the limbs on the trees waved, the storm would be here quicker than he expected. He'd always liked winters. Colder weather made lovers cuddle together near a roaring fire.

He smiled and pictured Charley in his arms as they lay naked on the bearskin rug in front of a fireplace. It could happen. Although he didn't have a fireplace in his townhouse, his cabin in Colorado had three. It'd been a while since he'd been there. Perhaps it was time to take Charley and show her how the real Damien Giovanni lived.

The knock on his office door jolted him out of his daydreams. The door opened a crack and his secretary peeked her head inside.

"Mr. Giovanni? There's someone here to see you."

He glanced down at his opened day planner. "I didn't forget an appointment, did I?"

"No. She's been waiting since right after your meeting started."

He creased his forehead. "Who is it?"

Maryann hurried over to his desk and handed him a business card. "Says she's the vice-president of Herbal Sensations."

*Their competitors?* "Really?" He glanced down at the card. As his gaze skimmed the name, Maryann spoke the words aloud.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Her name is Liza Scapolli."

## Ten

Damien drummed his fingers on his desk and clenched his jaw so tight he worried his teeth might break. He couldn't believe he'd agreed to see Liza. Not more than ten seconds ago, he'd nodded to his secretary to allow *that woman* into his office. What was he thinking? He'd gone this long without talking to her, so why couldn't he go another seven years or more?

The clicking of heels outside his door caused him to glare in that direction. He fisted his hands on the desktop, crinkling the paper beneath. Realizing he'd picked up an important document, he hurried and smoothed out the wrinkles then placed it on the desk out of his way.

The door opened. The long legs peeking from beneath a black leather mini-skirt grabbed his attention. Next that came into view, a silk, rose-colored blouse that had most of the top buttons undone to show off generous cleavage. His gaze traveled up the slim neck to the exotic face of the Italian woman who'd trampled his heart. She'd been his first love, and thankfully, not his last. But Liza Scapolli had been the most malicious. His gut clenched. What was the backstabbing bitch up to now?

She pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head. Long, black hair cascaded down her shoulders and curled slightly over her surgically enhanced breasts. The smile she wore looked just as fake.

"Damieno, my dear. How long has it been?"

He tried to act nonchalant when he lifted his eyebrows in what he hoped would be an unexpressive look. "Not long enough."

Her throaty laugh bothered him, making him think she didn't believe him. He'd try harder next time.

She shut the door and slinked over to him. Instead of sitting on the brown leather chair, she rested her small bottom on the edge of his desk, crumpling the document he'd previously unwrinkled.

Leaning back in his chair, he linked his fingers over his stomach. "To what do I owe the pleasure, Liza?"

She crossed one leg over the other, displaying the asset he'd forgotten. He didn't have to ogle her model size body. As far as he was concerned, she didn't compare to Charley.

Her heavy-mascara eyelashes batted. "Since I was in the neighborhood, I thought I'd come and say hello," she practically purred.

"Fine. Now that you've said hello, you can leave. I'm very busy today."

She pouted. "Too busy for a friend?"

He sat up. "Friend?" He looked beyond her as if someone else were in the room. "My friend is here? Where?"

"Oh, Damieno, you haven't lost your sense of humor," she drawled, then released a brittle laugh.

"I *am* very busy. If you haven't noticed, the lobby is packed with women auditioning for our ad. So Liza, please say what you've come to say and leave."

Gasping, she quickly stood. "I'm appalled you don't believe I'm here for a little visit. Perhaps I should leave and come back when you're in better spirits."

He rolled his eyes heavenward. "Liza, I know you better than to think you've come to see me just because you've missed me. In fact, I'm willing to bet you're here because you want to talk me into becoming your partner."

Her eyes widened and she placed her hand over her heart. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"I'd heard you were back in town so I checked out your company. I think Herbal Sensations is worried about GIO's new herbal lines. In fact, all analysts agree it's a better product. And since you stole the idea from me in the first place, I'm thinking you need my help. I believe you want to form an alliance."

Through her caked-on makeup, her skin lost a little color. She stared at him with her dark eyes, but kept a smile. He'd been right. The little heathen was still performing. Seven years ago he'd thought the sun rose just to shine on her every morning. He couldn't understand why the pain of betrayal was still fresh because he thought he was over her long ago.

Finally, her lips fell into a scowl. She took a step back and plopped into the chair on the other side of his desk. She shrugged. "Damieno, you're being very unreasonable."

"Ha," he snickered. "I have every right to be unreasonable. Back then you slept with me just to get information. Didn't you think I'd catch on? Not even four months after you left, I hear of a new company selling herbal shampoo, and guess

who's vice-president and married to the president? None other than my ex."

Her delicately shaped eyebrows creased in a scowl. "That's not how it happened and you know it. Besides, I'm not with Dale any longer. I never got over my feelings for you. I loved you—"

"And that's why you made the moves on my best friend?"

"It's not what you think. Maxwell Harrington was just comforting me—"

"Yeah, and I'm sure the reason you were both naked and in each other's arms was because the air-conditioning broke." He held up a hand when she opened her mouth. "But it doesn't matter now." He flipped his hand through the air. "You have your company and I have mine." He smiled. "And my company is doing so much better than it was while we were together."

She glanced at her hands while she twisted them against her stomach. "Damieno, don't you even want to hear my offer?" Her voice was low.

He rolled his eyes again. There she went on, over dramatizing. "Not really."

Her gaze lifted to his and fire could have shot out of her eyes. A muscle in her cheek jumped. He recognized the early symptoms of her anger. Now he couldn't wait to annoy her further.

"And why not?" she asked.

"Because I don't need you."

She leaned forward, exposing more of her bosom. He couldn't stop from taking a peek. All he could think about was



how they paled in comparison to Charley's perfectly molded breasts. He couldn't forget the way Charley looked naked and sprawled out on her bed.

"But, Damieno, think of how much more your company could make. There's nothing wrong with Herbal Sensations. We just need stronger backing."

Impatiently, he pushed away from his desk. "Sorry, Liza, I'm not interested." He walked closer to her. From up here, he could see farther down her blouse ... and the skimpy bra she wore. Obviously, she came to do more than talk. "I'm not interested in *anything* you have to offer."

"But your mother seemed pleased with the idea."

"My mother doesn't know you're a blood-thirsty shark either."

With a huff, she stood, her body only inches from his. "You're a very stubborn man."

"True, but I think you're more upset because you haven't been able to seduce me this time."

She arched an eyebrow. "Then I guess the rumors are true."

"What rumors?"

"That you're gay."

He chuckled. He'd have to find the person who spread that rumor and give them a raise. "Believe what you want."

She gasped. "I can't believe I hurt you so much you switched to men."

His laughter grew. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Do your shareholders know this about you?"

"Does it matter?"

She shrugged. "I'm just curious if they really know the truth."

"Liza, if you're trying to think up a way to blackmail me, it's not going to work. The shareholders are happy with GIO Products. They aren't going to be swayed." He glanced at her breasts again. "Not even if you slept with them. They enjoy getting wealthy off my business."

"Oh!" She pushed her palms against his chest and walked past him. Her heels clicked loudly on the floor as she stomped out the door, slamming it shut behind her.

He breathed a sigh of relief that she was gone, but knowing Liza, she'd be back, and that worried him. She didn't give up easily.

\* \* \* \*

*An old fashioned night on the town*

The next day Damien stopped in front of his townhouse to unlock the door and Charley came flying out of her front door.

"Damien, you're late," she said breathless.

He glanced down at his watch. "Only by ten minutes."

"We have to hurry. Max will be here in two hours."

He chuckled and opened his door, motioning for Charley to enter first. When she stepped past him, he breathed in her berry scent. He wanted to swipe the hair off her neck and taste her skin. Inwardly, he cursed his weakness. He couldn't think this way about her. Not tonight.

"We have plenty of time, *mí amore*."

"Have you thought of what we could fix for dinner?"

He shut the door behind him and leaned against the wood.

"No, have you?"

She nodded. "I thought about some exotic French dish."

"Oh, that's good."

Her smile brightened. "Really?"

"Yes. I have everything we need in my kitchen." He moved away from the door and in three steps stood in front of her. "I have *French* dressing to go on the tossed green salad. I have *French* fries that will go great with *French* bread."

She slapped his shoulder and laughed. "Be serious."

"Okay, I'll be serious, but just for tonight." He paused and gave her a nod. "I have it. We'll fix my specialty. Cinnamon chicken and cheesy scalloped potatoes."

"Hmmm ... sounds heavenly." She rubbed her hands together. "And what about a vegetable?"

"Would you rather have asparagus or broccoli?"

She scrunched her nose. "Definitely not asparagus."

He winked. "Then broccoli it is." He clasped her hand and hooked it around his elbow. "Now, *cheré*, if you'll allow me to escort you into zee kitchen, ve'll prepare zee most tastiest dish that's ever touched your tongue," he said in a fake French accent.

She laughed and hugged his arm. He groaned, wishing he could tell her just what her hug had meant to him—what *she* meant to him.

"First things first, we have to wash our hands." He reached over the sink and turned on the water. She grabbed the bottle of pump-soap and gave a couple of squirts before repeating the process to hers. When her slick hands moved together

under the water, he became mesmerized. The image of their naked bodies moving together filled his head, both slick with soap as they stood underneath the shower ... His groin tightened. He switched the cold water higher, hoping to dismiss the fantasy.

He cleared his throat. "Since I have everything we need, we'll just make it here."

She nodded. "But I want it to cook in my kitchen. My place needs to smell like I've been laboring over a hot stove."

He dug through his drawer-full of recipes and pulled out the one for Cinnamon Chicken. Leaning beside him, she peered at the card with him.

"I'll get the ingredients, and you get the chicken," she said.

"Sounds like a plan."

He moved to the refrigerator and withdrew the full chicken he'd planned to have for dinner. He unwrapped it, then brought it over to the sink to wash. He glanced over to see if Charley needed any help, but she'd found his spice cabinet and had proceeded to grab the needed spices.

When she reached for the cinnamon bottle, he realized how he could sabotage her meal with Max. Right next to it in the identical colored bottle was the chili powder. He opened his mouth to make sure she didn't grab the wrong one, but then snapped it close. The dinner would indeed be ruined if he used the powder instead of the spice. Should he switch bottles when she wasn't looking?

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

After blotting the chicken with a paper towel, he motioned with his head. "Sweetheart, why don't you go put one of my aprons on?"

"Great idea. Where do you keep them?"

"In the long closet right around the corner there." He nodded in the direction. "And grab me one while you're there."

As soon as she turned, he made the switch. Within seconds, regret hit him like a punch in the stomach, and he almost put the chili powder back, but she returned and her sweet smile twisted his heart. He wanted her, and he'd do anything to keep Max from hurting her.

He proceeded preparing the chicken, holding his breath when he applied the chili powder. Luckily, she didn't mention the smell. Of course, she stood by the sink peeling the potatoes.

She hummed a soft love song that he recognized from ten years ago. He smiled. She was such a romantic, and if all went according to his plans, she'd soon be his.

Setting the chicken in his roaster and placing the lid over it, he picked up the pan. "I'm going to get this cooking in your oven. I'll be back in a moment."

When he walked into her apartment and noticed what she'd done, his heart sank. Candles, low lighting, and what looked to be her best plates and utensils were all on a table set for two in the middle of the front room. Music played in the background, and he realized why Charley had been humming that song.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His hands tightened around the handles of the roaster. Would substituting the cinnamon for the chili powder be enough to ruin the evening? He doubted it, especially, if she planned on dressing to kill.

He walked into the kitchen and turned on her oven. It hurt to think he knew her townhouse almost as well as his own. Yet he was just her friend. He released a heavy sigh. He must tell her how he felt, and about Max ... tonight. Yet, could he confess his feelings this early in their friendship? What if she found out about Max and the revenge he had planned for the man back then? Would she think this was his way to get back at Max? He couldn't take that kind of rejection.

Before heartbreak rooted itself in his chest, he hurried to his apartment to finish the dinner. He explained how to fix the potatoes while he cut up the broccoli.

Once she placed the potatoes in the casserole dish, he carried it over to put in with the chicken. She followed behind with the pan full of vegetables.

"Do you like how I set the table?" Her voice lifted with excitement.

"It's perfect."

She turned on the stove and put the lid on the vegetables. "Would you watch these steam while I go hop in the bath?"

He nodded.

She took a step away from him, then stopped. Without hesitation, she turned and launched herself in his arms, plopping a big kiss on his cheek. He closed his arms around her waist and held her body against his, enjoying the moment while it lasted.

"Oh, Damien, what would I do without you?" she whispered in his ear.

Her warm breath teased his skin and his loins tightened. "I don't ever want to find out."

She pulled back and smiled. "You won't." She moved to kiss his cheek again, but he turned his head, letting her lips brush his mouth. He'd kissed her on the mouth once before, but this was different. This time she *knew* she was kissing him.

Electricity shot through his blood, that shower fantasy racing through his thoughts again. Yeah. He'd love to sweep her off her feet and whisk her away to the shower. But he wouldn't. Not when she still held Max in her mind. He wanted *his* name to sigh from her lips, not Mr. Jock-Strap's.

Laughing, she pulled back and stepped out of his arms. Her laugh seemed a little too light and breathless. Her eyes were dark and desirous, but she turned and hurried down the hall to her bathroom before he could see more. Funny, but he could swear her cheeks had turned red, too. Usually she didn't act so shy, but just a second ago it was like she didn't want to meet his eyes.

*Nah.* Couldn't be.

He sulked back to the kitchen and readied the last minute items she would need. Down the hall, the flow of running water caused an image of her naked to leap into his mind. He groaned. The way she'd writhed naked on the bed the other night would always be tattooed in his memory. But, ah, what a memory.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

The water stopped and her singing lifted through the apartment. She hit a few wrong notes and he smiled. It didn't matter. He liked her because she wasn't perfect. She was Charley, and that's all that mattered.

The next half hour passed with irritating slowness, but soon the bathroom door opened and the berry scent of her shampoo engulfed him. He hurried into the kitchen to appear busy. When her heels clicked on the kitchen floor, he turned to look at her. His breath caught in his throat and his heartbeat accelerated.

"You're absolutely beautiful," he whispered.

Once again, she blushed, and his heart sang. She fidgeted with the spaghetti straps on her white silky dress, then ran her hands down the sides of the tight bodice, to the straight skirt that ended just above her knees. And those legs! Inwardly, he groaned. Nude nylons covered them, but they were still the sexiest things he'd ever seen.

"Damn, woman." He shook his head. "You're dressed to kill."

Her face flamed brighter. "Thanks. I'm glad you approve."

"Approve?" His voice rose. "I'm about ready to send you back in the bedroom to change into a nun's habit, young lady."

She laughed while tucking a lock of hair behind her ear in a nervous gesture. He'd always liked it when she kept her hair down, cascading over her shoulders.

"I look that good, huh?" she asked.

He stepped over to her and grasped her hands in his. He scanned her length, once again, resting momentarily on the



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

heart-shaped bodice and the deep cleavage. He whistled. "If I was Max, I'd gobble you up in one bite."

Laugh lines disappeared from around her mouth and blue eyes. "Really?" Her voice was lower than usual, reminding him of the other night on her bed.

"Really."

She smiled and squeezed his hands. "Damien, I ... I ... really do love you, you know."

Keeping her hands in his, he lifted them to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. His heart beat fiercely against his ribs and his throat went dry. "Just as I love you."

Did she just catch her breath? In fact, had her breathing grown faster? His certainly had. And how long was she going to stare in his eyes before looking away? He could gaze at her forever.

But the buzzer on the oven rang through the air and broke the magical spell between them. He cursed under his breath and dropped her hands, turning to go into the kitchen.

Too bad he couldn't think of anything else to ruin her date with Max. He just hoped the chicken did the trick. *All is fair in love and war.*

There was no way he wanted her to fall in love with Maxwell Harrington.

## Eleven

Charley closed her eyes and breathed deep, trying to calm her out-of-control heart rate. She placed her hand on her chest and the erratic flutter bounced against her palm. Why did Damien have to look at her like that? His eyes were so dark, his expression so serious. And when he told her he loved her, it was as if he'd meant every word. Not as a friend, but more.

The worst part of all of this—she enjoyed it! She could have melted at his feet in a puddle of goo. Those damn hypnotic gray eyes of his affected her like no other. In fact, none of the men in her life could influence her the way this Italian Spice did.

She shook away the confusing thoughts and turned to inspect her table. Everything was perfect. Except Max would be sitting here and not Damien.

Growling with frustration, she massaged her forehead. *What's wrong with me?* It had to be that damn kiss. When she'd tried to kiss his cheek, his lips got in the way. Images from the other night came drifting back, making her body burn. But it hadn't been Damien who'd kissed her so passionately, so why did her body lie to her every time she looked at him?

"Okay, I think everything's ready."

Damien's husky voice brought her back to reality. She swung around and looked at him. His gaze skimmed over her body, making her limbs weak. His eyes darkened and his face

softened as if he thought about devouring her at any moment. Hadn't he given her that same look the other night after the Christmas party? It seemed so familiar...

"I'll let you do the serving," he added with a smile.

She nodded. "Thanks again, Damien."

He winked and playfully cuffed her chin with his knuckles.

"But remember, I don't wash dishes. That's your job."

She laughed. When he turned to leave, she grabbed his arm. "Damien, before you go, I need to ask you an important question."

His brows drew together. "What is it?"

"Um ... about the other night, after the Christmas party ... I need to know something."

Narrowing her gaze, she studied his expression, hoping to see something there, some sign that he was the man in her bed and not Max. His face remained blank.

"I really need to know if you brought me home. I don't remember much, but I really don't think Max did."

*Impassive. His expression didn't falter, damn it!*

He nodded. "I brought you home."

She wanted to breathe a sigh of relief, but dared not. "How did I act?"

He grinned. "Like an intoxicated woman."

"Yes, I know that, but ... but did I come onto you in any way?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "Charley, where are you going with this?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She huffed and balled her hands into fists. Why was he making this so hard on her? "Just answer me. Did anything happen?"

"No. Nothing happened."

"Do you know if Max came to my apartment after you'd left?"

He shrugged. "It's possible, but I don't know for sure."

"Okay."

"Why all the questions?"

"Because I don't want to say something stupid in front of Max tonight. When we talked this morning at work, he acted as he had ... as if we had ... well, you know."

He let out a brittle laugh. "Then maybe you did."

"But I want to know for sure. I don't want to say something and have him think I'm an idiot."

Damien shook his head. "He won't, and if he does—" he moved closer and cupped her face in his hands, "—then he's not worth your time. You deserve someone who can love you for yourself. And you'd better make damn sure he does before you sleep with him. I'd hate to see you get your heart broken, again."

She nodded. "I'll be careful."

He kissed her on the mouth, his gentle lips brushing tingles across hers. It was all she could do to hold herself back from wrapping her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss, and pressing her body against his. When he pulled away, she held in the disappointed sigh.

"I better go before he catches me here." Damien dropped his hands and took a step back. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He winked, then turned and left her townhouse.

She chuckled. That's the problem. She couldn't help but want to do what he did with other women. God help her, she wanted to be one of them.

Blowing out a frustrated sigh, she marched into the bathroom to recheck her makeup. She leaned in closer to the mirror and widened her eyes. Yes, the eye shadow was evenly matched. She pinched her cheeks to make them rosier, and puckered her lips to check her lipstick.

The memory of Damien's kiss came back, and she groaned aloud. Would she ever stop thinking about him that way? She didn't want to ruin her life by falling in love with a man who would trample her heart when another Barbie wannabe came along. Plain and simple, if she didn't get rid of her feelings for Damien, she was in for a depressing, lonely life.

She straightened and fluffed her hair the way she'd seen Damien do it. A stray lock fell into her eyes and she swiped it away. Studying the thickness, she realized it was time for a haircut. Did Damien know how to cut hair? He certainly did a lot of things she didn't expect him to do. Funny, but she really didn't know what he did at his job. What kind of friend was that? She scowled. Starting tomorrow, she'd stop thinking about her miserable life and try to find out more about his.

Her doorbell buzzed and she jumped. She placed her hand over her chest to settle her erratic pulse.

*Be yourself. Don't screw up.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

As calm as she could, she walked to the front door, her legs shaking as if walking on eggshells. Before she opened the door, she took a deep breath for courage. Right now she needed all the help she could get.

Her sweaty hand slipped when she reached for the doorknob, but she gripped it harder and turned the knob. When she looked upon Max's handsome appearance, she smiled.

"Hello," she greeted.

"Hi."

His gaze wandered over her, so she took this moment to inspect him closer. Instead of his business attire, he wore a long-sleeve blue and white striped shirt with a collar. The first few buttons were unfastened. His fingers were inside the front pockets of his faded blue jeans, giving him that relaxed look. Why did men always look so casual and unaffected? One day she'd like to see a nervous twitch in the man's eyes, or a bead of sweat on the forehead. Hell, even stammering would be good. At least it would make her feel better.

"You look really good," he said after a few moments of silence.

She smiled. "I was just going to say the same thing to you." She took a step back and opened the door wider.

"Come on in."

"Thought you'd never ask."

When he passed, her attention dropped to his ass. Damn, he looked good in tight jeans. But then ... Damien actually looked better. She cursed her wandering thoughts and shut the door. *Think of Max, not Damien.*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Hmmm ... smells good in here. What's for dinner? Something Mexican?"

She walked past him toward the kitchen. Why would he think it's Mexican? She took a deep sniff. Come to think about it ... it did smell like that. "Not Mexican. Just a family recipe I threw together. I hope you like chicken."

"Love it."

"Go ahead and have a seat. I'll bring in the meal."

Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed Max walking to the table, his gaze wandering around her apartment. The smile on his face eased her worries. So far, so good.

But then why did he seem to be looking at things as if he'd never seen them before? If he *had* made love to her the other night, why did he act as if this was his first time in her apartment? And if neither he nor Damien had made love to her, had it all been a dream? If she had dreamed it all, it had been Damien in her dream, not Max.

Confusion tightened her chest and a headache threatened. She shook it off and continued into the kitchen. Damien had taken the chicken and potatoes out of the oven and covered them to keep them warm.

She picked up the potatoes. From the other pan, a different scent assaulted her senses, making her stomach growl. *That was chili powder she smelled.* Couldn't be. Her nerves were not only playing tricks on her body, but they were playing tricks on her senses as well.

Careful not to drop the dish, she carried the potatoes in and set it on the table. Max leaned over and sniffed.

"Ummm ... these smell heavenly. Don't tell me this is another family recipe. This smells like it came from a gourmet restaurant."

She chuckled. "Yes, this is just another family recipe."

Hurrying back into the kitchen, she retrieved the broccoli and the pitcher of water. Definitely no alcoholic beverage tonight.

When she set the water on the table, Max looked inside the pitcher, then gave her a skeptical raised brow. "What's this?"

"Water."

"What, no champagne?"

"Not tonight."

"But I thought you were going to give me a repeat performance?"

*What's he talking about?* Surely, he meant what they'd done on her bed that night ... at least that's what she'd thought he meant when they had talked at work. Could it be that he wasn't referring to anything but her drunken spree at the party?

She shrugged. "I decided against it. I want tonight to be totally different."

He nodded. "That sounds good."

She rushed back into the kitchen, feeling more confused than ever. If he hadn't kissed her so passionately that night, then who was the man who touched her body with his skilled hands, stripped her of her clothes, and kissed her until her body melted?

*Damien.*



No! It couldn't be ... could it?

She removed the lid on the chicken, lifted it and sniffed. Confusion washed over her again, but it had nothing to do with the other night. The chicken *did* smell like chili. But wasn't it supposed to smell like cinnamon?

She shrugged. Damien knew what he was doing, didn't he? But as she carried it into the other room, the aroma of chili became stronger. Coughing lightly, she tried to clear the lingering spice from her throat, willing away the tears threatening her eyes.

Hopefully, chili powder wasn't baked in the chicken. She'd always had such a wimpy mouth, and she didn't need to eat something spicy tonight.

Max smiled. "This smells great."

*Let's hope it tastes great, too.*

"Are you sure this isn't a Mexican dish?" he asked.

"No. It's called Cinnamon Chicken."

She sat and adjusted the napkin on her lap, then reached over to spoon potatoes on her plate. Max eagerly took a piece of chicken off the platter, licking his lips in anticipation. Deep inside, a sinking feeling invaded her stomach. Something will go wrong. She just knew it.

Max spooned potatoes on his dish before diving into his chicken. The red sauce dripped from his fingers when he picked up the piece and took a big bite. She held her breath, praying nothing was wrong with the meat.

God must have been too busy to hear her prayer, because when Max's eyes widened and he took a quick intake of breath, she knew something was not right. Slowly, he placed

the chicken on the plate and picked up the pitcher of water, pouring the cool liquid into his glass. Tears pooled in the corners of his eyes while he brought the drink to his mouth.

She licked the sauce off her finger. Her tongue burned like the Mexican border in the dead of summer. Instead of drinking the water, she hurried and took a bite of potatoes. At least they tasted good.

Max wiped his mouth with his napkin and cleared his throat. "That's certainly a different tasting chicken." He cleared his throat for the second time. "So, it's a family recipe, you say?"

Humiliation washed over her and twisted her gut. Couldn't she do anything right? She gave a helpless shrug. "Thought so, but now I'm wondering what I did wrong."

He took a large spoonful of potatoes, but said in between bites, "Didn't you say this was cinnamon chicken?"

"Yeah, I thought it was."

"Doesn't taste like cinnamon to me."

"Me either."

She tried to remember when she'd taken down the spices from his cupboard. Did she read the bottle or just look at the color? Inwardly, she groaned. There'd been two bottles the same color. She was willing to bet she'd picked up the chili powder instead.

"Oh, God, Max, I'm so sorry." She wiped the napkin across her mouth. "I think I put in chili powder instead of cinnamon."

He took another drink of his water, nodding. He didn't have to reply. The liquid in his eyes told her what she needed

to know. She'd failed again. But at least Max was the only person to see her humiliation.

She sighed and covered her face with her hands. Tears threatened to spill and a sob lodged in her throat. *Could this night hurry and get over with?* What was she doing? Obviously, she messed up on everything she did. She should just let him off the hook and tell him they'd just be friends. But she didn't want to be the office joke either. If she gave up on Max, she'd never hear the end of it from Amanda ... and whomever Amanda had told.

The screech of Max's chair sliding on the wooden floor made her jump. *He's leaving.* She jerked her attention to him, trying to think of something intelligent to make him stay. He had to stay.

But instead of walking out the door, he came around to her side and knelt beside her. He took her hands in his. The warmth from his skin tried to heat her cold blood.

"Charley, it's okay, really." His fingers tightened around her hand.

She wanted to cry, but blinked to keep her tears from falling. "How can you say that?" Her voice croaked. "I nearly gave your mouth third-degree burns."

He chuckled. "No you didn't. In fact, I like spicy foods." He shrugged. "But I must confess, the chili powder went a tad too far."

She laughed, then bit her bottom lip. "I wanted the meal to be perfect."

"It is. I really like the potatoes."

"What about the broccoli?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Well, I don't exactly like that vegetable, but I'll eat it."

She shook her head. "No, don't eat it. I've punished you enough for one night."

He rose and kissed her cheek. "Then we'll just snack on potatoes tonight."

"I have bread and butter."

"That's even better."

The tightness in her chest eased when she retrieved the bread and butter from the kitchen, although she knew Max was just being nice. He hated the meal, she could tell. But he still slopped down his food like a man in a hurry. She picked at her food like an anorexic bird. Her stomach wouldn't allow her to eat any more.

He leaned back in his chair and linked his hands over his stomach. "Well, now that we're done, what else did you have planned?"

The husky tone to his voice told her exactly what he had planned, and although she was eager for a repeat of Friday night's pleasures, she also didn't want him to use her. She couldn't take another heartbreak. This was what she wanted, right? To get him and melt his heart. Then why was she suddenly afraid? Maybe it was too soon. After all, weren't there six more ways on the list? If she rushed it, surely she'd fail again.

"Well, I hadn't really made any other plans."

"Why don't we watch the tube? TBS has a Stooges marathon playing tonight."

She raised her eyebrows. "Stooges?"

"Yeah, you know, *The Three Stooges*?"

"Oh, Larry, Moe and Curly?"

"Exactly."

It sounded like a good idea, but she really didn't know that much about the Stooges. Her mind came to a screeching halt. *Way Number Six—Funny Movies*. Before she could watch the Stooges with him, she'd better make sure she knew them. Then they'd have something to talk about.

"Well, unfortunately, my satellite isn't working," she lied. "The repairman hasn't come to fix it yet, so watching television is off." The idea for Way Number Five struck her. *Tall buildings*. Not too far from where she lived, there was a tall building with a restaurant on top. In fact, if she remembered correctly, the room moved around in a circle, giving a beautiful sight of the city.

She grinned. *Perfect*.

"I have a better idea."

"What's that?"

"How about dessert?"

His eyes widened and his mouth stretched across his face. "Dessert? This soon?"

Cursing herself for not thinking before she spoke, she hurried with a laugh. "Not *that* kind of dessert. I mean food. I know this great restaurant with a beautiful view of the city. Interested?"

His smile relaxed. "Yes."

Simultaneously, they pushed away from the table and stood. She waited for him to walk around to her side before they stepped toward the front door. She grabbed her coat and purse. He opened the door and led them out.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

So, the evening had started out bad, but she had definite hopes for a better ending.

## Twelve

### *Tall buildings*

Damien growled, but the rumble in his stomach overrode everything. He'd tried to put his needs aside and concentrate on his irritation, but now it was time to eat.

He stormed over to the front window and leaned against the pane. From this location, all he could see was her porch steps. How was her night going? Had the chicken ruined the dinner? Had Max left already? He glanced down at his wristwatch. It had only been a half hour since he'd left, so perhaps they were still there.

Sighing, he pushed his fingers through his hair and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. Outside the wind picked up, stirring winter's brown and orange leaves on the lawn. He loved this time of year. The coolness, the coziness of two lovers...

He huffed and pushed away from the window, turning to retrieve his jacket. What the hell was he doing sulking like this? He'd never acted this way over a woman. Of course, he'd never met a woman like Charlene Randall. Like most women he knew, she wasn't trying to find a man because of his money, but instead wanted to find one to fill the void in her life.

The void in his life needed to be filled, too. A different woman every other day had been getting old for a while now. He wanted a relationship—one woman, forever.

One woman to love...

He stopped his thoughts as he reached for his black leather jacket behind the door. *Love?* Could it be possible he was in love with Charley? He'd told her he loved her, but did he really mean it *that* way? He'd wanted her for a while, but wondered if it was because she didn't want him. Being with her lately had filled his days with laughter and softened his heart.

It didn't matter. She wanted Max.

Slipping on his jacket, he stepped outside. The cool wind blew against his face and he bundled the collar around his neck, trying to block out the chill. Tonight was certainly not the kind of weather for walking, but he hoped it would simmer his aggravation, and his scorn. Not very often did a woman reject him, but with Charley, it was like a runaway train hitting him head-on.

He walked the street until a large building loomed before him. The Franklin Hotel was famous for their top-floor restaurant. He enjoyed this place. Looking over this section of the city at night calmed him and ceased his worries, if only for a little while.

Inside the five-star hotel, he unzipped his jacket and waited in front of the elevators. Many elegant couples walked arm-in-arm toward the grand ballroom. This hotel was not only known for their revolving restaurant on the top floor, but the numerous ballrooms used for various events. Tonight would be a great night to get fancy and have a knock-out woman on his arm. Coming here by himself while surrounded by couples only intensified his loneliness.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

The bell to the elevator dinged and the doors opened. He stepped inside and smiled. It'd been wonderful to dance with Charley the other night at her party, to hold her in his arms, feel her supple body against his, and breathe her berry scent. It was even better to taste her sweet lips, touch his tongue to her silky skin and intimately touch her where he'd always dreamed about...

The elevator dinged again, jarring him out of his naughty thoughts. He stepped forward and the tightness in his loins made it uncomfortable. *Damn*. He'd better find a table, and soon, and make sure the waitress brought him plenty of ice water.

Soft music from the overhead speakers played a love song as he walked into the lobby of the restaurant. The aroma of steak caused his stomach to growl.

As he scanned the tables, waiting for the hostess to seat him, he spied a familiar white silky dress and a woman's body that had filled his dreams lately. His heart dropped. *They're here*.

Charley had her arms crossed and was leaning on the edge of the table, her eyes dancing as she laughed at something Max said. Damien fisted his hands and shoved them into the pockets of his jacket.

Looks like Max was doing the seducing tonight.

Damien couldn't let Max use her. All during college, Max was the man who went from one woman to another, seeing how many marks he could get on his bedpost. Damien's so-called friend even went after women who were taken ... and like an idiot, Damien didn't notice when the woman who was

supposed to have loved him started spending more time with Max.

He gritted his teeth. He couldn't let Charley go through that. She deserved better. She wasn't the sleep-with-and-forget-about type woman. He'd watched the men traipse through her life the last six months, and he knew by how she reacted that she wanted someone to settle down with. Exactly what he was now looking for.

Max wasn't the settling down type. He never would be.

He glanced around the room, searching for a place to hide, but the plain and simple truth was, he couldn't. He couldn't let Charley see him. She'd think he was spying, and he didn't want her to be upset at him.

No matter how much he wanted to stay, eat and watch Charley, he needed to go home. He pivoted on his heels to head back to the elevator but knocked into another person. He grasped hold of thin shoulders, keeping them from teetering. When the dark-haired woman looked up at him, he cursed his luck under his breath and dropped his hands to his side as if he'd just touched hot coals.

*What in the hell is Liza doing here?*

"Damieno?" She laughed. "Fancy bumping into you here."

He nodded. "Yes, what a surprise." It shocked him she wasn't hanging on some rich man's arm. "Are you here alone?"

"Yes and no. I'm actually waiting for my friends. They were going to meet me, but I've been waiting ten minutes and they haven't arrived." She looked over his shoulder, then back into his eyes. "Where's your date?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"I ... I didn't come with a date."

"Your ... um ... *friend*?"

He bit his lip to keep from laughing. *She still thinks I'm gay.* "Uh ... sort of."

Her perfectly shaped eyebrow rose. "What does that mean?"

"It means I was stood up, too, so if you'll excuse me, I'll be leaving."

"Damieno, wait—" She grabbed his elbow before he could walk past her. "Since we've both been stood up, let's dine together."

He glanced over at Charley's table. Thankfully, she wasn't looking his way. Of course, he didn't like it that she had her stare glued to Max's face, either. Although dining with Liza didn't sound exciting, he welcomed the excuse to stay and keep an eye on Charley.

He looked back at Liza and nodded. "Fine, but I'm here only to eat. Don't read any more into this."

She smiled and hooked her arm around his. "Oh, Damieno, I wouldn't read more into it. We're just old friends."

The hostess came and escorted them to their table. When they headed in Charley's direction, he silently cursed. Luckily, her back was to him.

As they passed, he hurried faster, hoping she wouldn't notice. When they reached their table, several sections away, he slid into the seat. Lifting the menu to cover his face, he ignored the fact that Liza waited by her chair to be seated.

With a huff, she pulled out her chair and sat, bumping the table in the process. He peeked over the top of the menu,

first at Liza's scowl, then beyond her to Charley's table. The object of his dreams still stared into Max's eyes. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Damieno," Liza whispered harshly. "What's wrong with you?"

Looking around the edge of the menu, he smiled at Liza. "Nothing."

She shook her head. "Liar. For some reason, you're trying to hide."

"Nah, I'm just reading the menu."

To prove it, he relaxed in his chair, still keeping the menu up, but not as close to his face. First, the words blurred, then he thought he had dyslexia. Inwardly he cringed. Trying to act in control, he slowly turned the menu over right-side-up so he could read the words.

"Hmmm ... everything looks good. What are you going to have?" He peeked at Liza.

She opened her menu and gazed down at it. He took this moment to spy on Charley and Max. Charley's smile was wide, her eyes twinkling in the chandelier light. Damn, she looked pretty. Then she laughed at something Max said, and the cheerful ring to her voice floated across the room like angels singing. He sighed heavily, wishing he could be sitting with her instead of Max. God, would the ache in his chest ever subside?

"Damieno? Are you listening to me?"

He snapped out of his daydream and focused on Liza. "Yes."

"Then what did I say?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He grinned. "You said you're not hungry and you want to go home."

She rolled her eyes. "No I didn't, and you well know it. I said I'm ordering the vegetarian plate."

"Oh, in that case, I'll order steak and potatoes."

Tilting her head, she crossed her arms over her breasts. "Why are you annoying me?"

He shrugged. "Old habit?"

"Seven years ago, you were never this mean." She reached across the table and pulled the menu out of his hands.

Panicked, he ducked lower, hoping he was out of view from Charley.

Liza squeezed his hand. "Back then, you were so charming and loving."

He sighed irritably and focused once again on his ex. "Back then I was foolishly stupid to be taken in by your beauty. Back then I didn't know what I wanted in my life. Now I do."

Her eyebrows rose. "Are you trying to tell me you prefer a man in your life now?"

Chuckling, he withdrew his hand from her grasp. Damn, he liked playing this game with her. "Possibly."

He switched his gaze to the window. The gathering clouds made the sky darker, which in turn made the lighted city brighter. Slowly, the neighboring buildings crept by in passing, and once again, he wished he shared this with Charley.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Across from him, Liza cleared her throat. Hesitantly, he looked at her to see what she wanted. Poor woman couldn't stand that he didn't hang on her every word.

"Damieno, have you thought anymore about my offer?"

"What offer?"

"You know damn well what offer."

He shook his head. "There is no offer, Liza. I don't make deals with the devil ... or his mistress."

Her lips pursed, her fingers tightening around the cloth napkin on the table. "Would you for once in your life think logically?"

"I've been thinking logically since I caught you and Max together." He narrowed his gaze on her. "In fact, I've never been better."

"So you're going to ignore everything I'm offering you?"

"It appears that way, doesn't it?"

"I could make you a wealthy man."

He laughed deeply. "Liza, I'm wealthy enough, thank you very much."

She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair. The waiter came to take their orders. Liza snapped what she wanted, and he ordered the ten-ounce steak.

When the waiter left, Damien glanced back at Charley's table. The room had moved farther now, and the bright lights of the building he'd just seen were behind her. She had her head turned to look out the window, as did Mr. Jock-strap. But Damien noticed something different when Max turned to look out across the room. The shade of the man's face

seemed a little greener than he remembered it being. Could Max be sick ... or afraid of heights?

He grinned wider. Could the poor anchorman be feeling his head swim in nausea at this very moment? Damien could only hope...

"Now what are you smiling about?" Liza asked, looking over her shoulder as she searched the room.

"Nothing."

But he couldn't keep his eyes off Charley's date. The more the room moved the greener Max's face turned. Damien placed a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Oh, my." Liza gasped. "Isn't that ... Max?"

"In the flesh."

"Why are you watching him?"

He shrugged. "No reason, really. He's just having dinner with my next door neighbor, Charley Randall."

When Charley finally noticed the color of Max's face, her brows drew together. She reached across the table to touch his arm, but Max quickly withdrew and knocked over his drink.

Charley jumped up and dabbed the wet tablecloth with napkins. Two waiters rushed over to her side.

Max stood and took a step back. He swayed.

Damien leaned his elbows on the table, watching, waiting.  
*He's going down for the count.*

Max's knees buckled and he dropped. Gasps echoed around the room.

Charley hurried over to Max's side, patting his cheeks. One of the waiters took a glass of water and splashed it on his

face. Even from over here, Damien heard the sick groan from Max. *Poor guy.*

"Oh, my." Liza's voice rose in excitement. "Do you think we should go over?"

Damien shook his head. "It looks as if Charley and the waiter have it handled."

He moved his attention back to Charley. Her beautiful mouth was pulled tight in worry. It took all of his strength not to rush to her and take her in his arms to comfort her.

But he'd be there for her later, and maybe finally be able to confess his true feelings.

\* \* \* \*

Wearily, Charley pulled herself into her townhouse and closed the door. She dropped her purse and keys on the nearby table, then dragged her feet to the couch where she collapsed.

What a night.

She swiped her hair out of her face, not caring that the hairstyle had been ruined hours ago or that her make-up was probably smeared under her eyes. Burying her head in the throw pillow, she heaved a disappointing sigh.

*Way to get your date sick, Charley.* But how could she know he was afraid of heights? And why didn't Max just say something? It wouldn't have hurt her feelings to go to another restaurant.

She messed up Way Number Five. Dare she even attempt Way Number Six?



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Groaning, she rolled over on the couch and looked at the television. Max had mentioned TBS was doing a Stooges marathon. Should she watch it? What did she have to lose? Obviously, she couldn't sink any lower ... at least she hoped.

She maneuvered on the couch, tucking her legs under her. Taking the remote from the end table, she switched on the television and turned it to the correct station. Time to really study Max's favorite comedians.

As Larry, Moe and Curly slapped, kicked and did other strange things to each other on the screen, she cocked her head to the side. Max thought this was funny? Okay, maybe the pie in the face, but really...

The light tapping on her door jerked her attention away from the television. She glanced at the clock on the wall. One in the morning? Who could be here at this time of night?

"Charley?"

Softness enveloped her and her heart fluttered. Leave it to Damien to check up on her.

"Come in, the door's unlocked."

The second he walked in, his eyes scanned the room. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"No."

He shut the door and came over to the couch, across his arm hung one of his shirts.

"What's the shirt for?" she asked.

"I just wondered if you could sew a button on for me." He shrugged. "My talent doesn't lie in that area."

She nodded.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Charley? Why aren't I interrupting anything?" He reached over and stroked her cheek with his knuckles.

"Because, as always, I messed things up." Her voice choked and she held in the sob ready to escape.

His forehead creased. He laid the shirt on the edge of the couch, moved to sit next to her and opened his arms. "Come here and tell me about it."

Wearing her heart on her sleeve was not a good thing, but Damien's invitation was too good to pass up. She cuddled against him, pressing her face against his chest. Her heart pounded out of control, but it was more from their closeness than from her misery.

The gentle hand stroking her hair soothed her, and she felt she could actually talk without crying. She laid her hand on his chest, his heartbeat hammering under her palm. Just like hers. Why?

"Now tell me what happened," he commanded in a soft voice.

She hiccupped a laugh. "I don't know if you realized it while making the chicken tonight, but I mistakenly gave you the chili powder instead of the cinnamon."

His body froze. "You did?"

"Yes, but Max only took one bite out of it before realizing it was too spicy for him."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." His arm tightened around her shoulders, bringing her body closer against his. His warm breath brushed the top of her head and smelled like mints. And the scent from his body ... ahhh ... he was the essence of a true male.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"But the rest of the meal turned out fine. Well, except he doesn't like broccoli."

"Then what happened?"

"I remembered another of the 10 Ways to Melt a Man's Heart, which was taking him to a tall building. The article mentioned how guys like tall things. Anyway, I remembered the Franklin Hotel had a nice revolving restaurant on the top floor, so we went there."

"Sounds romantic."

"Yeah, well, I'd thought so too, but it wasn't."

"Why not?"

"Believe it or not, Max is afraid of heights, and sitting right by the window made him sick." She pulled back and looked up at him. "He even passed out."

She noticed the small tick to his lips as if he held back a laugh. The proof of it sparkled in his eyes. She gasped and playfully smacked his chest. "Don't you dare laugh."

"I'm trying not to."

When a tug pulled on her own lips, she quickly lowered her cheek back to his chest before he could see. "It's not funny."

"No, it's not. I'm sure he was very humiliated."

"He was, and so was I."

Silence lasted for a few minutes, the only sound was the Three Stooges on the television.

"I didn't know you were into the Stooges," he said, his voice laced with disappointment.

"I'm not, but I'm trying to be."

"Why?"

"Because Max is." She lifted her head and looked at Damien again. "Way Number Six says to share their favorite movies."

He nodded toward the television. "And do you share his interest?"

She shrugged and glanced over her shoulder at the program. "I really haven't gotten into it yet. I don't understand why they have to hit each other all the time, and why he—" she pointed to the dark-haired man with the funny haircut, "—has to act so tough. He's more silly-stupid than tough."

Damien's chest shook with laughter. "That's the whole purpose of the Stooges. In fact, if you'll look at all those older comedians, you'll see they are the same way. Look at Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, even Jerry and Dean."

She nodded. "True." She gazed at him, noticing the softness in his gray eyes. Why did he have to look so damn gorgeous? "Who's your favorite comedian?"

He shrugged. "I have a few. Although I like Abbott and Costello, my favorite is Bill Cosby."

She gasped and sat up straight. "No kidding. Mine, too."

His smile grew. "No kidding."

"Isn't that funny?"

"Yes, very." His voice came deeper, softer than before.

She stared into his eyes. *I could look at him all night.* Her heartbeat quickened, and her mouth turned dry. His gaze dropped to her lips, and the urge to lean forward and kiss him grabbed her. But she couldn't fall for him. He would love her and leave her for the next Barbie doll.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Her chest ached, and she sighed with disappointment. She cuddled back against him and rested her cheek on his chest. His heartbeat hammered against her ear. Why? He certainly couldn't be feeling the same thing as she. But she also couldn't ask. She'd been humiliated too many times tonight. Another episode would pretty much do her in.

"Charley?"

"Yes?"

"What happened after the date tonight? Did Max kiss you goodnight?" His body stiffened, his voice tight.

She frowned. "No. He didn't feel very well, so I didn't push the issue."

"Do you still think he's the one?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Personally, I feel like he's out of my league."

"Why?" His hand moved over her hair in soft strokes.

"Because I can't seem to be myself around him." She drew tiny circles with her finger over his chest and tight stomach. "I wish I could act normal, but I'm nervous all the time, and you know what happens when I get nervous."

He chuckled. "Yes, I know."

She smiled. Too bad Max wasn't more like Damien. She was *never* nervous around Damien. "But I'm not giving up. Not until he gives me some kind of signal that he's not interested."

Damien's hand cupped her chin, forcing her to look at him. The seriousness in his dark eyes confused her.

"Who wouldn't be interested in Charlene Randall? You're every man's dream."

She snorted. "Every man's nightmare, you mean."

"Quit being hard on yourself."

"Can't help it. I'm an accident on parade."

"No, you're not."

She pulled away and straightened. "I suppose I should tell you about my ex, James."

"What happened?"

"I started a fire in his apartment. Sure, it was only a grease fire, but still..."

Damien frowned. "Then I'm certain the fire was put out quickly."

"True, but I still caused it. I could have burned down his whole apartment building." Damien opened his mouth to continue, but she held up a hand and stopped him. "And that's not all. Guess what happened with Timothy?"

"What?"

"He broke his leg sliding down the back steps. They were covered with ice."

He scowled. "You can't blame yourself for that. I'm sure he knew there was ice on his back porch, for hell's sake."

She shook her head. "He would have been able to walk down them if I hadn't tripped on the rug and plowed into him." She folded her arms across her chest. "Shall I go on?"

"No, Charley. Stop it right now." Irritation captured his narrowed eyes. "All of those things were accidents. They weren't meant to happen."

"Oh, come on, Damien—"

"Charley." He cupped his hand over her mouth. "If I hear one more word about this, I'm taking you over my knee."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

A giggle erupted from her throat. She pulled back and his hand dropped. "And do what, may I ask?"

He grinned. "Keep belittling yourself and you'll find out."

She pouted teasingly and poked him in the ribs. "Oh, you're so mean."

He jumped, then tightened his arms around her. "Charley, the plain and simple truth is those other guys weren't right for you. You'll find the man of your dreams and know it because you can be yourself around him. And if a man can't love you for the Charley I know, he's not worth it."

Her heart melted. *Why can't you be the man of my dreams?* Damien would be the perfect man. If only he didn't move from one woman to the next so quickly. But then ... what if he'd changed? What if he was looking for a relationship? Perhaps she could test him in some way to see.

The idea gave her hope, and her mind began thinking of ways to see. Her spirits lifted and she looked forward to the challenge. But first, she had to give Max one more shot. She had to find out if things were just going to be doomed between them forever.

## Thirteen

### *Funny Movies*

Strike-out Number Six. Charley expected to be able to at least make it all the way through an inning, but it didn't look that way.

She shoved the car into park and killed the engine. Glancing up and down the darkened street, she made certain nobody could see her. The single streetlight on the corner didn't illuminate anyone. The quiet night gave her the peace she needed, and she heaved a sigh and slumped her head forward to knock against the steering wheel.

What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she make anything go right? She'd had it all planned out this morning. She'd invite Max to lunch, and during their meal, she'd start the topic of the Stooges ... Well, that part seemed to go well. Max had picked the restaurant, an out-of-the-way Greek place not too far from work. It was semi-crowded, but she had expected that.

She'd been extremely nervous. She almost had to sit on her hands because they shook so bad. But soon, they were discussing the Stooges, and she breathed easier. She thought it brilliant when he asked her a question and she threw out Curly's phrase, "Why soitenly! N'yuck, n'yuck, n'yuck."

Max had laughed over that, so she continued, with one of Moe's this time. "Why, you lamebrain, I'll fracture ya." Moe always threatened to do bodily harm.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Max had thrown back his head and laughed heartily. She went on with the name-calling; mashed-potato-muscles, two-ounce-brain, little-man, and cabbage-head.

Since Max seemed to enjoy her playacting, she decided to go for the kill. "Prepare for 81-c!" She held out a hand, two fingers extended ... and aimed for his eyes...

Charley growled in embarrassment and pounded her head on the steering wheel. Was it her fault Max forgot to block her fingers? After all, he was a Stooges fan. He should have known.

She lifted her head and rubbed the sore spot just below her hairline. Perhaps she'd hit her head a little too hard that time. But she deserved it. Poor Max couldn't see for at least ten minutes after she'd gouged his eyes.

Tears threatened, and it wasn't because of the pain in her head. Plain and simple, she was a loser. She couldn't do anything right when it came to men.

Reluctantly, she opened the door and climbed out of her BMW. When she slammed the door, the echo rang through the deserted street, mimicking the loneliness of her heart.

A tear slipped free, then others joined. She clutched her purse to her chest, trying to hold back the sob ready to burst forth as she shuffled toward her front door. Before she reached it, Damien's door opened and she quickly wiped her tears. When he stepped out on the porch, he stopped. His gaze stayed on her.

Relief flooded through her body. Her chest ached, her throat burned. He was the only person she wanted to see right now.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

His gaze wandered over her face. His eyes widened, then his forehead crinkled. "Charley? What's wrong?"

The concern in his voice made an ache form in her heart. Tears fell freely once again. He held his arms open and she rushed to him, pressing her face against his black leather jacket. Her sobs echoed around them. His embrace tightened around her.

"*Mí amore*, what's wrong?" he repeated with a tender voice.

When she didn't say anything—couldn't find the strength to pull away from him, he lifted her in his arms and stepped back into his house. He raised her face enough to press it against his neck. His spice scent smelled so good, so sexy. Like always.

The gentle stroke of his hand in her hair soothed her cries, calming her the way only Damien could. He took her to his couch and sat. She remained in his lap, and cursed herself for enjoying every second of it.

But she loved him.

She caught her breath and bit her bottom lip. When had this happened? But the bigger question was ... did she want it to happen?

Taking a refreshing breath, she finally lifted her head and gazed into his caring eyes. Soft and gray. So dreamy and laced with concern. Her heart clenched harder. She wanted him in her life. She wanted him to love her, to devote himself to her and only her.

He swiped his thumb over her cheek, brushing away more tears. "Will you tell me what's wrong?"

She nodded and cleared her throat. "I'm up to strike six. Good thing I'm not playing baseball, huh?"

"What happened?"

She tried forcing a laugh, but it didn't come across as humor. The squeak sounded pathetic. "You wouldn't think I could mess this one up, but I did."

"Did you talk to him about the Stooges?"

"Yes."

"He didn't like it?"

"Oh, he liked it, all right. He thought my version of Curly's *n'yuck, n'yuck, n'yuck* was amusing."

"Then what went wrong?"

She shrugged. "I thought, being a Stooge fan and all, that he'd be prepared when I did the fingers-in-the-eyes trick." She shook her head. "He wasn't. His eyes watered for nearly a half-hour, and even when he left work, they were still red. If he goes blind, it'll be my fault."

Damien's lips twitched, yet his eyes still drooped with sympathy. Through her misery, there was humor in everything, and a smile tugged at her lips. Soon, his smile widened.

"Oh, Damien, why didn't he block my poke?" She rubbed her forehead and sighed.

He chuckled. "I don't know, *mí amore*." He pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Perhaps he's scolding himself for not doing it at this very moment."

She laughed. "Oh, I'm sure he's doing a lot more than scolding. He's probably at the eye doctor."

He shook his head. "God, I love your sense of humor."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His laughing eyes grabbed her, pulled her in. Her heartbeat quickened. His square, clean-shaven jaw tempted her to touch it, so she did, cupping her hand on the side of his face. It was smooth against her palm, and she imagined how it would feel against her bare skin ... against her bare breasts ... her bare thighs ... Heated tingles surged through her body, moistening certain parts that cried out to him and only him.

Why did the picture in her mind seem so real?

Had he been in her room the night of the Christmas party? Had it been his hands, his lips driving her mad with desire?

Her heart hammered and moisture gathered between her legs. She squeezed her thighs together, hoping to make the crazy sensation tingling throughout her body disappear.

She stared at his lips, remembering the way they glided sensually over her body. Had it really been a dream? She'd kissed Damien only a couple of times, and his lips were very gentle. Perhaps she'd just imagined the time when they'd almost made love on her bed after the Christmas party.

His expression softened, the gray in his eyes darkening and his lips parting. She had to kiss him. Now! Her heart jumped and lodged itself in her throat.

She continued to lean forward, slowly, and waited for him to stop her.

He didn't. She closed her eyes and their lips touched.

His hands bracketed her head, holding her in place. Her heart soared. She nibbled on his parted lips, sucking the lower lip inside her mouth. He let out a small moan before slanting his mouth over hers and slipping his tongue inside.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Electric pleasure ripped through every nerve in her body, heating her blood to boiling. A sigh escaped her, sounding more like a groan. She threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling his face to hers as she partook of his erotic kiss. This was exactly what her dream had been like. Now everything was real. That night *had* been real.

"Oh, God, Charley," he mumbled, then turned and laid her on the sofa to the side of him.

Sliding her hands down his neck, she found the zipper to his leather jacket and pulled it as far as she could. Without breaking the kiss, he helped, shrugging out of it then discarding it to the floor. When he was back in her embrace, he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her to him.

Their mouths sought each other as she fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, releasing them one at a time. His hand moved over her with urgency, touching her waist, her buttocks, then down her leg. When it traveled upward, she held her breath until it came in contact with one of her breasts. Liquid heat shot through her body and a pleasurable sigh escaped her throat.

He pulled back and looked down into her eyes. His were a smoky gray, and his swollen lips begged her to kiss them again. Her breaths came heavy, as did his.

With his thumb, he drew a circle around the tip of her breast and it hardened. He smiled. Against her hip, something else grew hard. His excitement was very obvious.

"Damien," she whispered his name, just to hear it on her lips while he brought her body to passion. She cupped the

side of his face and he nuzzled against her palm, kissing her skin.

She urged his face back down to hers, but just before they could touch, the cell phone chirped, making her jump. She held his stare during the second ring, but by the third, a scowl had replaced his passionate expression.

He lifted himself off the couch and grabbed the cell clipped to his waist, quickly reading the caller ID. "Damn," he snapped, then answered on the fourth ring. "This better be a life-threatening emergency."

Within seconds, his expression changed again, but from a scowl to worry. His forehead creased, as did the corners of his eyes. He'd shown her this look before.

"Fine. I'll be there shortly."

He sighed heavily and turned off the phone. When he met her stare, he smiled, although it wasn't full. "I hate to bring this to an end, but that was work."

She nodded. Although she didn't want him to leave, her heart swelled with happiness. She'd been thinking about kissing him for a while now, and it'd finally happened. But she was grateful for the interruption. She needed time to sort out her newfound feelings.

"Are you in trouble or something?" she asked.

"No, *mí amore*." He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers briefly. "I'd like to finish our little discussion later, if that's all right."

Her gaze dropped to his fly. He was enormous. Once again, liquid heat rushed between her legs. Even her hands itched to touch him again. Her cheeks burned from the

naughty, yet pleasurable thought and she jerked her attention back to his face. "How long before you come home?"

"It'll be around midnight. Is that too late?"

"No."

He touched his finger to her lips, stroking them softly. "Please stay here until I return. We have a lot to discuss." He winked, then grabbed his jacket off the floor and left his townhouse.

A giddy laugh sprang from her throat and she hugged the throw pillow to her chest. The evening looked brighter already.

\* \* \* \*

Damien stormed into his office, slamming the door behind him. That damn woman was at it again. If Liza's company was in the hole, how did she find all this money to buy out his stocks? He would not have it! Liza Scapolli needed to be stopped.

His mother had been informed that something was wrong in the stock market, and upon investigating, found Liza's name adding up slowly—which was why his mother had called to warn him. Sure, her call was at the inopportune moment, but she couldn't help that.

At the thought of Charley, he smiled. He didn't like that she might be on the rebound from Max. If they continued on the path they'd been before he'd left, wouldn't he just be taking advantage of her again? He would and he knew it. Just like that night...

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

The desire in Charley's eyes flitted through his mind, and he groaned. How in the hell was he supposed to resist her? Besides, wasn't this what he wanted?

Her kisses were like hot honey, melting his body quicker than any woman had done before. She was everything he'd dreamed about, and more. Tonight he'd come clean and tell her the truth ... he'd been in love with her for quite a while.

Two swift knocks pounded on the door, interrupting his reverie. His mother bustled inside, wringing her hands against her stomach. "Damieno, what are we to do?"

"Mother, I can't control the shareholders of the company. If they choose to sell their stock to Liza, there's nothing I can do."

"Stop her somehow. Make a deal with her ... I don't care what, but do *something*."

He ran his fingers through his hair, then remembered the way Charley had touched him. A smile loosened the tension pulling at his mouth.

"Damien? Are you paying attention?"

He snapped his gaze to his mother. "Of course I am."

"Then quit looking like you're in Dreamland."

Yes, Dreamland with Charley, naked, rolling playfully between the sheets...

"There you go again with that far away look." His mother huffed and folded her arms across her chest. "Don't you care about the family's company?"

"Of course I care."

"Then pay attention. We have to figure out what we can do."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He nodded, then scooted around his desk and sank in his black leather chair. He leaned forward, linking his fingers and resting them on the desk, trying really hard to concentrate. Charley's passionate face kept returning. Their talk could definitely not be put off any longer.

Tonight would be the night for confessing, and anything else that happened between them that might bring pleasure. Then tomorrow he could organize his thoughts and think of a way to stop Liza.

He returned his gaze to his mother.

"What's so wrong with bringing her on as a partner," his mother was saying. "We could write the contract up so she'd only get forty-eight percent of the stock."

He scowled. "No. I won't have her back in my life, trying to steal ideas from me again."

"It might not be that way now."

He arched an eyebrow and titled his head. "What way do you think it will be, then? Haven't you heard the saying, once a bitch, always a bitch?"

"*Damieno*. Watch your mouth in front of your mother," she snapped.

He wanted to laugh, but refrained. His mother had been raised from the old school, and that was how she'd always act. Perhaps it's why she made such a great businesswoman.

"Please forgive me, Mother, but when speaking about *that woman*, my tongue gets carried away." He shrugged. "An old habit, I suppose."

"I have an idea." She walked around the desk to his side and reached over to click on the computer. "Look up the rest

of the shareholders she hasn't swayed yet, and call an emergency meeting. Maybe then, we'll figure out what can be done to stop this madwoman."

He nodded and clicked on the program holding their addresses. "Brilliant idea."

She nudged him with her elbow. "Yeah, I'm surprised you didn't think of it first."

"I've had other things on my mind." He smiled again when his thoughts turned to Charley. He couldn't help it. Love did crazy things to him.

His mother leaned forward and cupped his chin, turning his head to look at her. Narrowed eyes studied his. Finally, a smile stretched across her mouth. "You're in love, aren't you?"

He laughed, pulling away to look back at the computer screen. "Yes, Mother. I can't lie to you."

"Who is she?"

He paused his hand and stared blankly ahead, only Charley's face in his mind. "She's my next-door neighbor."

His mother gave a hearty laugh. "So Michelle was right. When do I get to meet her?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Should we wait until we get this mess cleaned up with Liza first?"

"Yes, but you better hurry. With news such as this, I can't wait much longer."

Back at his screen, there was a blur again, only thinking of tonight with Charley. After their talk, he'd continue where they'd left off earlier. Then, he'd take her to the point they'd been after the Christmas party. This time, he'd make damned

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

sure she didn't call out another man's name.

## Fourteen

*Wear his clothes / Surprise Intimacy.*

How did she get so lucky? The man she'd grown close to as a best friend was now within her grasp. She'd thought he'd been hot when she moved in next to him, but his sexist attitude had put her off. Somehow he'd changed. Or had she?

And what about Max? Why was it so easy to dismiss him from her mind? Had she known all this time he wasn't the right guy for her? She'd never once been comfortable around him, stumbling over her words and causing him bodily harm. Damien had been right. The perfect man for her would be the one she could be herself with when she was around him. Damien Giovanni fit that mold.

Of course, it didn't hurt that he'd been so attentive, so loving, caring, and thoughtful. He'd really listened to her, shared in her sorrow, and made her laugh when she needed uplifting. Best of all, she hadn't messed up his life as she'd done to the others.

And what about the point she was trying to prove to her co-workers? She'd failed the 10 Ways ... or had she? Most everything she tried on Max and screwed up, Damien was doing to her—and succeeding.

Damien had melted her heart.

She smiled. What her co-workers said at the office didn't matter. Damien was the only person who mattered.

The rest of the evening flew by in a blur. She tried watching the television, but her thoughts kept returning to

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Damien. She cracked open her favorite book, but the words ran together like watercolors in a rainstorm. She really wasn't hungry for food ... just for Damien. The passion he'd stirred inside her still burned hot, and just thinking about his hands on her made her tingle in the most unimaginable places.

She promised she'd stay in his house, but she wanted to bathe before he came back. She searched for another set of house keys, and when she found them, she left his house, locking the door behind her.

Rushing to her bathroom, she then turned on the water to fill up her tub, testing the temperature with her hand until it was perfect. She poured her favorite berry scented bubbles in then undressed.

She adjusted her body in the warm bath and turned off the water. Eyes closed, she leaned her head against the tiled wall. Images of what she and Damien would be doing in just a little while shifted through her mind and her body.

Soon, different images appeared—images of the night of the Christmas party. Her memory broke through the fog and she remembered him bringing her home. He'd carried her to her room and laid her down. She'd begged him to stay with her then kissed his fingers.

She opened her eyes in surprise. *I did that?* Rubbing her forehead, she tried to remember more. They had started kissing, almost like they did earlier tonight. His mouth had been like heaven, and his tongue mingled seductively with hers. She'd taken his hand and placed it on her breast.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She bolted up, the water splashed over the edge of the tub. *I did that, too?* She smiled when the evening's events rushed to her memory.

He'd taken off her dress, ran his hands over her body, kissed her breasts ... and more. Relaxing back in the tub, she closed her eyes again and recalled the earth-shattering experience he'd given her when he kissed other parts of her body. When his tongue did crazy things between her legs, her body had exploded with pleasure.

Hmmm ... and she remembered whispering his name—

Once again, she bolted up in the tub. *I called out Max's name!*

Groaning, she covered her face with her wet hands. Why had she done something so stupid when she should have known perfectly well who'd been kissing her body? It had to be that blasted champagne.

She held her breath and sank under the water. The warmth of the liquid surrounded her, but didn't clear her conscience. Was it any wonder Damien had left her bed so quickly? And she didn't blame him one bit for leading her to believe she'd slept with Max. Served her right for being such a drunken fool.

When her lungs began to burn, she poked her head out of the water and breathed in gulps of air. She wiped the bubbles off her face and relaxed her head against the wall again.

Had he forgiven her? He must have, or he wouldn't have kissed her so passionately earlier tonight. She smiled. She'd make sure tonight he knew what man she made love to.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

The bath water cooled and she climbed out, wrapping a towel around her. Tonight, she'd look her best. There had to be a sexier dress than the one she wore at the Christmas party and the one she wore for Max's date.

But as she searched frantically through her closet, looking for that special dress, she realized she didn't have any more. She'd have to wear one of the two dresses she'd previously worn. Yet the dress she had for the party held bad memories. That night she'd called out another man's name. On the other hand, she couldn't wear the dress she wore when she went out with Max ... although Damien had told her she'd looked good enough to eat that night.

She smiled. Yes, he liked that dress, but she couldn't wear it. He wasn't second best ... he was *the* best.

*Way Number Seven—wear his clothes.*

She laughed. Yes. And *Way Number Eight*—surprise intimacy. She could do them both on Damien.

But she'd have to go back over to his house to find what to wear unless...

She hurried out to her front room. The shirt he'd brought over the other day still lay across the arm of her couch. She picked it up and checked what needed fixing. The top button dangled on one thin thread. She snapped it off and placed it on the coffee table. Dropping her towel, she slipped his shirt on. It hung down to her knees, and the long sleeve fell way past her fingers. She rolled them up to her elbows. Since the top button had been removed, the next button hit right in the middle of her breasts. She grinned. Perfect.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She rushed back into her bedroom to look for her sexy black lace panties. When she slid them up her legs, a naughty thrill ran through her. Soon, it would be his hands touching her in that sensitive place.

As she applied her make-up, she tried not to overdo it, but still she wanted to make her eyes stand out. Puckering her lips, she rubbed on red lipstick, matching the red shirt. The tie holding her ponytail was the next to go, and she fluffed her hair with her fingers, then squirted a little hairspray to hold it in place. Lastly, she sprayed berry-scented perfume over her body.

Stepping back from the mirror, she tried to get a look at the whole view. She wasn't exactly the sexy type of woman, but Damien made her that way.

She slipped on high-heeled red shoes, and hurried next door to his townhouse to wait. Her heart thundered underneath his shirt, but with excitement, not nerves. She couldn't remember dating a man without her nerves shaking out of control, but tonight there was none of that. Anticipation had replaced it.

For the first half hour, she played with the television remote. When that didn't calm her, she paced the floor. Midnight neared, and her pacing quickened. After fifteen minutes, she'd resorted to chewing her nails as she stared out the window. Where was he? Why hadn't he called?

There were already two candles on his table, and she lit them, preparing the mood.

She found a bottle of wine in his cupboard, opened and sipped it. Crackers and cheese were the only things she could



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

find to snack on, but as the minutes ticked by, her enthusiasm dropped. Had he changed his mind? Perhaps he'd just told her he'd be back to make her feel better.

She shook her head. That wasn't like Damien. He'd confront her face-to-face no matter what the problem.

At twelve-thirty, she walked over to the candles and blew at the flames, extinguishing their effect. The tightness in her chest weighed her down, made her weary. At the same time, she worried something terrible had happened to him.

Kicking off her heels by the edge of the sofa, she slid her bare feet along the carpet, relaxing in the comfort it provided for her crunched toes. She'd never understand why high-heels were invented. A man must have created them, not caring if they killed a woman's feet.

She walked over to the kitchen table and put away the crackers, then wrapped the cheese in plastic. She took one last sip of wine before placing it in the refrigerator with the cheese.

Soft, low music from the stereo had been playing for over an hour now, so she walked over and turned it off. She sighed, regret flowing through her with a bitter reminder of another failed night. It could have been perfect. So what happened?

She turned out the few lights and moved over to lock the door. The chain was cold and heavy in her hand, and when she pressed her forehead against the door, the night's chill came through the wood. Such a change from how warm she'd been earlier, eager to make her body's temperature even hotter.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Just as she slid the chain into the slot, there was a knock. She jumped, and her heart nearly leapt from her chest. She placed her hand over her bosom to calm the frantic beating.

"Yes?"

"Charley, it's me."

She breathed a sigh of relief. Quickly, she unlatched the door and opened it. The porch light wasn't bright, and shadows disguised Damien's face. He'd flung his black leather jacket over his shoulder, hanging from his finger.

His gaze moved over her slowly, and once again, excitement built inside of her.

A lazy grin touched his mouth. "Damn, you look good in my shirt. Did I interrupt something?"

She chuckled. "Yes. Can't you tell I'm just about ready to curl up in bed with a good book?"

He stepped closer until he was a breath away. She looked into his dreamy eyes.

He cupped her chin, staring at her lips. "Lucky book."

She shrugged. "I thought I'd been stood up. When a man tells a woman a time, he'd better stick to it."

"The meeting ran later than I'd thought." His thumb stroked her bottom lip. "Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, as long as you do something for me."

"What's that?" His voice deepened, causing chills to run down her spine.

"Come inside. Standing here with the door open is going to freeze parts off our bodies I'd rather have kept on."

He laughed. She stepped back for him to enter, then shut the door behind him. He threw his jacket over the small table

and took her in his arms. She gasped when he pulled her body up against his.

"Are you still cold?" he asked.

She nodded slowly.

"Do you want me to change that?"

Her heart raced so fast she thought he'd be able to see the front of the shirt move, or at least feel it against his own chest. Her breath quickened with excitement. "Only if you want to."

A smile touched his mouth before he lowered it to hers. When he kissed her, she threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly so he wouldn't leave. He cradled her in his arms, meeting her demanding kisses with his own. When his tongue slipped inside, she suckled it lightly. He groaned and cupped her bottom, positioning her hips against his arousal, then pressed it into her.

A deep moan escaped her and she moved her hips against him with an urgent appeal. He growled, kissing her harder, faster, more passionately. She couldn't believe the animal lust ripping through her. She wanted him now.

But her conscience dictated differently, telling her they needed to talk first.

*Talk? Later. Now's the time to make love.*

Her body was ready, obviously his was too, and she didn't know how much longer she could wait before she ripped off his clothes.

But her conscience pounded in the base of her skull, reminding her of the confession she'd planned to give.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Reluctantly, she broke the kiss and tilted her head back.  
"Damien?"

His mouth wandered down her neck, teasing the sensitive skin on her collarbone with his tongue. "Hmmm..."

"We should talk first."

"We should?" His hand slid from her buttocks up her waist, then cupped her breasts. She moaned.

"Yes. There's something I need to tell you."

His kiss slowed to pecks before he finally stopped. He kept her in his hold and raised his head. "And there's something I need to tell you."

She stepped away, taking his hand and leading him to the sofa. He switched on a lamp before sitting next to her. She squinted from the sudden light, so he reached over and dimmed it.

He opened his arms and she cuddled against him. They'd done this a few times as friends, but it was different this time. They were going one step farther in their relationship. It felt good. Right.

He cupped her chin and tilted it up. "What did you want to tell me, *mí amore*?"

"I remember what happened the night I was drunk."

His eyes widened. "You do?"

"Yes. As much as you tried to sway me, I know it was you. You were the one making my body come alive."

He smiled but didn't speak.

She continued. "I want to apologize for sighing Max's name, when you were the man igniting my body with passion."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

I can't believe I couldn't see what was in front of me the whole time."

His eyes widened even more. "Really?"

She nodded. "I don't know why I said Max's name. I'd been dreaming of kissing you for quite a while even before that night."

His expression relaxed when he smiled. "Promise?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me before now?"

She shrugged. "Because once you became my friend, I figured you weren't interested in me any other way."

He grinned. "And because you thought I couldn't commit to one woman?"

She chuckled. "Yes, I'll admit, I thought you were a player." She crinkled her forehead. "You aren't, are you?"

"I *was* a player, but not anymore. Lately, I've wanted more. I want one woman to come home to every day. I want only one woman in my bed, now."

She smiled. "What changed your mind?"

"I wasn't looking for a relationship, Charley. Being with all those others protected me from money-hungry women like my ex."

"What happened? I mean, she had to have done something to make you that way."

"Liza Scapolli is not a very nice woman. Of course, I didn't know that at the time. She was only after me for one thing—to collect information about GIO Products to take back to her lover who was creating his own company, Herbal Sensations."

She stroked the side of his face and he cuddled against her hand. "How awful."

He kissed her palm. "That wasn't the worst of it. I caught her in bed with my so-called best friend."

She sucked in a quick breath and frowned. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Damien." She cupped his face again. "That's just terrible."

He nodded. "The man she slept with was Max."

A building falling on top of her couldn't have struck her as hard as his statement. Her heart went out to him, aching for all the pain she'd inadvertently caused him. "I can't believe it. Max?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me before now?"

His fingers threaded through her hair and he pulled her face closer to his. "I didn't want you to think the only reason I disapproved of Max was because of my past revenge. If you remember right, you were not very fond of me at that time."

She shrugged. "True."

His thumb stroked her bottom lip. "Now let me ask you. What about Max? Are you over him?"

She lowered her gaze to his neck. She touched the top button on his shirt. "To be honest with you, I don't think I was ever really into melting his heart. At the time, I was angry with Amanda for suggesting I couldn't keep a man in my life longer than three months. Max was a challenge. Plus I wanted to prove to myself I *could* keep a man."

"What about me?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She met his stare again.

He continued. "What am I to you? A challenge? A friend?"

"A friend, yes, but so much more than that. You're not a challenge, yet I wouldn't mind seeing how far we could take our relationship."

He ran his fingers through her hair near her ear. "What do you want now?"

She smiled. "I don't want to be just your friend anymore." She slid her hands around and cupped the back of his head, pulling him closer. "I want what you want. Tonight. Now."

## **Fifteen**

Damien's mouth covered hers, ending their conversation. Now, and for the remainder on the night, she wanted their only form of exchange to be in the physical sense. She wanted every exciting tingle shooting through her body right now to race through his. She wanted to be the woman who'd brand his memory forever.

Closing her eyes, she enjoyed stroking, then sucking his tongue as it entered her mouth. She made herself comfortable on his lap as she clutched his wide shoulders and caressed his muscles. He was one fine specimen.

He cupped her face, tilting her head with his as he deepened the kiss. His large hands moved down her neck, over her shoulders to rest on her back. He pulled her closer, and she linked her arms around his neck.

His hand moved again to her leg. When his hot palm made contact with her bare skin, she gasped. He slid it up and caressed her thigh.

Moisture gathered between her legs, and she relished the sensations flowing through her. He circled his hand up and over one cheek of her buttock and squeezed. A tiny whimper tore from her throat and her body burned for more.

Beneath her, he moved, but didn't break the kiss. He lifted her from the couch, cradling her body against his as he walked in the direction of his room. Once inside, he glided her down his length until her feet rested on the plush carpet.



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Damien pulled away far enough to grasp her shoulders, his gaze wandering down at her chest. He shook his head.

"Damn, woman. You're sexy as hell."

Happiness burst in her chest and tears pooled in her eyes. "Oh, Damien," she said with a tight voice, "you have no idea what that does to me."

"Hopefully the same thing it's doing to me." He traced his finger over her collarbone, then alongside the deep opening. When he passed over the curve of her breast, she gasped. Her body trembled for him to fulfill her ache, but for now, he seemed only interested in teasing. It made her want him more.

Her breathing intensified the longer he toyed with the shirt, touching between her breasts every so often. She wanted to grab his hand and push it to her breasts, but she didn't. She'd wait until he was ready.

Then his other hand moved to join the first, his fingers tracing her skin just inside her shoulder. She closed her eyes, fighting for control as she clenched her hands at her side.

Finally, his fingers moved, but not far enough. Her quick breaths grew ragged, and she inhaled sharply when he opened the shirt farther ... but it still wasn't what she wanted. She concentrated on the path his fingers took, igniting her skin with out-of-control tingles.

The sound of his pants rustling made her open her eyes just in time to see him kneel in front of her. She grasped his shoulders as he leaned in and pressed his lips to the exposed skin between her breasts. She moaned.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

His lips lingered, but he moved his head back and forth, nudging the material apart. The closer his mouth came to the spot on her body that cried out for him, the quicker her breaths grew.

His tongue darted out, wetting her skin, and her knees nearly buckled. She clung tighter to his shoulders to support her weight. She itched to cup his face and guide him to her breast, but she refrained.

Both of his hands held her breasts now, and she sighed heavily. Through the material of the shirt, his finger and thumb played with her hardened nipples. He moved his mouth to kiss each one, exciting her that much more.

He stroked his thumb on the inside of her breast, slipping through the opening as he slowly pulled it wider. His mouth followed, pressing feathery kisses along her skin. He was almost there. She held her breath, the anticipation driving her crazy.

He rubbed his face over her breasts, and in the process, moved the shirt away from one. Once her nipple popped into his view, he stroked his lips over it, his tongue following. Her body quivered and she released the deep moan she'd been holding.

She arched into his mouth. He suckled gently, circling his arms around her body as he held her in place. Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the hot, moist sensations like a humid night on a tropical island when nothing mattered except the feel of his mouth on her body. But soon, his mouth left and she looked at him.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He stood and unhooked her wrists from his neck, sliding them down to the buttons on his shirt.

She smiled. "My turn?"

He nodded, his mouth quirked in a grin.

Although he had taken his time with her, she didn't think she had the same control. She fumbled with each stubborn button. Finally, she lost her patience and ripped the shirt open, buttons flying through the air and clinking to the floor. Deep laughter rumbled through his chest, but he remained still and allowed her to undress him.

Before the shirt touched the floor, she bent her head and kissed his chest, brushing her lips across his smooth skin as her hands followed. *This is wonderful.*

She licked at a nipple, and he grasped her shoulders. It was good to know he liked this, too. But she couldn't be as patient as he had been. Her hands seem to take on a mind of their own and wandered over his torso, and then down over his tight stomach. She moved them behind and squeezed his muscular buttocks quickly before bringing them back around to the front. When she grazed his belt and cupped his huge length, he groaned and pushed her back.

"Let's move this to the bed. Now."

It surprised her to hear how deep his voice vibrated, but it also excited her to know he was as turned on as she. Linking her fingers through his, she pulled him back toward the bed. Her legs bumped the mattress and she fell onto the softness, bringing him with her.

She wanted to scream. She wanted him to take her now.

\* \* \* \*

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Damien wrapped her in his arms and kissed her mouth. The urgency in her kiss turned his libido up a notch, and he matched the strokes of her demanding tongue. He found the buttons to undo the shirt and yanked it apart to fully bare her chest. But he didn't break the kiss to see her beauty. Instead, he let his hands do the looking as he cupped her.

She arched against his palms, and he moved his hands around quickly, caressing her hardened nipples. Her increasing moans made him want to do more ... made him want to make her cry out his name in passion. She squirmed against his leg, and through the parting of the shirt, her womanly heat touched him. His erection jumped with excitement.

Hastily, he ripped off the shirt she wore. He gazed at her nakedness. Inhaling deeply, he touched her pointed nipples with his knuckles. "Charley, you literally take my breath away."

She moaned again and grabbed a hand, placing it over her left breast. "Can you feel the crazy beat of my heart? You make me breathless, too."

He gazed over her passion-laden face, down the curves of her breasts, over her flat stomach to rest upon the delicate black lace trying to hide his treasure. Her thighs parted and he smiled.

Without taking his focus off her sexy panties, he trailed his fingers down her body until they hooked inside the elastic. Slowly, he pulled them down, exposing her curls. But he planned on doing more than just view.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He tossed her panties on the floor then traced his fingers over her. She opened her legs further, making it easier for him to slip a finger inside her.

She growled and threw her head back on the bed, clutching the sheets beneath her. He swallowed, moistening his dry throat, reminding himself he had to take things slow. Even without the alcohol, she could be so passionate. He wanted to savor every moment and bring her to the edge and back as many times as he could before he lost himself in her sweet, hot center.

He slid in one finger, then two. Her hips started a rhythm, bucking against him as her moans amplified. It took all of his willpower just to maintain his own control. The passionate, abandoned doe-eyed gaze on her face looked so damn sexy, and her body begged to be tasted.

With his other hand, he moved it back up to her breasts, teasing the nipple with his fingers as he pinched lightly. He leaned up and licked the tip of one breast, rubbing it across his tongue before sucking it fully in his mouth.

She grasped his face and moved his head from one breast to the other. She kept the slow and easy rhythm with her hips, making love to his hand, controlling her own desire and bringing him along on a journey of what seemed like self-discovery.

She watched him devour her nipples. He loved the feel of their texture against his tongue, and the scent of berries surrounding him. Her breasts tasted like they smelled, he knew the rest of her would, too.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

Leaving her breasts, his lips traveled underneath each mount, over her ribcage, then down her flat stomach. Her fingers threaded through his hair, guiding his head. But when it neared her pelvis, she froze. Her breaths quickened with each second he hesitated.

He brushed his lips over her curls. Her womanly scent was stronger, and definitely smelled of berries.

She held her breath. He withdrew his fingers and opened her legs wider. Her juices flowed thickly inside of her, and his mouth turned dry again. He swallowed hard and moistened his lips.

His heart hammered faster. Pushing his finger in her one last time, he withdrew and brought it to his mouth and tasted. He glanced at her. Her eyes were darker, her lips parted as her tongue darted out to moisten them.

He couldn't take anymore. He had to taste her. Now.

Bending his head, he pressed his mouth to her, and at the same time, slipped his tongue inside.

"Oh God! Damien ... Damien ... yes..."

As she ground her hips against his face he clamped his hands to her hips to keep them steady, driving his tongue in and out. He groaned. *Heavenly.*

Not able to get enough, he hooked her legs over his shoulders and pulled her against him tighter. He lavished, suckled, and leisurely stroked with his tongue, and although her moans increased from the pleasure he gave, the aching stiffness in his pants became very uncomfortable. Something needed to be done and fast.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

When her cries heightened, he quickened the rhythm with his tongue until her muscles throbbed around him. He kept his tongue inside her until she sighed his name again and her body relaxed.

Leaving the bed, he yanked off his pants, flipping off his shoes and socks as fast as he could. A lazy smile touched her face while she watched. Her body hadn't moved from the relaxed position. He fumbled in his back pocket for his wallet, then extracted a condom package.

Urgency took over, making his hands shake as he ripped it open.

"Come here and let me help you with that," she purred, in a deep voice that didn't sound anything like the Charley he knew.

He knelt on the bed next to her. She leaned up on her elbow and took the condom away from him, but tossed it to the floor. "We don't need this. I'm on the pill."

Her gaze fastened to his arousal. The smile on her face stretched, and then she licked her lips.

*Oh, no! Not now, not when I could explode at any moment.*

She inclined her head, her mouth hovering above him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, waiting for impact. Her fingers stroked him, and he shuddered. He must remain in control no matter what she did. But when her hot tongue touched the tip of him, he groaned so deep it nearly shook his whole body. Then her mouth surrounded him. At that point, he knew he had to stop her.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Pulling out, he bent over her, laying her back on the bed as he covered her body with his. She parted her legs, and in one quick motion, he pushed inside. She cried out, and the magical feeling consuming him caused him to join in.

He devoured her mouth with his, and she returned his insistent kisses. As she wrapped her legs around his waist, he pushed deeper into her. His chest tightened, and at the same time, his erection ached for relief. He held back as long as he could as he moved his hips against hers, letting her take him to heaven.

When he couldn't control himself any longer, he threw back his head and let out a loud groan, finding his release of satisfaction. His life force seeped from every pore until finally he slumped and rested his face in her neck. His heart beat an erratic rhythm next to hers. Each unsteady breath mingled with the sweetness that seemed to surround Charley, until their breaths slowed to normal.

He smiled and kissed her. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled to his side, bringing her with him, still joined. She tilted her head back and met his stare, pleasure evident by her wide smile.

"I thought this moment would never happen," she whispered.

"You've been dreaming of making love to me?"

She nodded. "You're the perfect man. Not only are you a great friend, you're loving, kind, and very generous with your time. You accept me the way I am, and yet you still continued to be my friend." She shrugged. "But I thought I couldn't have you."



Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'm all yours now."

He covered them with a blanket and snuggled closer. His heart sang with love, but now wasn't the right time to tell her. After all, she might think his words were only because of the great sex. He'd loved her as a friend, and realized that loving her as a girlfriend satisfied him. He liked this comforting feeling. He never wanted it to end.

\* \* \* \*

Charley rolled against a warm, hard body and sighed with pleasure. *Damien*. Keeping her eyes closed, she skimmed her hand over the curves of his tight, smooth skin and the muscles in his buttocks jumped underneath her palm. Funny how she could affect him even in sleep. She stretched her lips in a lazy grin.

Peeking underneath her lashes, she gazed at the gorgeous man beside her laying on his chest. His head rested on the pillow, his face turned toward her. His long, dark eyelashes had a slight curve, and his mouth parted as flowing breaths exited. Damn, he was sexy.

She traced the tip of her finger over his lips—lips that had been over every inch of her body in fulfilled exploration. Warmth extended in her chest, moving in rapid anticipation for their next session of gratifying lovemaking. Her nipples puckered in response, but she had to control her hunger for the man who could excite her like no other had done before. There was no time this morning for expressing her love in a physical sense. Work had to be her top priority.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss across his brow. He didn't stir, just continued his deep breathing ... although there was a slight lift to his mouth. She smiled. Hopefully, his dreams were pleasant and filled with her.

Using great caution, she slid out of bed and padded into the bathroom. A shower helped awaken her, and as she rubbed the soapy sponge over her body, images of last night filled her thoughts. She turned down the hot water, praying the cool spray would relieve the desire flaring inside her. That's all she needed was to go to the news station hot and bothered.

Within an hour, she was dressed and ready for work. Damien still lay in the same position, his breathing deep and steady. Had she exhausted him as he'd done her? She tiptoed to the side of the bed, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. He stirred and rolled on his back, stretching an arm over his head on the pillow.

The sheet draped over his lower half, but displayed his broad chest. The description *Italian Spice* fit him well. He was superb. Very little hair sprinkled across his front, tapering in a line down his stomach and disappearing under the covering. She didn't have to move the sheet to know what was underneath. Pure magnificence.

She found herself grinning like a kid at a carnival, and between her legs moistened once again. Cursing her body for doing this to her *now*, she turned and hurried out of the room before she allowed passion to take over and she ripped off her clothes to crawl back in bed.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

As she walked out to her car, a whistle sprang to her lips, her chest bubbling with happiness. Had she ever been this giddy before? No. She'd been too distracted with the other men, worrying if she'd injured them or not. But all this time with Damien, she hadn't harmed him once. Perhaps her accident-prone days with men had come to an end.

This morning's latest breaking news story kept the office jumping with projects and phone calls. Two incidents had happened in town, both the top stories of the day. She'd been on the phone contacting witnesses and searching for more leads about the car jacking.

The message light on her phone blinked, but she couldn't check to see who'd called. Was it Damien? She grinned. Yes, it had to be. He'd always been considerate enough to call, and he'd understand why she couldn't return his call right away.

During lunch she found a moment to relax, so she called him on her cell, but received his voice-message instead. On impulse, she looked up the number for GIO Products and dialed them. When she asked for Damien, they informed her he was in a meeting.

She laid her head back against the couch in the break room, creased her forehead and clicked her phone off. He'd never really told her what he did at GIO, but he must be a supervisor of some sort. It could explain how he had enough money to redecorate his apartment.

She rolled her neck, releasing the tight muscles due to the stressful morning. The door squeaked open. Max entered and headed for the soda machine, not noticing her curled against the corner of the couch. He looked nice today, which wasn't

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

any different from how he looked every day, but her heart didn't leap like it used to. Her hands didn't moisten with the thought of talking to him. She smiled. Now she could treat him like she treated all of her co-workers.

After the soda can rolled from the machine and into his hand, Max straightened and turned. When his eyes landed on her, he stopped. At first, his eyes widened, then a smile replaced his worried expression.

"What a busy morning, huh?"

She nodded. "It's been a while since we've been this hectic."

"At least we'll have plenty to cover for the five o'clock news."

"True." She swung her legs to the floor and stood. "I've been meaning to ask, how are your eyes?"

He chuckled. "Fine."

"I really worried I'd gouged them out or something."

He leaned against the counter as he opened his can. "No, it's nothing that awful."

"I'm so sorry ... I can't believe I hurt you like that."

He shrugged. "It's my own fault. I should have known to block."

She walked over and stood beside him. "So you're not angry with me?"

"Of course not."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Good. I'd hate to think we'd just become friends and I've upset you already."

He shook his head and playfully punched her shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Charley."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She smiled and turned toward the door. "Gotta go. Catch you later."

As she passed through the door, her heart lifted with relief. She'd actually carried on a normal conversation with him without stammering. And she'd actually left without bringing him any harm. Her luck must be improving.

She walked by Amanda's desk. Her co-worker leaned her elbows on her desk, her fingers rubbing her forehead. Long, red waves of hair blanketed around her face like a shroud.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Amanda looked up and smiled, although not fully. She swiped the hair away from her face. "Yes. Just a little tired from this morning's rush of events. How are you?"

"I'm exhausted, too."

Her co-worker picked up a piece of paper and handed it to her. "Got another story, but it's not pressing news. I thought you might want to take a look at it, anyway."

"Sure. I'll handle it." She turned to leave.

"Charley?"

She glanced over her shoulder.

"You look different ... there's a sparkle in your eyes I've not seen before." She tilted her head to the side. "Did you get lucky?"

Taken unaware, heat rushed to Charley's cheeks, embarrassment leaving her speechless.

Amanda threw back her head and laughed. "You can tell me all about it later."

On her way back to her desk, Charley fanned her face, praying nobody else noticed. Although, she didn't mind

bragging about the fact that she and Damien were an item now, she needed to prepare herself. Her co-workers would soon ask questions, and she didn't need her face to shine like a beacon.

She sank into her chair and set the paper in front of her. She glanced at the typed words, not really reading it until two words made her pause. GIO Products. She frowned and leaned closer.

It looked as if the vice president of one of their competitors, Herbal Sensations, was buying up GIO's stocks. Her heart quickened as her gaze flew over the typed words. But nothing made sense. She'd have to do some poking around into the story to see what was really going on. It looks as if she'd have to call...

Liza Scapolli.

She let out a frustrated groan and threaded her fingers through her hair. Liza was Damien's ex-girlfriend. Could she carry on a conversation with the woman who'd broken his heart so many years ago? And to think the woman betrayed him and slept with Max. How awful.

She turned toward her computer and typed in a search for Herbal Sensations, then found Liza's phone number. From the Internet article, it seemed the company was started not too long after Liza and Damien had split, if she remembered her dates correctly. She arched an eyebrow. Damien had called her a scheming woman, so what were the odds Liza wanted more?

She gritted her teeth. Well, if she had anything to do with it, she'd make sure Liza was exposed as a corrupt woman.

Charley picked up the phone and dialed the number. After two rings, a soft voice answered. Charley cleared her throat.

"May I speak to Liza Scapolli?"

"This is she."

"Hi, I'm Charley Randall from San Diego's Channel Nine News. We got a tip about the power struggle between Herbal Sensations and GIO Products. If it's all right with you, we'd like to interview you."

"Pardon me? What did you say your name was?"

"Charley Randall with San Diego's—"

The woman on the other end gasped. "*Charley* Randall?"

"Um ... yes." She cleared her throat again. "As I was saying, if it's all right with you, I'd like to send a reporter out—"

"Why can't *you* interview me?"

Charley's mouth hung open. She'd never had someone ask her that. "Uh, well ... because I'm not a reporter. I'm the Research Producer. I just call to set up the interviews."

"What if I told you I won't talk to anyone but you?"

Her heart jumped to her throat. Why was this lady being so impossible? Did Liza know about her and Damien? What were the odds?

"Well, Ms. Scapolli, the only way we could conduct the interview is with a reporter and camera man. I'll be willing to talk to you, but I can't do the interview without my other team members. Do you understand?"

"So you wouldn't mind meeting me a half hour before the interview?"

"No, not at all."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Splendid. How about this afternoon sometime? Say about two?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall. One hour away. "That sounds fine. Where can I meet you?"

"How about Norman's Café on twelfth street? It's just up the street from the company building, anyhow."

"Good. I'll see you at two."

She hung up the phone and blinked. Why did this woman want to meet with her first? Her heart raced. Now what?



## **Sixteen**

The minutes ticked by in slow motion. Charley fidgeted in her chair and glanced at the clock much too often. What did Damien's ex want to talk to her about? The uncertainty would drive her crazy.

To keep her mind off Liza, she turned to her Internet to look up GIO Products to learn more about them. The name Giovanni leapt off the page and made her pause. Any relation to Damien, perhaps?

She leaned forward and continued to read. When she came across the president of the company's name, she gasped. Damien? It couldn't be! He'd lied to her?

Suffocation tightened her chest. She rubbed the ache beginning in her forehead as she tried to remember the few times they'd talked about GIO Products. Maybe he just figured she already knew.

She let out a deep sigh, blowing her confusion out between her lips with it. Yes, that was it. He hadn't really lied to her ... he just thought she knew.

She hoped.

Reaching over to the phone, she picked it up and dialed GIO Products again, but asked to speak to the president of the company. The receptionist gave her to a sweet lady who said she was the Vice President, Bella Giovanni.

Charley tried to set up a time to interview her, but Bella said she let her son handle these things, and unfortunately,

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

he was in a meeting. The woman was kind enough to take down her name and phone number, though.

As the time for Liza's interview neared, Charley's stomach twisted in knots. Meeting this woman couldn't be any different than meeting any of the other people they'd set up for interviews—yet to tell her nervous system this was a different story.

She drove to the café alone. Her crew would meet her at Herbal Sensations in a half hour. Her heart knocked in an uneven rhythm, so she took big breaths, trying to calm herself. Ms. Scapolli probably just wanted to be reassured of what the news station would ask during their interview. But then why did the woman ask her to repeat the name Charley?

After finding a parking spot, she killed the engine and climbed out of her vehicle, clenching her hands the whole time. Reassuring herself everything would be all right didn't work. Nervous butterflies fluttered out of control in her stomach.

Three steps into the café, she stopped and looked around. Sitting at a table for two in the far corner of the room, a woman with long black hair and a body made for a goddess, raised her gaze and met Charley's. It had to be Liza Scapolli. The name fit the woman who slowly stood.

Taking a deep breath, Charley straightened her back and walked toward the other woman. "Liza Scapolli?"

The lady's smile stretched. "Charley Randall?"

Charley held out her hand in greeting. "Yes."

Liza's weak handshake lasted only a second before the other woman stepped away and slid into her chair. "It's nice

to meet you." She motioned to the empty chair. "Please have a seat. Would you like a drink?" Liza turned and waved at the waitress who hurried over to their table.

Charley clutched her purse to her stomach and sat. "Um, sure. Anything diet."

The waitress nodded then left.

Charley cleared her throat. "Ms. Scapolli, how do you know me?"

One of the woman's perfectly waxed eyebrows lifted. "You don't know?"

Releasing an uneasy chuckle, she shrugged. "Well, I know, I just didn't think *you* knew ... about..."

"You and Damien?"

Charley nodded.

Liza's sultry laugh floated through the air as she drew her finger around the rim of her iced tea glass. "I make it my business to know what's going on in Damien's life."

Charley's breath caught in her throat, jealousy closing in like cold fingers trying to choke her. Obviously, Liza still wanted to be part of Damien's life. But was it only for business dealings?

She tightened her grasp around the straps of her purse and swallowed against the cotton dryness in her mouth. "Are you aware my reporter will be asking you questions about your involvement with GIO Products? And the reason you have been buying stocks from a competitor's market?"

Liza's mischievous grin didn't leave her face even when she lifted the drink to her mouth and sipped. Her deep brown

eyes kept Charley's attention, but secrets lurked behind those depths.

*Do I really want to know about their past?* Could she handle the knowledge?

\* \* \* \*

Damien strolled out of the elevator with a whistle on his lips. As he moved toward his office, he realized he carried himself straighter today, and even had a slight bounce in his step. He tapped his fingers on the handle of his briefcase to the beat of the tune in his head—the same song he'd heard Charley sing that night he'd helped her fix dinner for Max. Love did crazy things to a man, and he'd never been happier.

Running errands this morning had kept him away from the office, but at least he could rest assured Liza couldn't sink her fangs into his throat again or the necks of his shareholders.

The lobby wasn't as crowded this afternoon, and he nodded to a few employees as he walked down the hall. The phone on his secretary's desk buzzed with a call, and she answered. When he neared, she stretched her hand out, palm forward, and stopped him.

"Can you please hold?" she asked the caller, then pressed the button. "Mr. Giovanni, your mother needs to see you as soon as possible."

He nodded. "I'll go right now." He turned on his heels and hurried to his mother's office, his smile stretching the closer he came. He'd not told his mother everything about the women in his life, and he couldn't wait to tell her now. His mother would love Charley and welcome her with open arms.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He knocked twice before opening the door a crack and peeking his head inside. "Are you decent?" He chuckled.

The dark haired woman's head snapped up from the files she'd been examining and met his stare. "Oh, Damieno, you're here." She placed a hand on her chest and sighed. Worry etched the soft lines of her creased forehead and her lips were pursed.

He stepped in and closed the door. "Mother? What's wrong?"

She pushed away from the desk and stood. Her brisk walk brought her in front of him within seconds, her hands wringing against her stomach. "I just don't know what to do."

He patted her shoulder. "What happened?"

"I think Lisa Scapolli is up to something different this time. A Producer from San Diego's Channel Nine News called this afternoon to make an appointment with me, but I told her you were the one to handle this."

Panic swelled within his chest and he frowned. "Handle what?"

"Somehow the media knows Liza is buying our stocks. I believe they want to see what she's up to, and I'm worried what that woman will say to reporters if given the chance."

Cold fear closed around his heart and squeezed. His mother didn't even know the half of it. Liza could stir up a hornet's nest even in the dead of winter ... with frozen bees, no less.

He grasped his mother's hands to stop their trembling. "I'll keep the news station away from us, I promise."

She shook her head. "I'm not worried about that. What frightens me is the very thought of that woman being interviewed by Channel Nine. If they called us, they'll certainly call her."

The beat of his heart worked overtime, hammering against his ribs like an Indian war drum, making it hard to breathe. "Mother? Do you remember the person from the news station who called?"

She shrugged. "A sweet woman who sounded fairly young. I think her name is Shirley Randolph or Shirley Raddon..." She scrunched her forehead and tapped her chin. Then her eyes brightened and she smiled. "No. The woman's name was Charley Randall."

"Damn it to hell!" He rushed out of the room toward his office. When he neared his secretary, he snapped, "Get me Herbal Sensations on the phone. I need to speak with Liza Scapolli. Immediately."

He hurried into his office and slammed the door. He tossed his briefcase on the desk and cursed again. *This can't be happening!* Just as he finally found a woman who could make him truly happy, he was in the brink of losing her—just because his greedy ex couldn't let go. Damn that Liza!

Running his fingers through his hair, he paced the length of the room. When his speakerphone buzzed, he ran to his desk and grabbed the handset.

"Mr. Giovanni? I have Mr. Jacobs on the line."

Damien swallowed hard. "Mr. Jacobs may I please speak with your associate, Liza Scapolli?"

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

The man on the other end cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mr. Giovanni, but Ms. Scapolli has stepped out. She's doing an interview with Channel Nine as we speak."

Damien slammed the phone on the receiver. "Son of a bitch." As fast as his fingers could punch in the numbers, he dialed Charley's office phone. After five rings it was answered, but the voice wasn't the woman he loved. "Is Charley there?"

"I'm sorry. She's out of the office. May I take a message?"

"Who's this?"

"Amanda."

He blew out a sigh between his teeth. "Amanda, this is Damien Giovanni. We met at the Christmas party the other night."

The woman laughed. "Yes, I remember. How can I help you?"

"I need to know where Charley's interviewing Liza Scapolli, the Vice President of Herbal Sensations. It's very important I'm at that interview."

"Well ... we usually like to interview each company separately—"

"Amanda, it's an emergency. Please, could you help me?" he pleaded frantically.

"Well ... all right. The interview's going to be in front of Herbal Sensation's building, but Charley was going to meet Ms. Scapolli in person at Howard's Café first."

"What time?"

"Ummm ... it looks like it's about that time right now."

"Thank you." He hung up and dashed out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Charley narrowed her eyes at the woman across the table from her and arched an eyebrow. "Ms. Scapolli, is Damien aware you're stalking him?"

Liza tilted back her head and released a throaty laugh. When she met Charley's stare, Liza shook her head. "Honey, you don't know what you're talking about. *Stalking* is not the correct word in this particular situation."

Charley rested her arms on the edge of the table and leaned forward. "Is it correct to assume, then, you *are* trying to take over GIO Products? Is that why you've been keeping a close eye on him?"

The woman let out another laugh that made Charley want to reach across the table and strangle her. Instead, she fisted her hands.

"Miss Randall, I believe you need to leave these kinds of questions for your reporter."

Charley scowled. "Then tell me why I'm here? Why did you want to meet with me in person?"

The other lady shrugged. "I wanted to see what I was up against."

She tilted her head. "Up against? What's that supposed to mean?"

The vicious smile on Liza's face widened. "That means I'm seeing what obstacles are standing in Damien's way."

"Why would you care? Your relationship with him is over. It ended seven years ago."

"True, but I'd still like to continue our business relationship."



Charley clenched her teeth. No matter what that woman called it, she still wanted Damien for herself, and Charley wasn't going to give up without a fight.

The waitress finally brought over Charley's drink, and she gulped it down, needing something to cool her temper. So what did Liza really want? To size her up? To see what kind of competition she was *up against*?

Sheesh!

She set her glass down on the table. "So, now that you've met me, what do you think?" After she asked, she inwardly cringed. Why in the hell did she ask such a stupid question? It was like being thrown out on the stage naked for everybody to gawk at. But in Liza's case, the woman would throw daggers. She opened herself up for ridicule, so now she had to grin and take it when it came.

Liza leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "What do I think? Honestly?"

*No, I want you to lie.* "Of course."

Liza took a deep breath. "Well ... I'm surprised Damien is attracted to someone like you. Although I think you're very sweet and you have a pleasant smile, the man I know wouldn't go out with such a modestly dressed woman, nor one so reserved."

Charley brought her hand up to the top button on her pink blouse and swallowed hard.

"He likes sexy women," Liza continued, "women who know how to flaunt what they have to get what they want." She shook her head. "You don't appear to be like that. Besides, Damien doesn't usually go out with quirky women. I've done

a little checking on you, and I've heard about your past relationships with men."

*Okay, maybe I do want you to lie to me.* Charley nodded. "In other words, you don't believe he'd go out with someone like me because I'm not ... like you?"

Liza flipped her hand in the air. "You could say that, I suppose. It's just hard to believe he'd settle for you."

"When he could have someone like you, right?" Charley scowled.

The other woman's light laughter sent sickening chills down Charley's spine. Damien was right. This woman was malicious, and very evil. If she wasn't representing Channel Nine right now, she'd take her outside and teach her a lesson in manners.

"Ms. Scapolli, thank you for your honesty. I'm sorry to have disappointed you." She took another big gulp from her soda then scooted away from the table. "But the truth is—I'm the woman with Damien right now, and I plan to keep it that way."

"Is that a warning, Miss Randall?"

Charley reached into her purse, pulled out five dollars and tossed it on the table. "Take it however you'd like." She forced her best smile. "Now, would you mind if I follow you over to your company to meet my crew?"

"Not at all." Liza threw a ten-dollar bill next to the other and stood.

As the model-type woman walked in front of her, Charley's blood boiled with hatred. Or was it jealousy? Liza was everything she wasn't. Tall, long legs, and a chest made for a

least two men to enjoy. Could Damien be happy with someone as plain as Charlene Randall?

When they walked out of the café, Liza turned to her. "Charley, I can see you really have deep feelings for Damien, but I think I should be the one warning you."

She arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because he goes through women like he does his boxers. You seem like such a nice woman, and he'll only break your heart."

Charley stopped beside her car and leaned against it. "Then why do you want him?"

"I told you. It's for a business relationship only."

"Uh-huh, so why don't I believe you? If you want him for just his company, why would you insist on eliminating the competition?"

Liza folded her arms across her chest. "If you really knew Damien, you'd know." She shook her head. "Charley, he's a secretive man."

She lifted her chin. "I think you have him all wrong. He doesn't hide anything from me."

One corner of the other woman's lips quirked upward. "I can promise you, he's hidden something from you. It's just his way."

Uncertainty shot through her mind again. *If given the chance, would he have told me about being president?* "I think we'd better get going, Ms. Scapolli, or we'll be late."

All the way to Herbal Sensations, Charley's temper simmered. Why did this woman have to come along and make her doubt everything? Last night with Damien had been

the best she'd ever had, and she assumed he'd enjoyed it just as much. But what if she wasn't good enough? What if she didn't meet all of Damien's expectations? He'd been with several women in the six months she'd known him and they were all like Liza.

And what if he did try to keep his profession from her?

She gripped the steering wheel tighter. Damn it! Why did she have to think this way? Liza was the villain—even Damien knew it. He'd explained what she'd done seven years ago, so what made her have doubts now?

She shouldn't. Liza had no hold over him. None whatsoever. She released a sigh and chuckled from relief.

By the time she arrived at Herbal Sensation's parking lot, the restriction had left her chest and she could smile easier. At least she didn't want to scratch the witch's eyes out.

Her crew had set up, and the reporter was ready to begin as soon as Liza added more makeup. Charley rolled her eyes. Like the woman needed more.

"Are you ready?" Charley asked.

Liza nodded.

"Now remember, this isn't live, so if there's something we ask that's out of line, we can cut it out of the final version."

"Thank you, Miss Randall, I'm aware of this."

"Okay." She clapped her hands and turned, but Liza placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I want you to listen really close to my interview. You might just learn something new." She winked.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Liza stepped away with the reporter. Charley scowled, and her stomach twisted with insecurity. That evil woman was at it again. Would she ever relent?

Soon the taping started and the questions were thrown out. The wind picked up and turned the weather to a bitter chill. Bundling her coat around her neck, Charley stood against a tree and listened to everything. Apparently, Liza assumed she should combine her company with GIO Products, but the owners of GIO were not complying to her wishes. That woman over dramatized everything, even drooped her lips into a pout.

Charley rolled her eyes. How pathetic.

"Ms. Scapolli," Tamara, the reporter asked, "why do you feel GIO Products should allow you to become their partner?"

Liza's gaze moved and rested on Charley.

Prickles ran up her spine. Something wasn't good. Her sickening stomach warned her.

An evil spark touched Liza's eyes and she gave a malicious grin. "Because seven years ago, Damien Giovanni and I created the idea for Herbal Sensations. Now that he's the President of GIO Products, I thought I should bring Herbal Sensations back home, so to speak."

Charley sucked in her breath. Could this be the secret Liza hinted about?

"Ms. Scapolli," Tamara continued, "why would Mr. Giovanni let you take ideas and start another company?"

Liza's focus remained on Charley. "Because after our divorce, it was my half of our assets."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

A gasp sprang from Charley's mouth and she quickly covered it with her hand. A sharp pain twisted her stomach as if someone had just socked their fist into her middle. Yet at the same time, an invisible knife tore into her heart. Tears swam in her eyes and a knot the size of Texas formed in her throat.

*Divorced?*

No, this couldn't be. Damien would have told her that.

From the parking lot, the squealing of tires pulled her thoughts from the interview and she glanced over her shoulder. Damien's black Porsche jerked to a stop and the door flew open. The man she realized she didn't really know jumped out and looked at her.

Her stomach rolled, and everything around her spun out of control. She placed a hand on her head to steady herself.

She couldn't talk to him. Not now. And not in front of Liza. She didn't want to hear the shrill of laughter from the devious woman, nor see the lying eyes of the man she loved.

\* \* \* \*

Oh, God. She knew.

Like a tidal wave, guilt flooded his soul and drenched him. Why hadn't he told her sooner? He'd known she wasn't anything like Liza, yet he still hesitated on being honest and giving his whole heart to her.

Damn him.

And damn Liza to hell!

Charley swayed against the tree, her hands holding her head as if it would burst. He rushed across the parking lot

and up the slope of green grass to her. Just as he neared, she opened her eyes and met his stare. Her face had turned chalky white, and his gut clenched.

"Go away," she whispered.

"Charley, we need to talk."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against the trunk of the tree. "Not now. I'm at work."

"*Mí amore*, let me take you to my car. You look like you're going to pass out."

"I'll be fine."

Her voice wavered, increasing the pain in his heart. "No you're not."

She peeked at him, then glanced over her shoulder to where the interview still took place.

"You're making a scene," she spat.

"I'm not, and you know it." He grasped her shoulders, but she yanked away. Her body swayed again, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her to his chest.

"Damien—"

"If you don't let me take you to my car, I'll cause a scene, and the camera will be on us instead of the witch in disguise talking to your reporter."

She brought her hands between their bodies and pressed against his chest. Her gaze rose to his, the fire in her depths nearly piercing through him.

"I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Why?"

"Because ... I need time to think about what I've just learned."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Big, soulful blue eyes, currently red-rimmed and puffy, pleaded with him, even as they filled with tears.

"I'm also afraid if we talk right now, I'm going to say something I'll regret later, because I'm not pleased with the way you've been so honest and open with me."

Fear slammed into his chest, weighing him down. He dropped his arms and stepped back. She braced her hands on the tree for support. God, he couldn't lose her. But he couldn't force her either.

He nodded. "I'll give you some space. But know one thing. I love you." His voice cracked from emotion building in his chest.

Gut-wrenching, shoulder-trembling sobs consumed her, slowly shredding his insides. With his heart dragging, he turned and walked to his car, hoping her sweet voice would call out and stop him. He opened the door and climbed in, but still he'd yet to hear her.

He closed the door. Tears stung his eyes when he started the engine. He glanced up the green hill to the tree. She wasn't there. He scoped the area, but couldn't see where she'd gone.

With a heavy chest and a knot in his throat, he pulled out of the parking lot and away from Charley.



## Seventeen

Charley curled up on the sofa, her knees pulled tight against her chest. She stared through swollen eyes across the room. Amanda had been generous enough to let her stay with her for a few days—a few lonely, soul-searching days.

The hours at work seemed to pass in slow motion, and when it was time to go home, her exhausted mind and body nearly dragged as she entered Amanda's apartment and to the couch. After two days, she decided to take some time off.

Damien hadn't tried to call her, and she hadn't been home since the day of Liza's interview. But he'd sent flowers and cards to her office, reminding her again that he loved her.

*Loved her?* How could he love her when he couldn't even be honest with her? Why didn't he trust her enough to tell her the truth? She'd bared her soul to him, showed him the accident-prone side to her existence, and still he couldn't be sincere. No, he didn't love her. Not like she wanted to be loved. Was that asking too much?

Amanda had returned from work an hour earlier, and was now out with some friends. Her co-worker had confessed that she and her husband hadn't been living together for over a month now. It certainly explained why Amanda had more of a carefree attitude about life lately. If a woman like Amanda couldn't hold on to a guy, what sort of chance did Charley have? Were all relationships doomed to end?

She lifted up on her elbow and swiped the hair off her forehead. She glanced around Amanda's front room; two

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

loveseats, one coffee table, bookcase holding a few novels, television and stereo, but nothing to keep her interest. She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Up until now, Damien had been the one keeping her busy.

Her heart clenched and she cursed her wayward mind. Why had she let him sweep her off her feet so easily? Did he only want to get her in the sack? She gritted her teeth. He'd been a player when she'd met him, so perhaps this was his method of seduction.

She stood, walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Nothing looked appetizing. Not even the chocolate cake doughnuts with nuts sprinkled in the icing sitting in the box on the counter.

Sighing, she pushed the refrigerator door closed, turned and walked back to the guest room she'd been staying in. She plopped down on the bed and glanced at the nightstand. She'd brought her journal from home and it lay next to the lamp.

Way Number Nine—Great memories. When you're together, make it memorable. Create memories by taking pictures or writing in a journal.

Tears formed in her eyes once again. As much as she'd cried lately, it was a wonder there was still enough liquid left in her body.

She picked up the journal and flipped open to a page. She skimmed over the words. It was the day she'd moved in and met her gorgeous neighbor for the first time. He'd offered to help with moving the heavier objects, showing off by lifting more things at once than the moving men had done.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Biting her bottom lip from the memory, she tried not to grin. She even remembered the gray shirt that clung to his muscles, and how she'd wanted to run her hands over them.

After her belongings were inside the townhouse and the moving men had left, Damien stayed to give further assistance. Immediately, she knew what he'd wanted. His sexual hints weren't that subtle, and the way his gaze devoured her body let her know exactly what was on his mind. At that moment, she'd taken him off her list of future interests.

She turned to another page. This was the day Tim had left. He'd accused her of not being serious in their relationship. He also mentioned how he wanted to live longer than thirty years.

Letting out a snort, she rolled her eyes. He'd always been overdramatic.

On a different page was the night she was almost mugged. While in Damien's protective arms after the incident, she'd been overcome with comfort. It was at that point she realized he'd make a good friend.

When had everything changed? When did her feelings change and she start thinking more about Damien than Max? When he kissed her and almost made love to her after the Christmas party? Or was it when he stood by her side to help prepare that disastrous cinnamon chicken dinner?

A sob tore from her throat and she buried her face in the pillow. Why did falling in love have to hurt so much? Was finding a man and keeping him longer than three months worth it?

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

She straightened and sat crossed-legged on the bed, then reached for a pen. After finding an empty page, she finished the story with Damien's lies by omission. She wrote about what Liza had said, and especially, what Damien had done—and what he hadn't told her. Tears fell faster the more she wrote, but the anguish in her heart lightened. By the time she finished, exhaustion weakened her body, like a great weight had been lifted.

The heartache was over. It was time to get on with her life, just as she'd done with the other men. She'd give herself another month, and then if she felt like it, she'd get back to finding Mr. Perfect.

\* \* \* \*

Damien leaned his elbows on the conference room table as he stared at the shareholders surrounding the oblong piece of furniture. Conversations moved around the room, many concerning Liza and Herbal Sensations. But he tuned it out and focused on his own problems—Charley and how to win her back.

Since Liza's interview with Channel Nine, he'd gone through his normal routine, taking it one day at a time. Emptiness consumed his heart and pain numbed his mind. He'd sent flowers with cards that simply said *I love you*. But she hadn't called or even acknowledged the gesture. He waited every day for her to come home from work, but she didn't. Her townhouse had stood empty for almost a week now. As each day passed, his heart broke a little more.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

He'd do anything to get her back, even beg on his knees if he thought it would help. Yet knowing Charley, that probably wouldn't be the key to melting her heart.

*Melting her heart.* A smile tugged on his lips, but he fought the urge. Whether she knew it or not, he'd been using the same Ten Ways with her that she'd been using for Max. They'd worked ... until Liza had opened her lying mouth.

Then again, it was his own fault Charley had been hurt. If he'd been honest with her from the beginning, none of this would have happened. But in the beginning, he hadn't wanted to give her his heart. Women were all alike—all like his ex-wife anyway.

Except for Charley.

She'd shown him there really were women out there who could love without knowing the size of a man's bank account. Women like Charley didn't come along every day, and now he was without her. Hopes of rekindling what they had were slim to none.

It'd been close to a week since he'd last seen her ... since he'd seen her big blue eyes filled with tears and the betraying look she threw at him. Pain twisted in his gut. Would he ever feel better?

Why couldn't he have treated her differently? Why did he have to compare her to all the women he'd dated? Hell, all those women were like his employees that he'd dismiss at the snap of his fingers and never think about again...

He broke out of his thoughts and straightened. *That's it!* Of course, it wouldn't solve his problem with Charley, but it

would disentangle this mess with Liza. For the first time in days, he smiled.

Clearing his throat, he drew the attention of the shareholders. "Gentlemen, I have a plan."

\* \* \* \*

"Sign on the dotted line." Damien pushed the legal agreement across his desk. "Everything is just as you requested. You'll work under me and my mother as the assistant Vice President of GIO Products."

Liza lifted her chin, and that damn Cheshire grin stretched across her lips as she picked up the pen and signed her name. "You don't know how happy you've made me, Damien. It's going to be wonderful working with you again."

He forced a smile. "After I had time to think about it, your offer made sense. Herbal Sensations is a great company, it just needed the extra backing. Now that I've bought it from you and Dale, we'll be able to give it the push it needs to rise to the top once again."

He pulled back their contract and set it to the side of his desk. "Now, you know you're working under me and my mother. You'll be like her assistant, but still be able to manage Herbal Sensations as if it were your own—just as per your stipulations upon selling."

She reached over and tapped his hand. "You made a wise decision, Damien. You won't regret it, I promise."

He slid his chair back and stood. "Would you like a tour of the company? Or would you like to see your office first?"

She laughed. "I'd like to see my office first, then have a tour of the company, as long as you'll be my guide."

"But of course." He stepped around his desk and led her to the door. Opening it for her, he let her walk through before following.

If all went well, he'd be able to end this farce in a few days. With all this fake smiling, he was certain his cheeks would grow numb from the effort.

Just as his employees had promised, they greeted Liza with wide smiles and praise. He'd have to make sure to give them a raise after this.

When he opened the door to her new office and she got a glimpse of the inside, her wide eyes sparkled. He could swear he saw dollar signs in her gaze.

She had to test out her white leather swivel chair and even make it swing around a few times. She slid the oak drawers in and out before standing. Linking her fingers together, she then clasped them against her stomach. "Oh, Damien. This is wonderful. I still feel as if all of this is a dream."

He chuckled and leaned back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. "No, it's not a dream. Reality will sink in soon, I promise."

She hurried over to him and linked her arm around his elbow. "I'm ready for the tour now."

He peeled her hand away from him. "Liza. You're my employee now. This is not allowed."

"Oh." She pulled herself straight. "You're right. I need to act professional in public."

"Exactly."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

When they passed by his mother talking to a co-worker, she smiled. "Liza, welcome to GIO Products."

Liza wrapped her arms around his mother's shoulders for a small hug. "Thanks, Bella. It's good to finally be here, working beside Damien."

Inwardly, he boiled. How he hated her.

The rest of the tour went the same way. Liza appearing overly excited about meeting everyone, and they in turn acted as if they were welcoming her with open arms. Damien tried to keep his expression solemn. He didn't want to show how he truly loathed her, and worried that if he smiled too much, she'd notice how fake it really was.

When the tour was over and she went to her office, he hurried back to his to pour a strong drink. He needed it to calm his nerves. Acting as if he liked that woman took every ounce of strength. He couldn't wait until it was over.

The day passed quickly and as Liza was leaving, she poked her head in his office.

"Hey, are you ready to go home?"

"No. I still have a lot of work."

"So I can't talk you into going out to dinner? I bet you're hungry."

"Sorry, Liza. Not tonight. I'm not hungry anyway."

She shrugged, then left.

He breathed a relieved sigh. The sooner he could get rid of her, the better.

Her second day of work was pretty much the same. Damn, would she hurry and screw up? By the time lunchtime came



around, he was ready to scream. He kept his balled hands inside his suit jacket.

Knowing she was looking for him, he dodged her, hiding behind corners and even locking himself in the executive bathroom for a while. By the end of the day, he was ready for bed, but not before drinking a half a bottle of Scotch.

Day number three actually kept him busy and he didn't need to find an excuse to stay away from Liza. He'd been called out of town for a meeting, and couldn't wait to get the hell away from her. On his way out the door, his mother gave him the *a-okay* sign with her finger and thumb. He'd catch that devious Liza in the act if it was the last thing he did.

The afternoon meeting went quickly, which brought him back to what he'd wanted to do for a couple of days now. Across the street from his office building, he sat in a borrowed car to watch ... and wait. Darkness had hidden the town for an hour now and the light in Liza's office was still on.

He lifted his binoculars to that direction. Within minutes, she and a man entered her office. She slinked in that all-too-obvious way of hers to the window to draw the blinds.

He grinned. Perfect. Time to make his move.

Hurrying into the building, he held the laugh ready to bubble from his throat. Liza hadn't changed a bit in seven years, thank the good Lord. He counted on her being the slut he'd known from the past. She hadn't let him down yet.

The halls were quiet, so he took soft steps toward her office. Just before reaching it, his mother's door opened and she peeked out.

"Ready?" she whispered.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He nodded. "Let's go get her."

She hooked her hand around his elbow as they treaded softly toward Liza's office. As they neared, deep moaning grew louder from behind the wooden barrier. He shook his head. Once a whore, always a whore.

He placed his hand on the doorknob and turned, but it wouldn't budge. Of course she'd lock it. He huffed and fisted his hands by his side.

His mother grinned and held out a set of keys. Thank heavens she was thinking clearly.

He took them, slid the master into the keyhole and turned until a soft click sounded. He held his breath and listened. Moaning still echoed from behind the door.

Glancing at his mother, he nodded. "Are you ready to see something that won't be pleasant?" he whispered.

She rolled her eyes and flipped her hands, motioning for him to continue.

He squared his shoulders then pushed open the door. It was the boom of the hard wood hitting the wall that brought Liza and her lover to an upright position. Luckily, most of their clothes were still on. Her shirt hung open, her bra unfastened between her breasts, with the man's slobber all over her skin.

She gasped and crossed her hands over her naked breasts. The man swore and stumbled backward, falling over his pants that had been dropped to his ankles. He groped at them, trying to cover the bulge in his boxers.

Beside Damien, his mother stood in military stance, her hands on her hips, her mouth pulled in a thin line. He switched his attention back to the woman he loved to hate.

He shook his head and tsked. "Liza, Liza, Liza..." He walked in a little farther. "I take it you didn't read over your contract very thoroughly."

She scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"Page four, section three states there will be absolutely no sexual activities conducted inside GIO Products' building or warehouses." He lifted his chin. "And, if you're caught breaking this rule, you'll be dismissed immediately without leave or holiday pay."

He motioned his hand at the embarrassed man on the floor. "This constitutes sexual activity, Liza." He shrugged. "You're fired."

She gasped again, louder this time. "How dare you ... you set me up."

He laughed. "Set you up?" He looked at the other man. "Tell me, sir. Did I pay you or arrange for you to come to this room and have sex with her?"

He shook his head. "No. We met at a bar this afternoon. She invited me to come see her after hours."

Damien held out his hands, palms up. "There you have it, Liza." He glanced at his mother. "My mother will see that you're packed and out of the building in ten minutes. And I'll make sure this young man makes it to his car without any problems."

He waited for the man to pull his pants back on. Liza cussed up a storm, threatening to sue him. He laughed and

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

shook his head. She didn't have him this time, and winning made his chest burst with happiness.

Of course ... only one thing could make him truly happy. But that he didn't think he'd ever have. It worried him that Charley might be out of his life for good.

## **Eighteen**

Charley's feet dragged as she moved to the break room. *Whew.* What a day. As always on a Monday, the news had been overwhelming, and keeping up with the reports was a chore. Not to mention the big storm this morning. Several accidents were reported, some very critical. It was a good thing they didn't live in Colorado. Most areas in that state were hit with ten feet of snow. Perfect weather for the season.

She stretched out her bunched muscles and rolled her head around on her neck. Of course, taking off a few days from work just put her farther behind. And she didn't even want to think about Christmas. Inwardly, she groaned. It was only days away, and she hadn't even been shopping.

She stood in front of the soda machine, debating whether she wanted a caffeine drink or water. Then she glanced at the snack machine. Or should she get a candy-bar stuffed full of sugar?

Decisions, decisions...

The squeak of the door pulled her attention to the entryway. Max sauntered in, pushing his fingers through his hair. When he saw her, he stopped and his hands dropped to his side. A smile touched his mouth. "Hey."

"Hey yourself."

He moved over beside her. "So, what'll be your poison?"

She chuckled. "Haven't made up my mind."

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He plunked his coins into the slot and pushed the Coke button. "Man, after a morning like today, I need caffeine."

She nodded. "I'm thinking the same thing. It's just I don't have the energy to make up my mind."

A long silent pause passed between them as she stared at the options in front of her, but her mind didn't focus on what she really wanted to drink. After a few moments, Max nudged her elbow with his.

She glanced at him. His smile had disappeared, and concern drew his brows together.

"Charley, I think we need to talk. Want to go out to my car? It'll be more private."

Her heart picked up rhythm. Did he want to talk about *them*? About why she hadn't been hitting on him ... or causing bodily harm to him lately?

"Um..."

"Please." He grasped her hand. "I think you'll want to hear what I have to say."

She nodded, turned and walked with him out of the break room and out the front doors of the station. A cold wind hit her head-on, and she folded her arms around her, hurrying to his car. He opened the door for her, then moved around and climbed in the driver's seat. He turned it on to get the heater going, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel while he stared at the busy road in front of them.

She dared not say anything. Not until she knew what he really wanted to talk about. Even though she and Damien were over, she didn't want to go back to Max. He just wouldn't do any longer.

Finally, he exhaled a heavy sigh and turned to face her.  
"First I want to tell you I'm sorry."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because I feel a little responsible for what's happened between you and Damien."

She gasped, her eyes widening. "What do you know about me and Damien?"

"Not a lot, but Amanda mentioned you and Damien were, well ... getting closer, and after I saw the interview Tamara did with Liza Scapolli the other day, I realized what must have happened." He took another breath. "Did Damien ever tell you about our college days?"

"A little."

"We were best buds and nothing could come between us, I'd thought. We managed to get through a few years of college before Liza entered our lives. She sank her claws into Damien the moment she found out his father was owner of GIO Products. I, of course, was nobody of importance so she didn't care about me. But she worked her ass off trying to worm her way into Damien's life. At the time, I figured her to be one of those money-hungry women, but I thought because she and Damien had so much in common because of similar backgrounds, that maybe I pre-judged her."

He scrubbed his jaw and situated himself in the seat. "I don't know how she suckered him into marriage, unless it was lying that she was pregnant, but they married in secret. I think they ran off to Vegas for the weekend. Anyway, Damien told me he didn't want anyone to know. Not yet. I think he suspected she wasn't being honest with him. But I could also

see he'd fallen for her. Her charm had captured his heart, and although he didn't want it to happen, I think he fell in love. Out of the two of us, Damien had always been the serious man and didn't chase after women like I did. Liza had changed him."

Max took hold of her cold hands. "Charley, she hurt him really bad. Did Damien ever tell you she'd been cheating on him?"

"Yes."

"Did he tell you who the man was he caught her with?"

She glanced at their clasped hands. "Yes. It was you."

"Well, because of that, Damien hardened his heart. No matter how much I tried to apologize, he wouldn't listen. He quickly divorced Liza and dropped out of college. By this time his father was dying, so Damien took over in running the company."

Tears threatened her vision and she blinked, hoping they'd go away. She met Max's stare. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I can see you're in love with Damien, and at the Christmas party, I wondered if he wasn't in love with you, too." He chuckled and patted her hand. "I also believe Damien was the one who sabotaged our dinner. I remember the cinnamon chicken recipe was one of his favorites. He made it for you that night, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"Well, I think he was the one who replaced the chili with the cinnamon." He shook his head. "But it doesn't matter, because after that, I realized he did love you. He didn't like the idea of another man being in your life, and he was around



you a lot more than me. Because I know what he's gone through—what Liza and I put him through—I understand his pain. He was my best friend and I know when the man is hurting. I also know how hard it is for him to trust somebody."

She tilted her head. "I don't understand."

"I'm saying you shouldn't blame him for not fully trusting you, for not fully giving his heart to you. Although you're nothing like Liza, I'm sure it was still difficult for Damien to admit he loved you."

She creased her forehead.

"I read the card attached to the flowers, that's how I know," he said.

She nodded. A knot formed in her throat. "He didn't tell me he was the president of the company. He didn't even tell me he'd married Liza."

"I don't believe he thought of Liza in that respect. To him, Liza was just a mistake he'd been with for two months. Their marriage didn't last long, and since it was kept a secret..." He flipped his hand in the air. "But that doesn't matter. What matters is you can't hate him for not being fully honest with you. People he's loved before have hurt him, and it's his first reaction to harden his heart. He's also used to women wanting him because of his wealth."

A tear slid down her cheek, but she didn't wipe it away. "Max, does Damien know how much you still care about him?"

He chuckled. "No, and don't tell him. I deserve what I got back then." He cupped her chin, keeping his gaze to hers. "But Damien deserves a second chance from the woman he

loves ... you. Liza is very malicious, and she wanted to break you and Damien apart. By refusing to talk to him, you're letting her win. Do you want her to win?"

She scowled. "*Hell* no. I hate that woman."

"Good. Then do something about it. Go tell Damien you love him and that you forgive him for not telling you about his past. Give him the chance to love you like he's never loved before."

More tears streaked down her cheeks, and she covered her face with her hands. Sobs tore from her throat, making her whole body shake.

Max's comforting arms moved around her shoulders and pulled her to his chest. He didn't know how much she wanted to run to Damien and forgive him for everything. But she'd been hurt by other men, too. She'd never been good enough. Why would she be good enough for Damien?

"Will you do that, Charley?"

She lifted her head and through blurry eyes looked at him. "Are you sure he wants me? When he's had all those women to choose from, why would he pick someone like me?"

He shook his head and wiped his thumb over her cheek. "Charley, why wouldn't he want you? You're everything Liza isn't. You're kind, loving, caring, and you're the funniest person I know."

She snorted a laugh. "Then you need to get out more often."

He laughed. "I'm being serious." His thumbs dried her cheeks again. "Please, Charley. Give Damien another chance. I know he'll make you happy."

Nodding, she sniffed and pulled away. "Okay, I'll go talk to him."

"That's my girl."

She took hold of his hands and squeezed. "And what about you? Are you going to talk with him and mend your friendship?"

He sank back in his seat and gripped the steering wheel. He blew out a deep breath. "That's going to be harder to fix, I think. I betrayed his trust. I was an idiot who'd been taken in by a beautiful woman and a bottle of Jack Daniels." He shook his head. "Mending our friendship will take a little longer."

She placed her hand on his arm. "If you'd like, I could add a good word for you."

He looked at her and grinned. "You'd do that?"

"Look what you've done for me." She shrugged. "What else are friends for?"

He turned and met her for a hug. Her heart grew full again, but from the thought of going to Damien and apologizing. Would he take her back? Or would she have to fight for him? That gorgeous man was definitely worth it.

\* \* \* \*

Healthy flakes of snow floated down from the wintry sky as Damien stood beside the front room window and watched the white powder slowly blanket the land. Inside the cabin, the low burning fire heated the spacious area, keeping him toasty warm. The first snowstorm of the season had hit hard this year, and he was grateful he'd made it to Colorado before it'd happened. Christmas time was always better away from the

hustle and bustle of the big city and for a man who loved to ski, his cabin retreat was perfect.

About an hour ago, he'd ventured outside to use his snowplow to remove some of the snow from the driveway and road leading to his cabin, but then realized he was the only person up here so why should it matter? He didn't have anyone coming to visit soon. His mother and sister, Michelle, were safe at home in San Diego. He'd given all his employees a week off with pay for the holiday, and besides celebrating the riddance of the hemorrhoid named Liza that had been plaguing him lately, he didn't have any worries.

No worries—just one constant ache in his heart.

*Charley.*

Would the pain ever leave? She'd not returned to her townhouse since the truth had come out. He'd waited to hear from her, and when she didn't call, he decided to give her one last chance. He drove by her work yesterday to surprise her with a visit, but saw something that gripped his stomach and caused his heart to break all over again.

In Channel Nine's parking lot, sitting in Max's car, Charley and his former friend were embracing. To Damien, that told him what he needed to know and it was like a knife in the chest for as much pain it brought. She wasn't coming back into his life, but staying with Max instead.

While it lasted, their relationship had been short and very sweet.

And unforgettable.

He'd eventually get over her—maybe in a year or two, and be on his way to finding another woman. But could any

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

replace her? He'd been through hundreds of women, and none had come close to having Charley's spontaneous charm and wit. None had made him smile so much, or hurt so badly. None had captured his heart the way Charley had, and made him feel complete.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he turned away from the window and walked over to the fire. The embers popped, and a log broke in half. He took the poker and stirred the fire, then threw on another log.

From the stereo, Christmas songs played, low and soft. Soothing. Yet, they brought a deep longing that wouldn't leave. He'd never been alone during this time of year. Of course, the women who'd kept him company didn't mean anything, but at least they'd kept him from the kind of loneliness that reached into his soul and ripped it into tiny pieces.

Cursing, he moved over to the heavily cushioned chair and sank into it. He stared into the fire, but only saw one thing. Charley's smiling face. In the image he created, she reached out for him, her mouth forming the words *I love you*.

A knot tightened in his throat and brought tears to his eyes. "I love you, too, *mí amore*."

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, but saw a different picture. Her eyes were puffy and red, and she told him to leave. Her beautiful complexion had turned a chalky white, pain etched at the corner of her eyes and around her lips. She pushed him away and told him she needed space.

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He pinched the bridge of his nose and breathed in deeply, willing himself not to get emotional again. Lately, it seemed he couldn't keep from doing this when he was alone.

The song on the radio ended and another started, reminding him again how lonely Christmas was without someone to love by his side. But then a low hum began that wasn't part of the song. He glanced at the radio. The humming grew louder. It came from outside.

*What the hell?*

He jumped from his chair and rushed to the window. Through the heavy falling flakes of snow, a light shone in the distance. *A snowmobile?*

He squinted, peering closer at the object. Within seconds, the light formed, and it was indeed a snowmobile. Someone wearing bright red clothes drove the vehicle.

*Santa?*

Nah, couldn't be. His eyes must be playing tricks on him. He hurried to the door and flung it open. The blast of cold air caused a shiver to run over his body and he rubbed his arms.

The closer the snowmobile came, the more it looked like someone dressed as Santa Claus. He grinned and shook his head. They must not have the right cabin.

But he waited by the door and watched as the battery-powered sleigh brought the jolly man to his porch. The person stopped and killed the engine, then climbed off. Lifting a big, red cloth bag, he swung it over his shoulder. The weight must have been heavier than the person imagined because he stumbled backward. After retaining his balance, he treaded forward.

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
by Phyllis Campbell

"Ho-ho-ho. Merry Christmas."

The merry voice was too high to be a man, although made to sound like it.

He narrowed his eyes at the unexpected visitor. "Are you lost?" Damien asked, his voice filled with laughter.

"Nope, not lost. Just late."

Then the person looked up at him. Familiar, big blue, twinkling eyes met his stare. Red cheeks and nose matched the Santa suit. Then she smiled through the full, fake white beard and his heart leapt to his throat.

"Merry Christmas, darling." She shrugged, holding out her hands, palms up. "Sorry it took so long to get here. Can you believe nobody believes in using a snowplow in the mountains?"

A laugh sprang from his mouth and in three steps he stood in front of her. He slid his arms around her middle and lifted her, crushing her against him. The padding she wore underneath the red suit made it impossible to connect their bodies, but he was certain it helped keep her warm.

"Charley, you crazy nut. What are you doing out in the middle of nowhere?"

The bag dropped from her hand just before she threw her arms around his neck.

"I couldn't let another day go by without finishing my article. I've completed all but one of the *Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart*. I realized the reason we weren't together was because I hadn't concluded the final *Way*."

"And what way is that, *mí amore*?"

"Take me out of this cold weather and I'll tell you. I swear my ass has been frost-bitten, and I don't think I have any fingers or toes left."

His face hurt from the wide smile he wore, but he pulled her inside the cabin, shutting the door behind him. Before putting her down, he walked them in front of the fireplace and set her on her feet.

"Ah, yes." She stretched her gloved hands in front of the fire. "This is more like it."

He lifted the red Santa hat off her head, and with it came the full beard. Her brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. He cupped her cold face, his thumbs rubbing her skin briskly. "Better?"

Her eyes softened and she smiled. "Much."

"Do you need me to rub anything else that's cold?"

Her chest shook with laughter. "Not yet, but definitely later."

She yanked off her gloves and placed her hands over his. Pulling them from her face, she kissed his palms.

His heart raced, blood surging through his body with excitement once again. *Am I dreaming?*

She met his eyes and smiled. "Damien, I love you. I've loved you since that night I was mugged, I think, but I definitely loved you when you helped me make that chicken dinner for Max."

Moisture gathered in his eyes, and even hers were misty. A knot of emotion lodged in his throat. "What about Max?"

She shrugged. "What about him?"

"Aren't you with him?"



She snorted a laugh. "You must not have a very long memory." She shook her head. "You're the man I want, not him."

"But I saw you in his car and you were in his arms."

She crinkled her forehead. "When was that?"

"Last night while you were at work."

She smiled. "He was comforting me and explaining to me about his former college friend. He encouraged me to give you another chance." She held up her hands in surrender. "I happen to agree with him."

"Then you forgive me for not being fully honest with you?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Do you think I'd travel all this way in this freakin' weather if I hadn't?" She chuckled.

"Damien, I'd walk barefoot and naked if I had to." She squeezed his hands. "I love you, and I didn't want to go another day without letting you know how I feel."

A sob tore from his throat and he wrapped her in his arms, pulling her body against his. He kissed her forehead. She tilted her head back and her mouth met his.

Heat from the fireplace didn't have anything to do with the inferno raging through his blood now. His heart beat with life once again, and happiness poured into his soul.

He broke the kiss and smiled down at her. "I love you, too." He caressed her quickly warming cheek. "Thank you for making my Christmas wonderful."

"Thank you for making my life wonderful."

Emotion gripped his heart, and he willed himself not to cry in front of her, but his eyes misted anyway. "Charley, I never

Ten Ways to Melt a Man's Heart  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

want to lose you again. I was completely miserable with you gone, and that's not a good way to live."

She tilted her head. "So what do you want to do about it?"

He chuckled. "I want you to marry me, that's what I want to do about it."

Love shone through her twinkling eyes and she nodded. "That sounds like an excellent idea."

He bent his head and captured her lips again. This time the kiss was slower, more meaningful. When her tongue entered his mouth, he suckled then she did the same to his. He moved his hands over her Santa suit, wishing he could feel her, but right now he was content to make love to her mouth.

She was the one to break the kiss this time and she sighed, laying her head on his chest. "So, what do you really think about that Internet article? Do you think it works? Did I melt your heart?"

He ran his fingers through her hair, lifting her face to his. "No, I melted yours."

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**About Phyllis**

Phyllis Campbell does what she loves best—writing love stories. Since she wrote her first play at the age of seventeen, she's devoted her life to finding that 'happy ending'. She's been an avid reader of romance since the first year of her marriage in 1985, and she still can't get enough of a great story. She's continued her love for the art of performing by writing six more plays for her community. Now she's excited about expanding her stories into novels. Phyllis is a member of several romance writers groups, including Romance Writers of American, and online critique groups.

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