

MUSE

A novel of erotic romance by

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PHAZE

Cincinnati, Ohio

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Prologue

She hated that feeling during sleep, that sensation of being frozen, in stasis. Trapped between the dreamworld and consciousness, she was powerless to move and could barely breathe, and she shivered underneath the thin cotton sheet guarding her from the dawn's sunlight filtering through her gauzy curtains.

She was lying on her back and looking around her darkened bedroom, but she wasn't really *looking* at it. Her eyes were closed in sleep, yet in this dream state it felt as if her eyes were open and her body susceptible to whatever monsters lay in wait.

But here there was only one monster—a snarling ogre she called *insecurity*, that grinned yellow fangs glistening with drool and blocked her bedroom door. Incoming sunlight illuminated its face and lent its skin a nauseating green glow. It taunted her in a deep, familiar voice...*Give up*, it chuckled.

She fought the restraints of sleep. No, she wasn't going to let this get her down. She was going to get up, she was going to overtake that demon, and she...

Sleep, the ogre persisted. *You have no reason to rise, or live. He's gone, and he's not coming back.*

No. Sleep rendered her mute. She wanted to cry out for him. He couldn't be gone. He needed to be here to help her, to see through to the end...he would never leave her. If she could only *speak* and let him know she needed him.

He's gone, the monster sang. *Give up. You'll have to live*

without him. Maybe get a real job.

She shifted in bed, and managed to turn to her side. She was sleeping on one side of a queen, alone. Her hand smoothed the cool sheets stretching before her. It seemed like miles of emptiness before her in this haze.

He could come back, it was possible. He would come back and get into bed and draw her close. He would make love to her, and urge her to wake, and guide her through the day as he had been doing for many, many days.

Give up, Tania. The monster was persuasive in its brevity. The dulcet tone of its voice, a contrast from its sickening features, lulled her quickly and quietly into complacency.

No.

The monster was winning. She'd stay put. She had no motivation to rise, no inspiration. The world was turning without her; she wouldn't be missed. She'd stay in bed with nobody to hold her again, and be warmed only by the foul, steaming breath of the demon now hovering over the mattress.

Except for maybe that lean, handsome man standing next to her dresser.

Wha—?

She twitched. She felt her skin prickle, her nipples tighten. Was it possible for a woman to climax aided merely by the distant yet seductive smile of a dream man? To tell the truth, she was damn close.

He was back. He came back!

Or did he? This man looked different to her, nothing at all like the suave, fair-haired Adonis she had been accustomed to seeing in sleep, the one who had obviously departed for good. This man was leaner and tan, with sinewy arm and chest muscles that were well pronounced in the dim of the monster's shadow. His hair was longer, and his eyes crystalline—glowing a brilliant

blue. He looked unafraid as he faced the beast.

The monster reared its thick head back and lumbered backward, poised to strike the interloper, but her savior had only to wave one arm, empty of weaponry, to make the ogre dissolve with a stale popping sound. She remained on her side, watching this man from an awkward side view as he moved fluidly toward the vacant side of the bed. She saw now that he was naked, and gorgeous.

Suddenly, she felt vulnerable, but it didn't exactly diminish her arousal. She watched the man's approach, graceful as a panther, as he slid beneath the covers and opened his arms to her. Warm desire pooled in her belly and spread to every erogenous zone, prickling her skin and causing her pussy to ache.

You aren't him, she accused, still unable to move. Yet, she didn't mind so much.

I know, he said, *but I'm here for you, Tania. I'm going to help you.*

It's no use, she said, defeated. *I can't get up. There's no point to it, it's hopeless.*

It's not. He was closer now. She wanted so badly to touch him, to smooth her fingers down that feather soft patch of hair covering his breastbone. She wanted to trace that line of hair down to the soft triangle crowning his thick cock.

He clucked his tongue at her. *No*, he chided, *first things first. Get up.*

I can't.

You can and will. You can do it.

*Speaking of doing it...*She willed him closer, and to her delight he obeyed. The tip of his cock barely brushed the divot between her thighs, making her wet. That cock was going to feel so good inside her.

Oh, it will.

It surprised her that he could read her mind, but then it *was* a dream. His voice sounded so real, as if he were really in the room with her, and not in her mind.

I am real, he assured her, *and I'm here to help you. Now...*

He shifted his hip; his cock brushed against her skin, teasing her.

Wake up!

One

Of the three daughters of Giles Henry Pringle, governor of the principality of Cozelle, middle child Iona was not considered the prize catch, despite arguably being the loveliest of the trio. She was as delicate as the spider's web—on the outset fragile and transparent, a seemingly laughable challenge, yet to some an impervious, complicated snare. To listen to Giles at night when he believed no ears were tuned to him, one would soon discover Iona was no more than that.

Despite Iona's behavior, the men continued to call, their eyes fixated eventually on the swell of Trina's bosom as enhanced by her gauzy dresses. Iona's best chance for sealing a willing union lay in either Trina's quick betrothal (a slim possibility, as Trina's threats to stall the inevitable out of spite were becoming more numerous) or with a suitor unbiased when it came to the Pringle women.

The baby of the family, Nattie, favored her deceased mother in appearance and manner. Tall and sinewy with brown doe eyes positioned over high cheekbones, she shunned the fashions that dictated her sisters' lives, preferring manageably shorter hair and outdoor activities to interest in local politics, a thing shared between her father and sisters. Handsome would be the proper term to describe her, not quite demure, not exactly mannish. Giles had not worried in the beginning, thinking young Nattie would eventually run herself into maturity and pursue the course destined for her. Today, the morning of her eighteenth birthday,

Giles worried. He saw no signs of her slowing, not a flicker of interest in any of the young men in town.

Twenty-year-old Iona, to be certain, exhibited no interest in this occasion; the day was like any other. This morning, as usual, found her...

Tania stopped typing and looked at what she had written, her forefinger lightly nudging the scroll button sticking out of the computer mouse. The words bobbed up and down on the screen, giving Tania a headache.

Where *did* the morning find Iona? What was she doing? Wearing? Saying?

Moreover, what else would the morning find?

Would anybody care what Iona was doing, saying, wearing, or singing?

Would anybody want to pay twenty-one dollars to know?

Tania sighed, thinking back to last night's dream. Damn her muse for leaving her when he said he'd stay. Damn her characters for staying when *she* wanted to scam.

Tania glanced at her notes for this story in progress. Why, too, had she started to tell the story with Iona? At best, she had earmarked Iona for a secondary character, someone against others could bounce off dialogue. Tania shrugged; maybe there was some truth in the theory spread by her writer friends that some characters tended to take on lives of their own when being written. Perhaps Iona felt like being the center of attention.

Well, Tania decided, as long as she was writing *something* instead of wishing to write something, Iona could scream to the heavens and tap dance.

Tania then sighed. She wasn't writing *now*, though.

She looked up at the clock above her—a thick wooden disk with black, metal Roman numerals fastened in their positions

with tiny black grommets. The minute hand did not appear to have moved since she sat down to her allotted four hours of writing, though the ticking of the second hand clearly filled the silence in her one bedroom condo.

She blinked the sleep from her eyes, squinted, and craned her neck upward; yes, she saw it now...it was eight-fifteen in the morning in sunny Virginia Beach. Beyond the clock, through her living room-cum-office windows, the Chesapeake Beach shoreline was alive and bloated with out-of-state vehicles, surfboards and vacation clamshells strapped to their roofs. Tourist season had begun.

Tania hated tourist season.

Her gaze drifted back to the clock, which now read eight-sixteen. The clock had been a wedding gift from her now ex-mother-in-law. It matched nothing Tania owned, yet Hubby—*Ex-hubby*, Tania mentally corrected herself—had insisted on keeping it to spare Mum's feelings. Hubby had thought nothing of sparing Tania's feelings two years after unwrapping that hideous gift when she arrived home late to find him screwing one of his freshman Psych 101 students on their couch, however.

Though she kept it to spite him, Tania hated the clock more than the incoming tourists who would spend the next four months crowding her favorite restaurants and her favorite nooks along the shore. To say nothing of grabbing the good parking spaces in every lot from here to Williamsburg, she reminded herself with a labored sigh. Had she not already been suffering severe writer's block, she would surely have blamed her inability to continue this latest story on the thoughts crowding her mind.

"How much worse can it get?" she moaned to the ceiling. Her answer came immediately with the shrill peal of the phone.

"Gah!" Tania clutched the mouse and dragged it back and forth across its pad, sending its white pointer zig-zagging over

the words she had written. The urge to depress the left button, highlight everything, and hit delete passed quickly, and instead she lifted her hand. The sparse paragraphs onscreen were the first she had written in months. Hardly her best work, but this *was* only a first draft. Surely something could be salvaged.

"Go away!" she yelled after the phone's third ring. The answering machine triggered and Tania listened to the automated female voiced default message before her agent's louder, more demanding voice filled the room. Cheryl Ormond, as usual, sounded two minutes away from an apoplectic fit.

"Pick up the goddamn phone, Tania. I know you're home."

Tania did not move, did not breathe, as if any hint of mobility on her part would betray her to the machine.

"Tania Garber," Charlene warned, "if you don't pick up the phone and talk to me right now I swear upon everything holy that I will—"

Beeeeeeep.

Tania relaxed and exhaled, but her relief was short-lived when the phone rang again. Cheryl did not miss a beat.

"You want me to sing? I'll do it, girl. You like ZZ Top? I know their whole catalogue, and don't think I'm going to let some answering machine stop—"

The third time the answering machine triggered, Cheryl immediately launched into "La Grange," and Tania enjoyed her first genuine laugh of the week as the normally high-pitched agent attempted a Texas-flavored bass. It was enough to inspire her to finish the sentence of the last paragraph written:

This morning, as usual, found her in the tiled kitchen of the governor's ancestral residence, a two-acre plot on the edge of town known as The Grange.

"They gotta lotta nice girls, ya'll," Cheryl drawled. "Yuh, huh-huh, huh..."

Tania picked up the hand-held receiver by her computer and the singing on the machine ceased. "Uncle!" she cried.

Cheryl however, appeared to have lost her sense of humor in the split second between her song and Tania's acknowledgment. "Where's the book?" she demanded.

"What book?"

"Don't start with me, Tania. Your publisher is hounding my ass for the next Tawny Garbo romance, and if it's not on my desk or in my e-mail inbox within the next week then it'll be *your* ass."

"What? Cher," Tania whined, glancing at the clock, "it's eight-twenty in the morning here. The publisher's in California. Who's hounding you at five-twenty in the morning? And why are *you* hounding *me* now? Did you finish your morning yoga routine early and have nothing better to do?"

"Number one, I do Pilates. Number two, I'm hounding you because I need your book. Now. Yesterday."

Tania's face stretched into a grin. "Heh, heh, you said 'Number two,'" she replied in her best Beavis and/or Butthead impersonation. Tania often had trouble discerning the two.

"It's not funny, Tania. Your publisher doesn't think so, either. Your tardiness is throwing off their schedule."

"Don't you have other clients to harass?"

"My other clients turn in their work on time. You used to, too."

Tania leaned back in her office chair, wincing as the coils underneath groaned. "Yeah, but what fun was that, being punctual and obedient? Admit it, this way brings much more excitement to your work, wouldn't you agree?"

"If by excitement you mean threats of breach of contract

lawsuits, then yes."

"What?" Tania bolted upright and the chair sprang forward, causing her to brush against the keyboard. Frantically she pointed her mouse to the Undo command and cleared the gibberish tarnishing what little there existed of her first draft. "They wouldn't do that."

"They would, they will, they're going to." Tania heard the rustling of a stack of papers on the line. "Marketing and PR is about to begin on this book, their art department already has a draft cover, and we have yet to see word one. Tania, do you realize how much money these guys have put into selling your books? How much they stand to lose if you don't deliver?"

Tania looked around her sparse apartment—at the television set that was not cable ready, the pastel green recliner draped with a white afghan to conceal the grime left by years of sweat, and the coffee table with the chip in the left corner—and sighed again. Those who believed that all famous writers were fabulously wealthy and living on tropical islands were sadly mistaken. Of everything she owned, only the couch was new. For good reason.

"I know I bring *in* a lot of money through sales," Tania said finally, "and I know how little of the percentage of those sales go to me, after the publishers take their share, and after I've paid my agent."

"Hey now. Without me, you wouldn't even be getting that," Carolyn retorted. "*Bedeveled* would still be taking up space in the trunk of some editor's car. You know that."

"I do," Tania conceded. She had to admit that despite the lack of furs in her closet and extra zeros in her bank account, she had struck gold when she signed on with Carolyn Ormond's agency five years ago. She remained eternally grateful that the agent had found something salable in one of her novels that the

previous thirty or so agents had obviously overlooked. *Bedeveled*, her third novel written and first one published, became a hot property in Carolyn's capable hands, the first of what Tania christened the *B* books, as every title since published began with that letter.

Staring at her computer screen, Tania pondered another, less encouraging *B* word: *bankrupt*. "What's this again about a lawsuit?" she asked.

Cheryl's sigh was a gentle roar over the phone. "I'm meeting with them later this morning, my time," she said. "I can do some sweet-talking, and at best buy you a week. You think you can have something for me by then? I mean, I know it's not brain surgery for you. Just a nice, Tawny Garbo historical romance with lots of sex, heaving bosoms, throbbing weiners...it writes itself basically."

Tania, of course, knew better. "A whole week? A whole, seven-day week?" Today was Monday. She would have to increase her allotted writing time to a full eight-hour workday. Perhaps overtime.

Tania hated Mondays more than she hated tourist season and the ugly Roman clock now ticking loudly in her ear.

Cheryl appeared not to hear the panic in Tania's voice. "How much do you have written so far?"

"Oh." Tania clicked the mouse. "It's going rather well. I have a good twenty thousand words down." *Give or take nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine.*

"Well, that's not so bad." Cheryl's tone reflected a boundless relief. "Tell you what, I'll definitely get you a week and to reward you, I won't bug you until next Monday. Unless, of course, I hear back from Eve on *Bedeveled*."

Tania felt her heart throb. "Definitely, let me know what happens there." Eve TV, a cable network specializing in women-

centered programming, wanted to option *Bedeviled* for a miniseries. What Tania stood to earn in the subsidiary sale would hopefully cover a complete design makeover for the condo, with some nesting money to spare.

"One week, darling," Cheryl sang. "Give me something good, or next time I'm singing Metallica's greatest *hit*, over and over again." Her agent rang off without a goodbye.

"One week," Tania muttered to her computer screen. Seven days to write a novel. It had been done, she knew. Jack Kerouac purportedly had written *On the Road* in four days, and given the formulaic, romantic pap Tania was known for writing, this next piece would not require as much thought as the great Beat writer had given to his work. Boy meets girl with instant attraction, girl dismisses boy after implausible miscommunication over ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend, girl finds herself in dangerous situation. Boy rescues girl, boy and girl live happily ever after. Intersperse with some creative sex and BAM! Bestseller. Stories like these did easily write themselves.

Tania drummed her fingers across her desk. That being the case, why were there no further words on her screen? Where was that handsome dream man who had destroyed the monstrous manifestation of her writer's block, then promised to be with her? She closed her eyes and tried to conjure his image, but failed.

"Probably out to lunch with the Tooth Fairy," Tania grumbled.

She had an idea, of course, a kernel of thought centered around three sisters. Three was her lucky number—*Bedeviled* proving that theory, the third time definitely being the charm in that case—and she wanted the streak to continue. This work, however, would be her *fourth* published work, if it even made it to print. Tania did not want to be a three-trick pony, despite her numerological suspicions.

Three sisters: Iona, Trina, and Nattie. Nice, historic-sounding names for the bucolic village setting of the fictional Cozelle, named for her parents Cole and Zelda. This untitled work, as with the other *B* novels, would probably be ripe with flowing damsels garnished with cursed, heirloom jewelry and handsome warriors with rippling, muscular chests and flowing hair to arouse the envy of any romance cover model. There would be conflict with a jealous villain, maybe some fistfights and swooning, and naturally a few scenes of sweaty, passionate lovemaking in the cornfields.

All Tania had to do was write it.

She wanted to bang her head against the monitor. Why could she not write it?

She lowered her head on the keyboard, oblivious to the clacking sound emitting from the pinhole speakers on her monitor. Cheryl was going to call next Monday morning and Tania would still be in the same position, miserable over this failure and worried over how to stave off a lawsuit when she had nothing of value to pawn. The clock was hardly an antique; Mum-in-Law had purchased it at Target. She would have to forfeit her film earnings from *Bedeveled*, she realized, unless Eve TV decided not to option it. Then there would be nothing to forfeit.

"No!" Tania straightened and positioned her fingers at *ASDF* and *JKL*;. She could do this, she could write. She needed a new recliner, a new computer, and a new outlook on life to replace the cynical one that had grasped hold when Hubby moved in with his nubile, twenty-something love bunny. She needed only to get the poison out of her head and pick up where she had left off, and scanning her first draft she saw she had left Iona in the kitchen.

"Come on," she muttered, squeezing her eyes shut again.

Deep within the recesses of her memory emerged a faded image—tall and handsome, with piercing blue eyes.

Yes! She smiled.

With a deep breath, Tania plunged headfirst back into The Grange to shape the remainder of Iona's day:

She was perched in her seat at the oak rectangular table—far left to accommodate eating with her left hand—hovering over a plate of steaming corn cakes, scowling. Giles, sitting opposite her, no longer bothered to inquire of her discomfort. Each day brought a new answer, another wheedling request to dismiss their manservant...

Then a thunderous, deep bass shook the floor, rattling a ceramic clown figurine Tania had perched on an occasional table by the couch. Iona's cozy existence faded instantly along the image of her muse, leaving Tania's fingers back at their starting position.

"Damn it!" she cried, and sprang from her chair. The noise was coming from downstairs, but how could that be? The owner of that condo, an elderly retired Navy captain, had left last week for an extended European package tour with several other oldsters. The man had no family that she knew of who would be staying there.

The noise was a steady beat, peppered with loud, staccato commands and girlish squeals. *Terrific*, Tania thought. More than likely the captain sublet his place to a pack of college students for the season. Assuming the condo, which was laid out similar to Tania's, went for eight hundred dollars a month, four kids desiring close beach access and walking distance to three bars could bunk together cheaply, living off beer and Cheetos. Tania was certain Jack Kerouac never had to work under such

conditions.

She slipped on her tennis shoes and stomped down the flight of stairs to number 101, determined to give her new neighbors a welcome they would never forget.

Two

"Boone!"

Wesley Boone looked up from the galley kitchen counter to see his thin, blonde companion waving her arms around the compact living room with a hair dryer. No sooner had they arrived at the condo, rented for the month, did Alisha hit the stereo and fill the silence with a local rock station, and here she insisted on being heard over the noise.

Boone sighed and padded over to the owner's archaic stereo, turning down the volume. He had left Los Angeles to get away from the noise, to say nothing of work-related stress. He should have known better to think Alisha would not bring a little of both with her.

"...and how do you expect me to listen to my music on that thing?" Alisha continued, a look of disgust marring her lovely face. "Did you see the 8-track slot on it? How am I supposed to play my CDs?"

Boone straightened and regarded Alisha's pouting, pink lips and high cheekbones with a touch of regret. She had the best-looking face money could buy, and Heaven help how that face would distort when she learned what he had planned to do while they were here. Perhaps it would freeze permanently.

"I'm surprised you know what an 8-track is." It *was* a bit before her time.

Alisha snorted, then giggled. "Come on, Boone. I'm not *that* out of touch. I did a walk-on for an episode of *That 70s Show*,

you know."

No sense arguing with that logic. "Have you considered, Alisha, appreciating the silence?" he asked. "That's why we're here, so I can relax and renew my creativity, and maybe get back to work one day." *Get on with my life, without you*, he wanted to add, but instead said, "I can't concentrate on getting better if you're going to try daily to render me deaf and insane."

Alisha scoffed. "That doctor is a quack. Your nerves are fine." Those pouting lips then curled into a mischievous smile, and she snaked her hands around his waist. "They felt fine last night, anyway, along with the rest of you." She licked her lips as one hand came to rest on the bulge between his thighs. "Mmm, just thinking about how you pounded that thick—"

Her touch was hardly a turn-on. Boone shrugged away from her, then looked behind him and pointed. "What's with the hair dryer?"

Alisha pulled away and looked at the dryer as if realizing for the first time that she was holding it. "Oh, I was putting my stuff in the bathroom—the teeny-tiny master bathroom with no jetted tub, I might add," she said, weary, "and that guy's got his crap all over the sink! Where am I supposed to put my stuff?"

"Captain Anderson said there's a plastic bin under the sink. You can put his stuff there for the duration of our stay."

The smile was gone; the look on Alisha's face implied that the task was too much work for an aspiring actress/model such as herself. She wrinkled her nose at the nautical décor of the condo. "I don't like it here. I feel like I'm living with the Gorton's fisherman," she complained. "This place smells like old people, and cat."

"This place is fine. There's a great view of the beach, and easy access to it. You can go every day we're here." Right this second seemed all the more appealing. Was she going to

complain the entire time?

Alisha was hardly appeased. "You could have spent a little more money. Got us a nicer, larger place with a *private* beach."

"I'd like to have some money when I, er, *we* get back to LA." Boone cringed, and hoped Alisha had not noticed the slip. To his relief, she merely stomped about the living room, scowling at the captain's framed aircraft carrier photos and certificates of service to the United States Navy.

He returned to the kitchen and toed the litter box by the refrigerator. The captain's cat was with a neighbor during the older man's sojourn. "Just finish unpacking," Boone said, "and we'll go somewhere nice for dinner tonight."

The promise appeared to lighten Alisha's mood, and she bounced happily into the back bedroom. Boone watched the shapely lift of her buttocks as she retreated, and sighed. Lovely she was indeed, even before the elective surgeries. Why she had insisted on them he could not imagine, because she was still rather young, and her looks before could never have impeded her securing work in any facet of show business. The money would have been better spent on acting and singing lessons, but Alisha for some reason preferred a raw approach to showcasing her talents, whatever that meant. The raw approach must have forgiven artificial enhancements to the body.

Boone leaned on the counter, looking over the tenant's agreement drawn out for him by the condo's owner, which was accompanied by a note written by aged, trembling hands. The captain's missive assured Boone that the condominium complex was the epitome of serenity with its thick walls and flooring, a beacon of calm among the busy Chesapeake Beach strip. Nearly three-quarters of the tenants were retired or approaching retirement age, and those who rented their units abided by a strict code that ensured all renters were quiet and mindful of their

neighbors. Boone's serenity could be had here, no problem.

Good, Boone thought, thankful that the old man had agreed to sublet, even for the short time. Boone's doctor had been adamant that he get some rest, insisting that some time away from the city would calm him, and eventually aid in the recovery of his ability to work. On the recommendation of a colleague, he chose the East Coast, as opposed to any of the similar beach towns bordering the Pacific Ocean, to make a point of getting as far away as possible. He wanted a complete mental overhaul.

The trip, he hoped, would also serve to soften the blow of Boone's planned breakup with Alisha. Though he could not and would not attribute this recent problem to her, he had to admit to himself that their yearlong relationship was stagnant. Aside from a mutually strong sexual appetite and their careers—he being a much sought after photographer, having met twenty-years-younger Alisha on a magazine shoot—they had nothing in common.

Boone wondered now if they even had the sex in common; their first night in Virginia Beach at the hotel had to have been a fluke, as lately his desire for intimacy had dwindled along with his desire to pick up a camera. Perhaps it was the anticipation of this vacation that provided his withering libido a reprieve, he decided. Either that, or Alisha had spiked his drink with some kind of performance drug.

He looked down to see the bulge in his jeans had flattened somewhat. Alisha's touch did nothing for him now; his cock seemed to have shrunk inside himself.

Her music still rang in his ears, and Boone realized he had not completely turned off the stereo. No doubt the captain's neighbors, if any were home right now, had already formed low opinions of him without needing to meet him. He could only hope everybody in this building had gone to work.

The angry knock on the front door told him otherwise.

Boone sighed and did his best to make himself look presentable. He smoothed back his unruly mop of ginger brown hair and tucked his T-shirt into his black jeans, prepared to face the wrath of whatever little old lady waited for him on the other side.

He was not expecting the shapely brunette glaring back at him with equal surprise. He took in her heart-shaped face, deep brown eyes, and nearly flawless skin. The form fitting blouse and cutoff denim shorts she wore accentuated her every curve and the length of her lovely legs. She was the antithesis of the thin, lithe Alisha; put this woman in a red dress and veiled pillbox hat and she would fit nicely into any 1940s film *noir*.

Whoa. He shifted his hips slightly when he felt a stirring down below. His cock, previously repulsed, had suddenly found new life and filled the zipper pocket of his jeans once again. He hoped the shadows from the door would conceal it well enough from his visitor.

The woman, presumably a neighbor with a complaint, appeared to swallow back a curse and nodded. "You'll have to forgive me," she said, her voice deep and melodic. It suited her. "I heard the loud music coming from here, and I knew Captain Anderson had gone on vacation..."

"He did," Boone rejoined quickly with a nervous laugh. He gripped the open threshold, blocking her view of the interior. "He did. W—, er, *I'm* subletting the place for the month. I got into town late last night and took possession this morning." He wrinkled a brow; why had he just lied to this woman? Why not mention he was not alone?

"Oh." The woman nodded, folding her arms. She appeared to be studying him with some degree of amusement, Boone noticed. She had to be in her early thirties, and hardly fit the

description of the typical complex resident described to him. Did she not work? Perhaps she was a stay-at-home mom? Boone cringed at the thought that Alisha's music might have woken a sleeping infant.

"I-I heard the music through my floor, and thought at first the captain might have rented his place to some college students," she said. "It's that time of year, you know, and it gets crazy around here during the spring and summer."

"I can sympathize. I'm from LA, where it's crazy all year round." A bout of chuckling from both fell quickly into an awkward pause, whereupon the woman shifted her weight and looked for another opening into the conversation via the opaque cobwebs plastered against the top corner of the captain's front door.

"You don't sound like you're from LA," she said. "My agent lives there, was born there, and she doesn't have a British accent."

"Oh, right. Well, that is to say I'm not *originally* from there, I've just been living there for the past ten years. On vacation now." Already into his life story and he had yet to introduce himself. *Nice going, mate.* "I'm sorry to be rude." He outstretched his hand. "Wesley Boone, but everybody just calls me Boone."

"Boone. I'm Tania Garber. I'm in 201." Her palm found its way into his, and he curled his fingers gently around her hand. Coupled with the sultry timber of her voice as she pronounced his name—her lips still pursed and looking very kissable—her touch sparked a numbing sensation that quickly spread up his arm and into his heart. A tingling in his chest alerted him to his nipples hardening underneath his thin T-shirt, and suddenly there flashed an image in his mind of those same kissable lips pursed around one turgid nipple, her tongue tracing a delicate circle on

his skin.

He tried to mask his sudden pleasure with a friendly, platonic smile. How long had it been since a woman had that affect on him? Alisha had not done that to him in a long time, not even during last night's spontaneous tryst. Come to think of it, Alisha had yet to inspire such a feeling as this.

He heard Tania clear her throat, and Boone followed her gaze to their joined hands. With another nervous chuckle he loosened his grip and tucked the hand underneath the opposite arm. The continuing silence behind him played further on his nerves; who knew what Alisha was doing in the back bedroom, but he hoped she would remain quiet for the duration of Tania's visit.

"Let me assure you, Mrs. Garber—"

"It's *Ms.* Garber, but you may call me Tania, I'm very informal."

"Right. Tan-yah." He was careful to pronounce her name correctly, yet with his accent the name still sounded awkward. "Let me assure you that the loud music you heard was strictly an isolated incident, and I'm sorry it bothered you. I came here for some peace and quiet, doctor's orders."

"That's okay. It's just me upstairs, and I work from home."

"I see, well, I'll make an extra effort then." He managed to maintain his smooth demeanor despite his rapidly thudding heart. *Miz.* She was single. Could he hope for her also being unattached?

Why was he thinking this way? He did not come here to prowl.

Tania smirked. "Peace and quiet, huh? Well, I can't guarantee you'll find it here. I mean, the *complex* is quiet, don't worry about that. It's just that sometimes on the weekends it can get pretty loud what with the bars."

She gestured to the main road, and Boone peered into the distance to see the string of bars and restaurants planted along the strip. So early in the morning, few if any were open for business at the moment. Boone envisioned their gravel lots bloated with cars and sandaled foot traffic, whooping night revelers in search of the best drink specials, and cringed.

"It's at its worst on Fridays and Saturdays, don't worry." Tania's voice was both soothing and upbeat. "All the kids go to the Oceanfront during the week. Chick's Beach, that's what we call Chesapeake Beach, is more for the locals."

"That sounds better, I suppose, unless the locals party just as frequently," Boone said, then smiled at Tania. "I better finish cleaning up in here. I know I shouldn't keep you from what you were doing."

"Hm? Right." Tania backed toward the short flight of wooden stairs leading to her floor. "I have a killer deadline ahead of me, and I can't waste time."

"Of course." His stomach quietly roiled. Talking to him was a waste of time? Surely her words held a different meaning. Introductions never seemed graceful. Their next meeting, he promised himself, would go better. "I'll see you around, I hope?" He relaxed as Tania broke into a friendly grin.

"Definitely. Good luck with your health. If you need anything, I'm right upstairs."

I'll think of something. "I'll hold you to that." He closed the door in front of him and let out a long exhale. A perfect imprint of Tania's retreat played over in his mind; the soft sway of those hips hugged by her shorts, even the innocent manner in which she grasped the wooden railing as she ascended the stairs seemed erotic to him. He imagined that same hand grasping his cock and stroking him to orgasm, those curvy hips bare and pressed against his.

Relax. How was he supposed to relax with such a luscious woman one floor away, and still stuck with Alisha? He would have to end it sooner than planned, he knew, and get her on a plane back to LA before the two women ran into each other.

Of course, why would *Miz* Garber be bothered by Alisha? He shook his head; he was getting way ahead of himself. He had only just met the woman. How he could be sure of mutual interest? This was definitely not going to help toward relieving his stress.

At the very least, Boone decided as he trudged back to the kitchen, the visit ended on a high note and a friendly overture. Of course, Tania might have only made her offer in order to be polite. Was that not what all new neighbors said, come by if you need anything, but never really expected you to show up at their doors?

He would think of something to ask of Tania, even if he had to resort to begging the cliché cup of sugar.

As he glanced out the large window facing the busy street, he realized he had not found out exactly what it was Tania did at home. She had an agent, she said, so perhaps she was involved somewhat in freelance media. A writer, or maybe even a photographer like himself? Boone smiled, noticing the coffee shop wedged in the middle of a short strip mall. Now there was an opening he could use. He could invite Tania for coffee as an apology for the stereo incident, get to know her. Talk shop.

A muffled crash from the back room invaded his thoughts. Alisha's shrill voice next pierced his ears as he pressed a hand to his chest, failing to still his pounding heart.

"Boone, sweetie, could you give me a hand?"

"Coming." He bent his head. Alisha speaking his name nowhere near had the effect of Tania's honeyed voice.

Three

Boone.

Tania could barely type those five letters, her hands were shaking so badly.

Boone, the man downstairs, was her muse. Rather, he was the real-life version, the clone of the man in her dream. He had the same lean body structure and hair, and the same beautiful blue eyes.

She thought back to the dream and recalled the size of her dream man's cock, that she hadn't had the pleasure of enjoying. What did Boone's look like? Was it as big or, God willing, *bigger?*

Would she be enjoying *that* soon?

"Ah!" She shook her head. She had only just met the man and was thinking about fucking him. What was wrong with her?

Maybe nothing's wrong, girl. You're a romance writer, you need to think romantically.

True, but she would definitely have to tweak this sudden rush of lust and heighten the romance when she transferred it to the story.

Fingers on the keyboard, Tania typed the name on a separate line underneath her work in progress. She highlighted the name and changed the font face to several different styles before settling on the standard Times New Roman she used for her novels. Then she changed the size, then italicized it. She studied the name as one would a museum artifact, searching for

surface flaws and marks of authenticity. Boone. Would it work? Had it been done already?

Closing her eyes, she drudged through her memory banks to recall whether or not she had used the name in her previous works. A mere trek to the bookshelf on the opposite side of the room, where she kept copies of all her works, would have brought the answer more quickly, but she did not want to leave the computer, not with the prospect of more words coming so close.

"No," she said to herself and shook her head. *Bedeviled* had no Boone, nor did her other *B* novels. Tawny Garbo heroes were christened with laughable, Brawny paper towel mascot names like Brock and Drake and Kieran. Not a John or a Joe in the bunch, as decreed by a romance writing guide Tania had read in college. Who wants to be romanced by a man with the same name as her mechanic and/or father?

She erased her experiment and finished the sentence from where she had left off earlier: *Each day brought a new answer, another wheedling request to dismiss their manservant, Boone.*

She liked it; it was a name that evoked an image of masculinity with a touch of sensitivity, and it rang of an historical time without reading too ridiculous. One problem solved. Her new hero would be called Boone, and he would be a man any standard, cookie-cutter Tawny Garbo heroine would come to love, to say nothing of Tawny Garbo's readers.

Tania's fingers paused at the keyword. Would *she* come to love it as well? To love *him*? He had not mentioned coming to Virginia with anybody, and no person in a committed relationship would travel cross-country for a month alone. She had to admit, too, she felt something more than his hand when they shook their introductions.

Of course, that rather impressive bulge in his pants was

hardly a deterrent. Tania hoped her new neighbor had not caught on to her gaze constantly drifting south for a better look.

She shook her head now. *Stop it*, she thought. She had to write a book in seven days; there was no time for a spontaneous fling with a stranger, and who knew if this Wesley Boone did not indeed have a girl in LA, or one on her way to Virginia to be with him. Or a *guy*, even, but he did not strike Tania as that type. Tania liked to believe she could tell one way or the other.

Maybe after the book was written, though, if she happened to cross him in the parking lot or by his door, she would invite him across the street for a cup of coffee and platonic small talk. There was nothing wrong with being a good neighbor and reaching out to the new guy in town.

Nothing wrong with being reached *for*, either. Tania thought of those strong hands stretching forward to cup her breasts, his thumbs brushing her nipples into a wild state of arousal.

She sighed. *Write the damn book, Tania.*

Fingers back in position, she wrote:

The man in question—a wiry man of thirty-five with light brown hair and sun browned skin, water blue eyes, strong jaw, and a slightly hawkish nose with which he looked down upon nobody—stood with his back to the approaching family, quietly preparing the remainder of the cornmeal batter. He was long immune to Iona's tantrums, and lobbied every interrogative demand this morning with a benign voice.

She paused again. Yes, her Boone very much resembled the Boone downstairs, right down to the tanned skin, which was why the British accent must have thrown her off earlier. Her impression of the British was that they were paler for the most part, but Boone had said he had been in California for a while.

But, she dismissed any thoughts of litigation on the real Boone's part. Anybody willing to ensconce himself in the naval surroundings of Captain Anderson for a month was likely not the type to read her books. He probably read crime novels and Tom Clancy, if he read at all.

The words seemed to come easier now, and Tania marveled at the speed at which she typed. When she paused for a sip of Coke, she glanced at the hated clock and was shocked to see exactly how much time had passed. She was back.

She read over the chapter, stifling a laugh at one of Boone's sarcastic retorts to Iona. She liked him already; for a beta male he was certainly sharp, determined not to let Iona's constant complaining get the better of him. She hoped Cheryl would approve of this new and different tack in her writing. Previous *B* novel heroes had been typical alpha males, warriors on horseback and sword-wielding goons. She was ready for a change, and figured this next book would attract more readers to her stable following. She had her new neighbor to thank for that, she supposed.

And Iona, what a bitch! Tania could actually imagine a reader thinking exactly that, yet come to the conclusion that she might soften towards the end, enough to perhaps win a man's heart, be it anybody in the village. That had been the plan during the outline stage, anyway, but as Tania read over her words she feared taking the spunk from Iona would plunge the story into mediocrity.

Of course, not everything would go as the reader might predict. The happy ending was just not going to be handed over on a silver platter.

She reached to her left and retrieved her printed notes, then made a few quick corrections in pen to remind herself of later chapters. Best not to lead her readers directly by the nose this

time, she decided. Cozelle needed a few twists to keep up interest, especially hers if she had to write sixty thousand more words.

No more interruptions and we might actually accomplish serious wordage today, she told herself, and dove headfirst into a conversation between Iona and her father Giles about sister Nattie's coming into womanhood and the possibility that she might choose a husband. Servant Boone, unbeknownst to them, was not taking that well.

"I'm going into town for breakfast," Iona announced with a finality that silenced the kitchen. With one deep scrape of her chair against the floor she was gone.

And with one high-pitched squeal from under her living room window, so too went Tania's concentration.

"Damn it!"

Tania sprang from her chair and peered out into the dimming night, and down at the nearly empty parking lot to survey this latest fracas. There, a slender young pixie in a string bikini top, shorts, and flip-flops, had her hand on the hood of the yellow Monte Carlo idling before her. She was screeching at the driver, kindly old Mr. Gutman in Building Two, and Tania presumed that either the girl had walked into his path without looking or Mr. Gutman was just returning from his eye doctor after having his pupils dilated and just did not see her.

Tania could hear the girl through the window. "You could have killed me, you old coot!" she yelled. "I ought to get my boyfriend out here so he can kick your scrawny ass!"

From Tania's angle she could not see Mr. Gutman's reaction, but noticed a few conciliatory hand gestures from inside the car. The girl said nothing further, but scooped up her

fallen beach tote and stormed toward the main road. The girl did not look familiar, and Tania wondered about the boyfriend. Two young Navy ensigns shared the place above hers; perhaps she belonged to one of them. Turnover was high upstairs, as far as romantic liaisons went. That had to be it.

The thought to go downstairs and check on Mr. Gutman passed quickly as she watched the old man maneuver his car into his reserved space, get out, and extend his middle finger toward the girl's retreating back before walking to his condo. Tania let out a loud guffaw and returned to her workstation. If only she could write that into her story; the girl appeared to be Iona personified, at least, how Tania wanted to personify her.

Unfortunately for Iona, however, it would take a while for Tania to further mold her. The distraction had been unnerving, and now she could only sit and stare at her monitor.

Come on, she urged herself. Think, damn it. What happens next?

Four

Nothing happened next, at least not that night. Tania was so rattled that she was unable to continue writing. She saved what she had completed and went to bed, hoping for a return appearance from her dream man. In sleep, nothing happened, either.

She awoke, frustrated and horny, and hoped a shower and coffee would rejuvenate her. It didn't completely, but she felt somewhat human as she slipped on a T-shirt and shorts. She hoped, too, that the loudmouthed beach bunny from yesterday was sleeping late, and sleeping somewhere far, far away.

She checked the parking lot from her living room window as the coffee brewed. Not a sign of her. Good.

Minutes later the doorbell's chime caused Tania to squeal, and she nearly spilled her coffee. It rarely sounded, as Tania had very few visitors, and she had seen neither the mailman nor a UPS truck during her brief bout of voyeurism. She was not expecting any galleys right now, and all papers relative to her pending divorce were usually sent directly to her attorney's office.

"Who is it?" she called, mainly out of habit. Hubby's last act of charity before leaving six months ago was installing a peephole in the front door. She hurried towards it to see a distorted image of Boone peering back at her.

"It's Boone, from downstairs?" His elegant accent pitched high.

She smiled at his forlorn image in the fisheye lens. His already prominent nose dwarfed the rest of his face and seemed more pointed, like that of a Renaissance puppet. Even so, she could detect an attractiveness in this sight of him that caused the heat to pool low in her belly. She imagined he wouldn't look so goofy up close without a door separating them.

"One second," she said, stifling a giggle, and opened the door to find him holding an empty measuring cup.

"Let me guess." She folded her arms and wondered if Boone had noticed she wasn't wearing a bra underneath the white T-shirt. "It's Grandma's birthday and the cupboard is bare."

Boone held up the opaque plastic cup and twirled the handle around his forefinger. "Actually, I need to cut down on refined sugars. I thought I'd bring this along for kicks. I mean, why defy neighborly tradition, eh?"

His smile was infectious, and enhanced by perfectly straight teeth. Tania responded in kind. "It's just as well, anyway. I have only a carton of sweetener packets that I use for coffee, and it would seem tedious to have to rip through a thousand tiny pink envelopes to fill that cup," she said. "So, how can I help you?"

"I do need to borrow something, I'm afraid. I've had a look through the captain's quarters this morning," he chuckled, "and I've been unable to find a map of the city."

"Not surprising, since Captain Anderson's lived here more than half his life and probably knows where everything is. You didn't get a map en route from LA?" Her right eyebrow rose with suspicion. Seemed like a lamer excuse than wanting to borrow sugar, but Tania had to give him points for effort.

"I used directions downloaded from the Internet to get this far, and I'd do it again if the captain had a computer, which he doesn't," Boone said. "I only need to find one particular store I found in the phone book, and I didn't see the point in driving all

the way out to that drugstore on the main road if it turned out I had to go in a completely different direction."

Of course you didn't, Tania thought. She knew very well that the phone book contained a few small maps of the area that Boone could have easily used. "Well, I'm sorry to say I don't have any maps, either," she said. "What are you looking for? I've been here *all* my life and pretty much know where everything is."

"That would be very helpful, thanks." Boone's fleeting disappointment turned back into a smile, and he told her the name of the camera shop he wanted.

Tania motioned him into the living room. "I know where that is. How about I just print up another Internet map for you? I have a cable connection, so all I have to do is this." With a few clicks of the mouse Tania hid her novel in progress and called up an Internet map site. Typing in the address Boone relayed for her, she clicked the enter button and a map illuminated on her screen. "Just take a second or two to print," she announced.

The second she said that, Tania felt her heart sink. Why had she said it wouldn't take long? Boone would just take the directions and leave. She should have stalled, offered him some coffee. It would seem silly to do that now.

"I can't thank you enough," Boone said.

"Uh, thanks."

Tania watched as Boone idly paced her living room, admiring the spacious setup, and relaxed. He didn't seem to be in a hurry.

He studied the walls, which were painted a soft peach and bordered with white crown molding, very appropriate for a beach condo. She found it difficult to gauge his reaction at seeing her dated furniture and ratty ends of the carpet where it bordered against her kitchen. Whid his being from LA and able to afford

to take a few months off without worry of income, Tania surmised his home surroundings were more luxurious. No cans of potted meat and baked beans in his pantry.

His gaze now aimed above her head. "Nice clock."

"You want it?"

"Beg pardon?" Boone laughed.

Tania shook her head. "Forget it. Just a gut reaction. My soon-to-be ex's mother bought it for us, and I've never liked it."

"So why keep it?"

"Good question." Now Tania looked at the clock. "My rationale at first was that I was hanging onto it to spite my husband, since it was his mother's wedding gift to us."

"So your husband really likes the clock, but you won't let him have it, is that it?"

Tania thought a moment. She could not recall Hubby actually saying he liked the clock, or that he wanted it. Surely he would have taken it himself when he left the house? It wasn't affixed to the wall, just hanging by a thumbtack. To remove it would have required no more energy than it had taken Hubby to mount his honey on their living room sofa.

"To be honest, I don't think I ever really knew what he liked or likes, except for maybe the girl he left me for." Tania tried to smile, but it came out crooked. "I do know, though, he's nuts for golf. Maybe I should have fought harder to keep his Big Berthas."

This brought another good-natured laugh, in which Tania did join Boone. Suddenly she realized the whirring of her printer had long since ceased, and she reluctantly presented him with his map.

"Here you go." Her voice started out cheerful, but lowered an octave as her hand brushed against his. Their contact sent an immediate shockwave through her system. Her skin prickled; her

pussy throbbed with want, which surprised her. Had she really been that out of touch with the opposite sex that her mind would interpret the simplest gesture as desirable?

She wanted more signs suddenly, more innuendos and touches. She wanted to brush more than fingers. She wanted that impressive bulge in his shorts brushing against her...

Tania, you just met the man.

I know, thank you. Yeesh. She wasn't *that* out of touch. What was wrong with a small fit of explosive lust between new neighbors?

She looked away from him, then stole a coy glance in his direction as he curled the map in his grip. Boone had not appeared to notice anything unusual, and she relaxed.

"Really, thank you for this," he said. "I do owe you one. I know I'm intruding on your time, what with your deadline approaching."

"Hm? Oh, yes, that." Tania craned her torso back towards her computer and moved to maximize her word processor screen, but stopped. Boone could be reading over her shoulder. What if he saw his name in the book? Quickly she straightened and smiled back at him. "Don't worry about it. I have seven full days to finish this and no assignments in the meantime."

"Are you a journalist?"

Tania nodded, but her answer negated it. "I was. I used to work for the community section of the local paper, writing book reviews and such. One day, after reading my umpteenth really bad romance novel, a friend suggested I write my own."

Boone offered a sage nod himself and folded the map into thirds. "I see, and let me guess: you were offered a smashing advance and record first printing, and now Danielle Steel is sitting alone at her own Macintosh, wringing her hands with worry over being usurped as the queen of romance."

"Try a wall papered with rejection slips and a pittance advance. My spies haven't come back with news of Danielle." Tania could not tell exactly how patronizing Boone was being; his accent was deceptive, and very sexy. He probably could have said outright that romance books were mindless pulp and she would have swooned. "But I am published. Just not rich."

"Congratulations, that is a marvelous achievement." Boone bowed politely. "And you're going to finish a book in just seven days? You must be quite prolific."

"Too bad *prolific* isn't a synonym for *insane*. Otherwise, I'd agree with you," Tania said with a slight laugh. "But, since I don't work a regular job, I have the time. Normally it takes a few months to do, but I'm behind schedule, and I plan to burn many vials of midnight oil."

"I shouldn't keep you, then." Boone bowed his head, looking guilty. "I'm sorry to say I've not heard of your works, though. If I find a bookshop en route to the camera store, I'll definitely be sure to look you up."

Tania blushed. She was a better writer than she was a businesswoman. Cheryl, thankfully, had handled the marketing of her books with great success. Tania could barely manage three words whenever somebody asked about her writing. She knew it must have made her look like an idiot, and leave people wondering how somebody so unsure in her speech could write such flowing, eloquent prose. Such as her writing was, anyway.

"Thanks," she finally managed to say, feeling ready to change the subject. No sense in telling him that she published under a pseudonym. He was probably only being polite with his offer to find her books, anyway.

She didn't, however, want him to leave so soon, though she had work to do. She tried to stall the inevitable. "Are you planning to play tourist today? If you need me to print out any

more maps of the area for you..."

Boone looked at her quizzically, and followed her gaze to his hands. "Ah, yes, the camera shop. No, you see, well, perhaps. I am a photographer by trade." He shrugged. "I like to think I am, anyway. I've been having some problems of late."

"Oh." Tania wondered for a moment if Boone was part of the notorious paparazzi, and if this vacation was really an excuse to lay low and avoid the wrath of some annoyed celebrity. He did not seem the sort to push a live flashbulb into a movie star's face, though. Despite her own modest fame, Tania was hardly among the upper echelon of authors who would likely be bothered by such people. Boone seemed too nice to fit the image of that type of photographer.

Too timid to be much of anything else, too, she noticed, as a silent, awkward moment passed before he took a deep breath and turned toward the door.

"You see?" he scolded. "I'm wasting your time again..."

"It's not a problem," Tania began, then hesitated. She wanted him to stay, wanted him to reconnect with her with that same bolt of intimate energy, but she knew if she did not sit down to her computer Cheryl would send her a more unnerving jolt through the phone. She sighed. Maybe she could finish this book in a week, or sooner. Boone was not going anywhere that quickly.

"Maybe...when neither of us are busy," she ventured, "we could get some coffee from across the street?" She felt her heart lift as he warmed to the suggestion.

"That would be great, yes." Boone held up the folded map. "Thank you again, too, for this," he said.

"Anytime." Her spirits were buoyed, but she still felt a bit apprehensive. Why did he appear to want to leave so eagerly? "If you change your mind about that birthday cake, too, I got the

sweetener right here." *Maybe something sweeter.*

Boone laughed at that, and nodded his farewell. Tania waited until the door latched shut before sitting down and banging her head against the keyboard.

Five

Five full seconds passed before Boone could find the strength to release his grip from the doorknob. She had been parading around her condo without a bra. All he could see, no matter how many times he had blinked, were those two tight, darkened nipples poking through the thin cotton of her T-shirt. He could swear they had been taunting him, daring him to move for a closer look.

He had half a mind to burst back inside Tania's condo, take her lovely face in his hands, and kiss her full on those inviting, pouting lips. He wanted to take those luscious breasts in hand and suck the nipples through the fabric. That would show 'em!

She, of course, would think him daft and rightfully respond with a slap across his face, if not a swift kick to the groin, and he could forget about coming upstairs for anything again. No sugar tonight in his coffee, no artificial sweetener in Grandma's birthday cake.

He let go and listened for movement on the other side. She had not approached to throw the lock, and he wondered if she did not feel threatened at all, by him or their surroundings. Everywhere else he had lived in this country, people had an obsession with locking away themselves and their possessions, for fear of theft and terrorism and rabies-infested creatures come to take back their rightful land. The apartment he had purchased in Los Angeles even had its own "panic room," a place for the owner to hide away in the event of a break-in. Boone recalled

thinking the concept ludicrous as he signed the contract for the place. Good fences may have made good neighbors, but clearly good locks made for greater paranoia. He felt strangely relieved Tania did not appear to share those feelings with her fellow citizenry.

That he had locked the condo before heading for the car he had leased, however, he did not view as hypocrisy. The condo belonged to Captain Anderson, as did nearly everything in it. He had a responsibility to make sure everything was intact upon the captain's return, and hopefully Alisha would honor that deal as well.

He groaned. *Alisha*. Alisha was still here. She had skipped away to the beach not long after Tania came downstairs to complain about the noise, then stayed gone for hours. Boone waited as long as he could for her, but the stress of getting settled into the new place had taken its toll on him, and he passed out into fitful sleep on the couch. When he awoke, the only evidence of Alisha's return was a note resting on his chest, saying she hadn't waited for him for dinner, and that she had gone back to the beach.

Did she bother taking the spare key? Not likely; the girl never liked to be fettered with such responsibilities. Come to think of it, Boone did not recall seeing the girl even packing her purse for this trip. For all he knew, she had come to Virginia without identification and a single credit card to her name.

Boone cursed. He did not want to sit around and wait for her to return *again*, whenever that would be. The idea was for him to relax, not just her, and he could not do so if he had to play guardian in addition to boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend, he corrected himself. Soon, anyway. Would it be too crass to break up in a note pinned to the front door?

If he could just get to the camera store before it closed,

return to his own element, maybe that would instigate a resurgence in his creativity. Otherwise, he would sit in the captain's condo and go mad.

Returning to Tania's was right out, he knew, as much as he wanted to go back and envelop himself in her cozy, time worn surroundings and drink in her smile and good humor. Actually, he wouldn't have minded enveloping her in a tight embrace, perhaps have her envelop his aching cock in her snug, moist slit...

Down, laddie. Boone leaned against the driver side door.

There was no reason for him to go up there right now, he had to admit, and sap her creative process because he could not regain his just yet. He would wait a few days, let her get some work done before taking her up on her invitation for coffee. Alisha would be gone for good by then, hopefully long before then, he would see to that. Then he would be able to pursue a friendship—and something more—with Tania with a clean conscience.

The sooner the better, he decided, spotting a nice waterfront seafood restaurant in his peripheral vision. When he got back from the store he would take Alisha there for lunch and break it to her gently. She was smart enough not to put up a fuss in public, and he would sleep on the captain's plush sofa again tonight. He would have her in Norfolk the next morning on the first plane back to California, assuming she would want to stay another night.

He shook his head. It would have been easier to have just broken it off in LA. Why did he not just do that?

Because you're a bloody marshmallow, he answered himself. A bloody marshmallow too soft to dispel the look of delight on Alisha's face when he announced he was going on a trip, and she assumed she was coming along. Was she really that

blind to others that she could not read the unhappiness constantly creasing his face these days?

Or was he that much of a wimp, rendered spineless by his misfortunes?

A glint of tanned flesh caught his eye and he looked up from the car, sighing. Speak of the devil...

Alisha's foam rubber thongs made a loud *thwacking* noise as she crossed the lot towards him. Her tote was slung over her shoulder, its contents appeared undisturbed. Light specks of sand coated the tops of her feet. "How can I relax on the beach when it's packed with kids?" she groaned, rolling her eyes. "Noise and screaming and fat little babies with inflatable water wings...ugh! I had to get out of there."

Boone opened his car door. "It's a public beach, Leesh," he said. He had no sympathy for her anymore; she thought only of herself. Of course, so was he at this point, so how could he judge her? "The public is entitled to use it, and why would you let a few kids scare you away?"

"It wasn't a few, it was a horde. Thousands of them. I wanted to swim, and I'm not sharing the same water with a bunch of kids who aren't housebroken yet. What if a full diaper came floating in my path? Gross!"

As opposed to all the sea life that constantly secrete their waste into the sea, Boone wanted to retort, but wisely remained quiet. He did not want to argue about the particulars of fish digestion with Alisha. Instead he asked her if she needed a key to the condo. "I'm going out for a few. There's a camera shop nearby. I'd like to get some film." Against the advice of his doctor, he had packed some equipment in the event inspiration did come.

Alisha brightened. "Thinking of taking some beach shots of me?"

Boone sighed. Alisha never had enough photos of herself. "I thought you didn't want to go to the beach anymore."

But Alisha rounded the car and pumped the passenger door handle. "Kids gotta go back to school eventually. I'll come with you. I don't want to be left alone at the Sandy Pines Rest Home here."

"Fine," Boone said, and mashed the door lock button to allow her entrance. He quickly buckled in and started the engine, hoping Tania had not at that moment looked out the window to see him and Alisha get in the same car. He waited until they were out of the parking lot before he acquiesced to Alisha's request to put down the convertible top.

Six

Tania was too focused upon her Boone, still in his kitchen in Cozelle, to care what was happening in the real world outside her window. She worked through a breakfast of coffee and toast, fleshing out a conversation between Boone and Governor Giles. Nothing too important, but a few exchanges to create an atmosphere that readers would associate with the people of Cozelle. Her fingers attacked the keyboard as the two men talked up the weather and local sporting events.

She paused. Did people in fictional, somewhat fantastical-historical villages play rugby? She thought a moment, then shrugged. They would in this one, she decided, and wondered if her mind unconsciously chose rugby because it was a British sport.

She wondered if the real Boone had ever played rugby, then shook her head. Rugby players appeared to her to be squatty, thick men bulging with muscles and smiles gaping for lack of teeth. Whereas Boone was long and lean with no outstanding muscles readily visible, but that did not mean they were not there.

And, she thought with a wicked smile. Those shorts he had on did wear a bit tight, she had noticed. A twist in the right direction might leave nothing to the imagination. She had to wonder, though, how Boone would have looked in a rugby jersey and cleats, running amok in a field tackling and being tackled, sweat tricking down his neck and onto his chest.

An image of Boone, hair askew and skin caked with mud, materialized, and she closed her eyes to savor it. She saw him rising from a pile of angry flesh and swaggering toward her, the bulge in his shorts more prominent. She saw strong hands tipped with dirty fingernails grasping her waist to pull her close, and could almost smell the musk of the dozen men from whom he crawled to get to her.

Her pussy throbbed as she imagined his sweat-beaded lip brushing against her ear and whispering, "We could use a shower, love."

"Down, girl," she scolded herself. Best to save it for the love scenes. She continued typing up the conversation, deciding to go with rugby. Manly, sexy rugby.

Giles nodded. Tully, Piro's brother, was team captain. Iona had eyes for Tully, who had eyes for Trina. Few boys in Cozelle did not already.

"And Nattie?"

Boone bent forward and spoke into the oven. "I've not seen her yet."

Giles finally turned in his chair. The manservant appeared to be adjusting a cake pan. A blast of sweet aroma escaped before he could shut the door. Giles's stomach fluttered in appreciation. "Well," he said, "I suppose you'll have to join me for breakfast then, friend."

"That would be nice," Boone said with a shy smile, and took Iona's vacated chair.

Boone kept his head bowed and ate methodically. Not an uncommon sight to Giles, but today the manservant appeared distracted. He cast frequent glances toward the oven, then the shining, metal-encased icebox, presumably to catch a newcomer from behind him.

Her Boone was preoccupied, much like the real Boone had been earlier. Tania wondered why. He had seemed so friendly and attentive before she handed over the map. Perhaps it was related to the doctor's orders he had mentioned when they first met? Maybe it was true, then, that he needed some kind of rest. Had he burned out of his job? Suffered a nervous breakdown? Whatever it was, it intrigued her, almost as much as her Boone's behavior, as she continued to play his actions by ear.

She introduced the youngest Pringle, Nattie, who glided into the kitchen in an ankle-length nightgown and a dreamy expression left over from a good sleep. Her dialogue with her father was light and mirthful, yet Tania kept the scene underscored by an obvious tension emitted from Boone as he scrambled from his chair to fetch her breakfast. It would be here where Giles would realize that Boone was in love with Nattie, for it was here where Nattie announced her intention to marry, and where Giles noticed Boone's reaction as he burned himself trying to lift a cake pan.

Boone loved her. Boone was in love with her. And, aware that Nattie was now coming into her own, being more serious than her sisters in her search for a husband, Boone had no choice but accept her eventual departure and the painful knowledge of another man in her bed. No such pleasure awaited a manservant of Cozelle, not even one as skilled and well liked as Boone.

Tania paused to proof her last page. Poor Boone. A good-looking man who cooked and cleaned? She would have been all over that like Senator McCarthy on a Communist.

She shook her head and continued writing well past lunch;

the remainder of the chapter focused on a heart to heart between father and daughter, a deep discussion of Nattie's ideal suitor. This revealed, of course, after Boone took his leave to tend to his burn. Tania followed this with a chapter providing some backstory on Nattie, her dreams and desires, and her plans for making both come true.

When it felt as if her fingertips were going to bleed, she glanced at that dreadful clock and was surprised to see how much time had passed. Then her gaze panned to the window—it was nearly dusk.

Tania hit the save command with a flourish and raised her arms in victory. "Not bad for a full day's work," she announced, but her euphoria was short-lived when she checked her word count. She had written just over seventy-five hundred words. Had an Olympic trial for novel writing existed, she would have been left in the dust.

She had at least fifty-two thousand more words to go, and less than one hundred and twenty hours in which to write them. She could do it, she *would* do it, she promised herself. She was on a roll now, and with the image of her handsome neighbor to sustain her, she knew she should shape her novel's hero into somebody her readers, and her characters, would adore.

She leaned back in her chair and spread her legs, thinking of the real Boone. His legs had a nice shape to them—strong thighs and the sculpted calves of a runner. She pictured those legs tangling with hers in the midst of a playful roll on the carpet, touching a hand to her breast and urging one nipple to harden.

Mmm, nice. She saw their tongues mating in a furious duel, hands groping bare skin. She saw his shorts wrinkle in response to the rapid growth of his erection, pressed hard against her pussy.

She closed her eyes and stroked her crotch over the soft

denim. She could feel herself getting wet.

Very nice.

She was going to have to get this down in a later chapter. She couldn't stop writing now. Much as she was enjoying this interlude, she had to keep plugging away.

Abruptly she hopped out of her chair. Yes, she would keep writing. Right after she fixed herself a snack. And took a shower. And changed for bed, just in case she collapsed on her keyboard tonight. Yes, the light flannel pajamas with the pictures of little puppies all over the pants would be good. She wasn't going to write a novel naked.

Not this one, anyway. Maybe the next one, if she received a healthy advance.

And an audience in her handsome new neighbor.

Seven

The trip to the camera store proved a success, Alisha's complaints of freezing in the shop notwithstanding. She had, though, brought it upon herself, having ducked spontaneously into his car wearing the bare legal limit of clothing. Surely she would have anticipated many store merchants would have turned on their air conditioning to combat the early heat wave. He did notice, however, that Alisha had not been bothered by all the appreciative stares from various male onlookers, in the store and on the road.

Nonetheless, his sojourn in the store, while brief, excited him. He was the proverbial child in the candy store, cherry-picking rolls of film as one would with candies and gums not enjoyed in a long time, and talking shop with the store owner, who clearly felt as passionate about his work as Boone had once been. And would again, he hoped. Before he realized it, Boone had dropped nearly a hundred dollars in the shop and would have spent more had not Alisha tugged on his shirt and whined to leave.

Boone reluctantly complied, then rewarded her strained patience by buying her a low-fat smoothie from an adjacent café. He was putting his purchases in the trunk of their rental car when he noticed the small used bookstore sitting catty-corner from the strip mall. "Wait here for a sec," he told her. "I just want to look for something."

"Knock yourself out." Alisha had found a bench and lay

across its seat, soaking up the midday sun.

The musty scent of book dust slapped Boone directly in the face as he entered the store; a tiny bell rigged to the door announced his presence. From a desk in the front left corner, cluttered with books and papers, a rotund, sixtyish woman with large-rimmed glasses looked up from an active computer and smiled.

"Good afternoon." Her voice was soft and cordial. "Can I help you find anything in particular today?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Ta. I thought I'd look for some beach reading," he said, and quickly ducked down one aisle in search of the romance section. He felt suddenly embarrassed to admit he wished to browse the "bodice-rippers," as he had heard romance books called once. What would he say, though, if he found one of Tania's books? He supposed he could mention they were for Alisha, if the old woman cared, and she likely did not. So long as she made a sale, he figured.

There were two other shoppers in the store, and thankfully neither of them were in the five-shelf section for romance, leaving Boone to browse unfettered. The books were, for the most part, shelved spine out, and as he studied each author's name he noticed that not only was the persistent theme of bright pastel book cover colors giving him a headache, but that the store owner seemed to eschew alphabetization. Tattered paperbacks appeared to be crammed into spaces at random—Jude Deveraux was snuggled next to Danielle Steel, who was next to Maeve Binchy, and so forth. So many names, so many toned, muscle men posed lustily among backdrops of beaches and lush, European fields. Romance fiction was clearly a big business, Boone concluded, for all the books available. It made sense, though, that Tania did not seem to be getting much of the pie if she had to split it amongst all of these other authors.

The search through the romance shelves proved fruitless, and Boone hoped that those who had purchased Tania's books liked them well enough to keep, thereby preventing her from losing royalties via second-hand sales. In fact, he felt a bit guilty looking for her books in a used store, but promised to make it up to her by buying one through a chain store, if he could find one.

He was on his way out the door when he spotted a shelf reserved for works by local authors. There he found several copies of Tawny Garbo's *Bedeveled*, one of them a hard cover with a pale blue dust jacket, complete with the requisite bare-chested, long-maned hero. This had to be a pen name, he decided. The names were too similar not to be.

Snatching the book, he looked around an adjacent shelf and plucked a few spy thrillers at random to save face, and presented the books to the bespectacled store owner for purchase. She did not bat an eye at the romance novel as she wrote him a receipt.

"This is a good one," she did remark. "Miss Garbo lives in the area, you know."

"Really?" Boone pretended to act surprised. This definitely had to be Tania's book. "I suppose I'll have to track her down to sign it for me."

The older woman chuckled. "Good luck. I hear she's as reclusive as *Greta* Garbo. You know, 'I want to be alone.'" She mimicked the Swedish actress's accent. "Never does interviews or booksignings. I'd know, I tried to get her in here once."

Boone thanked the woman and declined a bag for the purchases, holding the copy of *Bedeveled* for intense study. From the looks of things, Miss Garbo was not one for author photos, either, as there was not one available anywhere on the dust jacket. Only one sentence following the book's plot—*Tawny Garbo lives and writes in Virginia*—provided her readers with any clue about her life.

Perhaps she's shy, he mused as he tucked the books under his arm and exited. He had met a number of writers throughout his travels, and had photographed a few on occasion for various magazines. Introverted for the most part, they were, preferring to let their printed words do the speaking for them. Yet Tania had come across as warm and inviting to him. Maybe she just did not like public forums.

Did she like to have her picture taken, he wondered. A beautiful face as that deserved to be on a book cover. Perhaps he could...

The thought dissolved with one of disbelief as his eyes adjusted once again to the sunlight, and he spotted Alisha lounging by the car, talking animatedly with someone. A passerby looking to score, Boone surmised at first, not feeling a bit jealous. The guy would be doing him a favor, actually, to woo her away from him.

Upon approaching the car, however, he recognized fellow photographer Paul Linton, looking casual and cool in a yellow Polo shirt and khaki shorts. Paul had been the one who suggested Virginia Beach as Boone's getaway and, being a native of the area, had talked incessantly of the town's charms while in LA.

"I see you made it unscathed," he greeted Boone with a hearty handshake. Boone let the books tumble into the backseat and returned his friend's good-natured grin. "Planning some light reading by the shore?" Paul asked, eyeing the books.

"I have no plans, that's why I came here," Boone replied, and thanked his friend for suggesting the captain's condo. "It's the perfect location for m—, er, *us*," he added.

Paul looked to Alisha for confirmation, but the girl just shrugged and slurped loudly on the dregs of her smoothie.

"That's great. You two are going to love it here, and I'm glad I ran into you today." Paul pointed to the camera shop with

his own bag of purchases. "I might have known you'd find this place eventually. You can take the boy away from the camera..."

"I know, I know," Boone laughed, fondling his car keys. He was not much for small talk, and thoughts of the unpleasant task he had lined up weighed heavily on his mind. He would call Paul later, he decided, to talk shop, maybe get recommendations for some nature shoots if he was feeling up to holding a camera in his hands again. "Listen," he began, but Paul had said the same thing at the same time.

They laughed awkwardly; Alisha just rolled her eyes. "I was going to say," Boone continued, "that I was going to take Alisha to lunch at the seafood place by the complex."

"Hey, I know the place," Paul jumped in quickly. "Since you're just in town, why don't I treat. They make the best crabcake sandwiches in town, and the best margaritas."

Boone opened his mouth to politely decline, but Alisha chimed in with, "That's great, we'd love it!"

Sigh.

The dazzled look in her eyes, directed at Paul, was unmistakable, and Boone could not blame her for being smitten. Paul had the looks of somebody who should be standing in front of cameras instead of winding the film, with his cropped dark hair, chiseled jaw, and deep tan. His looks were only the half of it, Boone knew, as Paul also had a great sense of humor and a broad life experience that made for some exciting storytelling at dinner parties. What woman would not be interested romantically in a guy like this?

He had half a mind to suggest Paul just take Alisha, get her out of his hair. Maybe then he could ask Tania to lunch today with a clear conscience, but where would they go? What if she suggested the same place?

Tania. Would Tania rather go for a guy like Paul? Boone

felt his heart sink, and reminded himself to meet Paul elsewhere should he call at the condo.

"Terrific." Paul extracted a pen and business card from his shorts pocket and jotted down a phone number. "I just need to do one more thing, and then I'll meet you there. Here's my new cell number just in case. But I shouldn't be more than twenty minutes." He handed the card to Alisha with a wink. "See you there."

"Right," Boone called after his retreating friend, and slid into the driver's seat. As much as he enjoyed Paul's company, he did not want the hassle of hanging around with him, not with everything else on his mind. He did not want to put off breaking ties with Alisha any longer than he had to.

Of course, he thought, if Paul charms her enough at lunch maybe she'll dump me. It was possible. He could play dull to Paul's bravado easily. The thought warmed him as they pulled out of the parking lot onto First Colonial Road.

Alisha buckled herself in and twisted around to inspect Boone's purchases. She held up the copy of *Bedeviled* and gasped.

"Is this a first edition?" she cried, thumbing eagerly through the pages.

"Huh?" Boone watched her, perplexed. He had never before seen Alisha so engrossed in reading material not required for an audition. "I-I don't know. The lady at the bookstore said the author was local. I figured why not brush up—"

But a squeal of joy from Alisha interrupted him. "It *is*, and it's signed, too!" She held up the title page for Boone to see, nearly blocking his view of traffic, and tapped Tania's signature with a perfectly manicured nail.

"How about that?" Boone said. The lady at the store had sold it to him cheap. Interesting that he got it for a song,

considering Tania's reluctance to autograph her works. It had to have been an oversight on the storeowner's part. Now he felt worse for cheating Tania out of the sale.

"My friend Marie, you know, who works at Eve TV, said they're negotiating to buy the movie rights to this book. God, I love this book! I must have read it a thousand times when it first came out. I would *kill* to play Darcy, the sorceress who wins the heart of Prince Oleander from that bitch Lucinda." Alisha clutched the book to her chest as if holding a precious antique.

Boone shook his head. Sorceresses and princes? No wonder he had never heard of Tawny Garbo. The only such characters visible in LA had been created by Tolkien and George Lucas.

Alisha looked at Boone with intense gratitude. "Hey, if this woman lives in Virginia Beach, you think we could track her down? I could convince her that I'm perfect to play the part."

"I don't know." Boone's voice was wary. No way in hell was Alisha going to meet Tania. He was not about to spoil any potential relationship with the lovely writer. "I hear she's a bit of a recluse. You know, like Salinger. I imagine she's unlisted, too."

The Salinger reference, as expected, flew straight over Alisha's head. She shrugged. "Oh, I'm sure she's not as bad as that. She would be flattered to meet a genuine fan, and I am one. That's why I'm perfect for the part. I *know* Darcy better than I know myself."

Boone slowed the car to a red light behind a string of cars, and Alisha leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. "And you knew to get me this book. You are *such* a doll! Thank you."

"You're welcome." Boone felt his stomach roil. A real doll, he was. Right.

Eight

The shower had extended well beyond the time Tania had originally allotted, and the snack became a late lunch that stretched into an early dinner, capped off with half a pint of ice cream. Soon dusk was settling over Chesapeake Beach, and Tania sat once again at her computer, fed but hardly sated. She had wasted too much time doing meaningless things since finishing the first chapter—checking e-mail, checking regular mail, watching her favorite soap, and just general procrastinating. She cringed as she stared at the gaping blank space below the next chapter heading. She had no idea where to go from the first morning in Cozelle.

Think, you idiot, she berated herself. Her inner voice was soon drowned out by the memory of Cheryl singing classic rock, and Tania knew that if she did not get this finished by the appointed time she would be hearing much worse from her agent.

She contemplated another glance out the window. What was her new neighbor doing now? Did he need any more maps printed? She rose, then quickly sat down again. No, best to get some more work done. Save Boone as a nice reward for a job well done, or at the worst a job in need of extensive edits.

She flexed her fingers and tapped the space bar, but not hard enough to create actual spaces. She needed filler, exposition, something to bridge the introduction of Nattie's mysterious love (and, to be sure, Tania knew her readers would know off the bat

of whom the girl was speaking) to the actual coupling. Her readers needed to know more about this world she had built.

She typed:

Iona Pringle glided past the confectioner's, her scuffed brown boots tapping the crisp pine needles blown in her path. Prudence kept her from backing up and purchasing a bag of her favorite toffee, assuming there was any to buy. Even the governor's family had to observe restraint in this time of recession, Giles had cautioned his daughters, if only to serve as an example.

"Absurd."

Her hand flew to her mouth with the pronouncement, and with quick, clandestine glances she checked her perimeter. To her relief, those within earshot appeared too preoccupied with their own problems to care that the middle daughter of Governor Pringle had taken to talking to herself.

Tania paused. It would be good, she decided, to continue the story with Iona. Her past novels had not necessarily focused upon one heroine, thereby allowing for subplots to intertwine and take away the predictability factor. A reader engrossed with Nattie's doings would now read of Iona and wonder how she will figure further into the story. Who would end up with the love of her life in the end, just one or both? Who would have to face the most strife to achieve the happy ending?

Aside from that, Tania felt a kind of kinship with the middle child. She had been one herself, and lashed out at times—not out of a want to make everybody miserable, but to be noticed. Though she had not delved too deeply into Iona's character yet, Tania had a feeling she would shape up well, perhaps more so than the others. Trina, the third sister, was still a bit of a problem, as Tania had yet to decide how to introduce her. Not

only that, how would she figure in the story? There was the temptation to write her out altogether, but Tania was drawn to the power of three. Three sisters in *MacBeth*, three singing Supremes...it was a good number.

She continued writing, lengthening Iona's idle stroll through the busy pathways of the heart of the village, where the young woman spied...what? A crowd. Dozens of curious townsfolk gathered at a central meeting area, like a kiosk or grandstand, trading gossip.

Trina would be among them, yes, with members of the rugby team. They would relay news of an impending marriage as a town clerk prepares to post the banns.

"Oh, this is good," Tania muttered, and typed a furious pace, trading speculative dialogue between sisters and potential suitors. Though hints of Nattie's possible betrothal had been planted earlier, Tania crafted the scene to make a number of couplings possible, between any of the sisters and a number of eligible young men.

Tania stopped and proofed her work, and her face fell slightly as she recalled her own wedding. Hubby had been cross with her two days before, convinced that she had purposely arranged for their most holy union to coincide with the seventh game of that year's World Series. His behavior had baffled Tania, as both had agreed on the date months earlier, and neither one of them could have anticipated the Atlanta Braves fumbling to lose three straight games, thereby making a seventh necessary. Yet, it was still somehow her fault. The ceremony had been scheduled for five in the afternoon. Hubby showed thirty minutes later, and by seven he was in the bar of the restaurant where the reception was held, watching the game with his groomsmen, leaving her to entertain all of his relatives and convince him to come cut the cake during a commercial break.

She should have known then that she had made a mistake marrying him.

She glanced at the clock; it was late now. She so wanted to rip the thing from the wall and toss it like a Frisbee across the parking lot. In retrospect, perhaps there was a reason her ex-mother-in-law had given them the clock, to ensure Hubby would be punctual from that time hence. A nice thought, but it had not worked. Even now, Hubby was lax with their divorce proceedings.

Besides, had she known how her marriage would end, Tania would have advised to be gifted with hedge clippers.

"Gah!" she spat, and rose from her computer for another soft drink. This was no way for a romance writer to think, she knew. She needed to inject passion into this story, and certainly not any of the vengeance-seeking quality. Her career was all that remained now, and damned if she was going to let her ex-husband's ghost disrupt that.

She saved her work. It seemed like a good place to end the chapter, with the overall speculation of the bride and groom, yet she knew she would need more exposition to fill out the story.

She thought a moment, suddenly aware of how quiet the complex was tonight, despite the outside traffic streaming toward the local bars. Her upstairs neighbors were out often due to their duties, so she never expected to hear any noise above her.

Below her, it was also quiet. She wondered briefly what the real Boone was doing now, probably sleeping. He had mentioned something about needing to rest.

Well, she thought wickedly, *let him rest*. If she could get this thing written in a timely manner, she would ask him to help her celebrate. For that, he would definitely need his strength.

"Oh, girl," she chided herself, and crossed her legs tightly to

stifle the ache in her groin. She had it bad, and in a way it was good.

She wondered if Boone had been able to find that camera shop. She had not seen him since he left the apartment, and had not gone looking for him, either. She knew, though, that did not need to do that right now, not with Cheryl's deadline looming over her like the Sword of Damocles. Work first, play later. Lots of play later.

Until then, she had her other Boone to keep her company.

Nine

Her Boone kept her company through much of the night, as people revelled and shrieked along the beach and in their cars. Her next chapter focused entirely on Boone, creating a backstory wreathed in mystery:

He had always been called Boone. Nobody could be certain whether or not it was his given name or surname—he was just Boone, and the people of Cozelle seemed content with it. Boone himself could never offer a definitive answer, for there were no Boones within the province to consult, no family left. Or, and this suspicion had festered in the back of his mind for many years, no family was willing to come forward to claim him.

Yes, thought Tania, *the readers will like Boone*. The mystery of his origins would well make up for the rugged, dynamic qualities of the typical alpha hero found in most romance novels. Boone was not going to be a product of the romance cookie-cutter, and she would fight to the end with Cheryl if the agent disagreed on any facet of his character. Boone was going to be *interesting* and multi-faceted, damn it!

What an inspiration her neighbor turned out to be. Tania continued with a bit of Boone's history, from his adoption into the Pringle family as an apprentice to the manservant he would eventually replace, to the present time as he sulked in his cottage and mourned the loss of Nattie, who was certainly preparing to

marry another man.

Or was she? Two paragraphs later, and Boone had a visitor. Nattie arrived wearing her wedding dress:

Were it possible to have grown even lovelier in the ten minutes (and Boone, to be sure, had often counted the moments between encounters, if only to enhance his anticipation of gazing upon Nattie) since Boone left the kitchen, Nattie certainly found a way to do so. With marked speed she had managed to change into a creamy white cotton shift, which nearly covered her matching slippers, an outfit Boone clearly remembered leaving folded in the young woman's room on the second floor of the main house. An unbroken garland of white flowers crowned her head, and the heirloom medallion attached to a silver chain—the hexagonal crest of the Pringle line—rested firmly between her budding breasts.

Boone saw none of this for the radiance of Nattie's oval face and rich, brown eyes, which at the moment danced with unspoken delight.

Tania sighed and touched a hand to her aching breast. "To have a man look at me and think that," she murmured. Was that not what every woman wanted? The man did not have to be a zillionaire or look like Brad Pitt, but to just be sincere and secure in his love. No wonder romance books sold so well; Tania wondered exactly how many women perceived such thoughts came from their men, or any man.

Talk of Nattie's marriage wasn't immediately broached, however. She thanked Boone for the special breakfast he had made for her, and he downplayed his motives with much humility. Tania shaped Nattie's words to imply that the young girl could see through him, and quickly the topic of conversation

switched to the future, in particular Nattie's intention to run for governor of Cozelle after her father's retirement. *Yes*, thought Tania as she wrote the scene, *why not switch roles?* Nothing wrong with putting a woman in a position of power for once, and now this woman was making Boone feel uncomfortable with strong hints of Giles' early retirement and probable departure. Where would that leave Boone?

"Father has promised a good share of The Grange to me, Boone," Nattie said. "And I have to tell you that your cottage falls within the boundaries he would give me."

"I see," Boone said softly. "So I will be required to move upon your union. I can see no other reason for you to be wearing this marriage garment." He cast a mournful glance around the small living space, everything in its place, save the treacherous vial. His shelter, his womb, punctured by a lovely smile and melting eyes.

Tania looked around her own environs, a sadness creeping into her heart. She would get to keep the condo when the divorce was final, and Hubby would continue to help with the mortgage, but her shelter had been punctured nonetheless by his infidelity. Not that she expected him to sneak in one night and take everything, but her faith in secure relationships had been shattered. Immediately she felt for Boone, though his love was unrequited.

"Of course not, Boone." And her hand touched his shoulder, prickling his skin down to his fingertips. He looked down to an earnest expression that paralyzed, and he opened his mouth to no sound. Never before had another had such an effect on him, a feeling he had heard described once or twice at the pub, while

half-listening through a pint. The conversation of a soul, one had said. One should be so blessed to experience it.

But Boone did not feel blessed. Boone's heart was breaking to see beautiful Nattie in her marriage shift, talking of her future, and perhaps altering his for the worse.

"Indeed," whispered Tania, and saved her work. There appeared now to be enough exposition for readers to be able to follow the rest of the story without complaint. Of course, she would interject throughout the novel more bits of information as needed. What she wanted to avoid most was committing what she believed was the cardinal sin of romance writing, the act of telling and not showing. Too many authors she had read were guilty of this crime, summarizing points of the story that would have worked better as action, writing off the sensuality as incidental and not integral. Such poor prose had prompted Tania to try her hand at romance in the first place. At first, she had thought it would be simple, but now...

She yawned. For somebody who had done rather little and ventured no further from her office living room, Tania felt fatigued. Her hands ached, and she paused to rub them. Outside, she could hear the beach was still alive with passing barflies. She did not need to look directly out the window, either, to know that the coffee shop was bursting to capacity. That was a given, as it stayed open to the small hours.

She thought of throwing on some sneakers and walking over for a *grande* latte. She could certainly use the caffeine to keep her going through to the morning. Prudence kept her seated, however. For one, she had a perfectly good coffee maker in her kitchen, and a selection of grounds ready to brew. For two, she knew the second she stepped foot into that café she would procrastinate by drinking the coffee there, sitting in one of the

café's plush velvet sofas, and reading the dregs of today's newspaper. Even the classifieds would keep her occupied—whatever kept her out of the house and away from this blasted novel. She had wasted enough time today, and she had to fight the urge to sleep and get some work done, despite the possibility she might see her dream muse again.

Not like she would be seeing his human counterpart anytime soon. *Not. Until. You're. Done!*

She settled for quickly setting her coffeepot to brew, and rushed back to her work, feeling a surge of creativity that she did not want dispelled. As the open space of her condo slowly filled with the aromatic scents of coffee kissed with hazelnut, Tania soldiered forward:

It took two hundred and twelve paces, as measured by Boone's wide gait, from the door of Boone's cottage to the center of town where the kiosk stood. An extra five paces to the right lands one well inside the pub—Boone preferred a middle stool in the bar so as to be absorbed in the warmth of other patrons and offer the illusion to a passing stranger that he was often included in their revelry. This is not to say that Boone was not liked by the people of Cozelle. Quite the contrary, his generosity and kindness to the less fortunate, particularly in the lengthy time of rationing and restrictions, had garnered him a status that might become legendary if his beneficiaries chose to relay his deeds to future generations. The yield from his garden, his bee houses, and his skills had seen more than one family through a troubled time. To be sure, Boone would most certainly be included in pub revelry, were he not so shy as to shrink away from the slightest referral.

"Okay, so I lied," Tania told herself. She was not quite

finished with the exposition, but felt the extra passage helped shape Boone's character. She wrote up Boone a bit more, particularly his connection to Cozelle and her people. She played up his skills as cook and tailor, and placed heavy emphasis on his introverted nature.

How shy, if at all, was the real Boone, she wondered. Tania couldn't help noticing how, during their few encounters, he wouldn't look directly at her. His gaze seemed to be forced to look elsewhere. Was it because he didn't find her attractive?

Tania frowned at the possibility. She hoped not. Maybe he did, and didn't want her to feel uncomfortable with being ogled. If he only knew.

She stretched and arched her back, then looked down her chest. Her nipples were still distended, aching for a man's touch. She smiled. Come to think of it, she thought Boone had given them more than a passing glance. Maybe she had made him too uncomfortable? Well, there would be ways to fix that.

How would he react, she wondered, were she to just start rubbing her nipples over her T-shirt, while talking about something ordinary like the weather? *My, but it certainly gets cold for the spring here, you think? I mean, look at me, I'm poking through my shirt.*

Get back to work, girl.

She tried to push thoughts of the real Boone out of her mind, to focus on her Boone now as Nattie asked him to accompany her to town. An announcement was imminent, and Nattie wanted him there. Poor Boone could only guess that he was to be one of a multitude of witnesses to Nattie's marriage, to a son of another affluent Cozelle family.

"Poor thing," she echoed her thoughts, her fingers racing over the keyboard.

Or, maybe not.

The town clerk had just asked Nattie to announce her intentions as the doorbell chimed. Tania's heart leaped into her throat and she jumped, causing her fingers to scatter numerous letters beyond the unfinished sentence, creating nonsense. "Damn it," she cursed, hitting the backspace key and saving what she had written. Her eyes darted to the clock. Who would be calling at this time of night? Morning, rather? It was nearly two.

Then it occurred to her. Boone? The real Boone? Was something wrong?

The frustration on her face quickly melted, and Tania instinctively smoothed down the frizz in her hair and squared her shoulders. She willed away the fluttering in her heart that sparked her nerves, but the sudden throbbing between her thighs remained. That, she didn't mind so much.

It had to be Boone at the door, who else could it be? She rarely interacted with her other neighbors, and Boone, being new in town, might have felt he couldn't turn anywhere else for help. She pressed a hand to her pounding heart and hoped there was no danger involved.

She listened, and heard no knocking. No, if it had been an emergency, surely his call would have been more urgent. He probably just went for a late walk, saw her light was on, and decided to stop by for a chat. He *was* from LA, and those people were always up at weird hours. Cheryl was proof of that. Maybe he just didn't know better.

That gave her an idea, and she smiled as she darted into the kitchen. This distraction she would wholeheartedly welcome.

She ignored the second chime as she selected two mugs from the wooden tree on the kitchen counter and filled each to the brim. "One second," she called gaily, and looped a forefinger around one to carry with her to the door.

"As it happens, I do have some sugar to lend you, but I put

it all in the coffee," she said as she opened the door. "So it looks as if you'll have to come in and—"

Then Tania looked up at her guest, and her smile froze, then quickly fell slack.

"Wha—?"

Ten

The she-crab soup, a house speciality, was delicious, as were the raw oysters appetizer, the scallops and shrimp dinner, and all the side dishes. Normally Boone might have better savored the shellfish doused in melted butter and the taste of the rich, creamy broth layered with sherry and seasoning salt, but the volleyed innuendo between Alisha and Paul was too much of a distraction.

Dinner had been interminable, with Paul monopolizing much of the conversation, talking of his professional and personal exploits. Not a course of the meal went by where the name of a famous supermodel was dropped, picked up again, then drop-kicked across the table, presumably to rub it in Boone's face.

"That's right." Paul snapped his fingers as the plates were cleared away. "I forget how long you've been out of the game. You probably haven't talked to Tyra."

"It hasn't been *that* long," Boone grumbled, and looked over at the awestruck Alisha, who simply propped her head on her elbows and hung onto Paul's every word as if life depended upon it. Some help she had been in defending Boone's professionalism. She was too goo-goo eyed to notice he was even at the table.

Though, this could be viewed as a good thing, Boone knew. Trying to parlay this into a breakup, however, would prove difficult with Paul at the table. As much beer as the man put

away, Paul gave no sign that he needed to use the men's room, or leave early. More than likely, Boone was stuck with Alisha for another night.

A waitress offered coffee and brought a large, oval tray laden with dessert samples. Paul selected the key lime pie, Boone the tiramisu, while Alisha declined. "I'm off dairy and refined sugars," she said as she wrinkled her face at the sweets set before them. "Those of us who work in front of the camera need to watch our figures."

Paul winked at her. "I certainly don't mind watching yours myself," he said as Alisha giggled. "Hope ol' Boone doesn't mind, do you, guy?"

Boone said nothing. He brushed away some of the powdered cocoa dusted over his plate, then plunged the tines of his fork into the square of thick custard, creating four thin divots that quickly fused together again. "Not at all," he replied woodenly. "What would Alisha be without her adoring public?"

Neither Alisha nor Paul appeared to catch the the sarcasm of Boone's remark. Their conversation continued without skipping a beat, while Boone picked at his tiramisu. If Paul could actually *see* anything when he looked at Alisha, then bloody bully for him. Alisha tended to vanish every time she turned sideways.

She was nothing like Tania. Tania had a body, and a brain. He hadn't known her long, but Boone knew she had some substance. She seemed like the kind of woman who could interest him beyond a round of incredible sex. Though, he certainly wouldn't mind the sex, before or after the intelligent conversation.

Or during.

Half-heartedly he took a bite of his dessert. Very good, but his current mood wouldn't allow him to enjoy it more. Perhaps in different company...

He looked up and did a doubletake. Weaving through tables in the distance, her hips swaying with each step in a skin tight black skirt, was a dead ringer for Tania. Boone thought at first it was her and sought to stoop low in his chair so he wouldn't be seen with Alisha, but as the woman neared he knew immediately it was not her. He took a deep breath to slow his heart and filled his mouth with more tiramisu to prevent a sigh of boredom from escaping.

To the right of their table was a large picture window overlooking the docks and put-in bordering the restaurant. Beyond that, Boone could see the condominium complex. Was Tania still holed up in her place, working on her writing? More than likely she was; Boone had no idea which car in the lot was hers, so he couldn't say for certain.

He stabbed at his dessert, creating numerous lines of fork prints in the custard—uniform rows of four, eight, twelve, sixteen...Paul and Alisha's chatter was a slow, deep-voiced banter now, echoing in his head like in a movie slow-motion scene. He ignored and was ignored in return as he forced his mind to imagine something more pleasant.

In this fantasy he willed the frosted glass doors of the restaurant to open, and in slinked Tania in a red minidress that hugged her every curve. She glided closer on stiletto heels, her hair blowing past her shoulders in the standard strong breeze that often accompanies such slow-motion approaches. Her full lips were colored the same hue of the dress, which revealed in a low cut neck her luscious breasts as she bent over the table towards him.

"This seat taken?" she asked, and curled her lips in a hungry smile.

Boone gestured to the empty chair and Tania sat with her legs crossed. The skirt hiked up well past her thighs and she

dangled her shoe from her elevated foot, swinging her ankle back and forth. Boone scooted back from the table for a better look, hoping to catch a sliver of pussy in the shadows of her seat. Her position made it impossible, but Boone nonetheless could feel an erection in progress.

She folded her arms on the table and leaned forward, crushing her exposed breasts. "What's for dessert?" she asked.

"You," he replied. Yes, it was a corny line, but judging by the look of want on fantasy Tania's face, it was working.

This being his fantasy, Boone saw no reason to further the prelude of conversation. He would save that for the real thing. Right now, he wanted to enjoy his dessert.

In one swift motion Tania lifted her legs and draped each one over either arm of the chair, revealing a beautiful, shaved pussy. Boone's mouth watered at the sight of it, more so when Tania snaked two fingers to the edge of her cleft and parted her labia. Just underneath, her pretty pink clit was threatening to pop from its hood.

"Hungry?" she asked. Like he had to answer.

Silverware clattered around them. Dinner chatter rumbled like distant thunder, Paul and Alisha carried on without concern. Boone plunged a finger into his tiramisu and scooped up a dollop of the coffee-flavored custard before kneeling before Tania. He planted a light kiss on her exposed clit before slathering it with the custard. He felt Tania twitch under his gentle touch.

"Ooh, that's cold," Tania squealed.

"No worries, love. It won't be there long." With that Boone leaned in and stroked upward with the flat of his tongue. The tiramisu and Tania's own unique taste blended together for a delightful sensation that hardened Boone's cock to the point of aching. He delighted in Tania's soft, mewling reaction and, encouraged, lapped up the remainder of the custard with the

pointed tip of this tongue.

"So good." Tania's moan caressed him, and rippled his skin. He sped up his attention to her clit in response, and felt her contract with her orgasm just as he plunged his tongue into her slit to feast on her nectar.

"Oh, Boone," Tania whispered, writhing in her chair. Boone held his mouth fast to her clit as she rode into another orgasm. "Boone," she repeated, "could you pass me a creamer?"

"I'll make you cream," Boone muttered.

Tania looked up sharply. "What?" she cried. Only her voice was pitched lower, and masculine.

"What?" Boone asked. He looked up to find an empty chair before him.

And Paul and Alisha looking at him like he had gone mad.

Paul chuckled nervously. "Boone, buddy, where'd you go?" he asked. "I asked could you pass the creamer. What was that you said?"

"I said something?" Bloody hell. Had he just made a pass at an imaginary woman in front of God and all these people? He felt a thousand curious stares boring into his skin, but a cursory glance around the restaurant told him nobody else was paying attention.

"Uh, sure. Sorry about that." Boone shoved the dish of creamer cups in Paul's direction. "My mind was somewhere else." *So was my tongue.* "Suddenly I'm not so hungry either." He pushed away his dessert. He couldn't imagine eating it now, not if he couldn't eat it off of Tania.

Alisha idly drummed her nails on the table. "Well, it's getting late, and I need my beauty sleep. Boone, are you ready to go?"

"Hm? Of course, love. Just let me..." Boone scooted his chair back an inch, then quickly returned to the table and

arranged the cloth to hide his raging erection. No way in hell was he going to walk all the way back to the condo with his cock leading him around like a divining rod.

"Actually," he said, "I wouldn't mind one more refill on coffee myself," he said, and signaled the waitress.

* * *

Staring back at Tania were not the kind, crystalline eyes of her new neighbor, but the tired, mud brown ones of Craig Garber...Hubby. That was, Soon-to-be Former Hubby. He looked as if he had just been mugged, with his thinning blond hair and shirt collar askew, his suit jacket wrinkled. He was leaning against the door frame, panting. Sweat beaded on his forehead, which appeared to have become more visible since the two last faced each other.

"It's two in the morning, what the hell are you doing here?" Her tone was accusative, and rightly so. He had no right to disturb her this late, and why did he look as if he had run a marathon? "Why the panting like a pervert? For Pete's sake, Craig, it's only one flight of stairs, it's not like you had to climb the Washington Monument."

"Hello yourself," Craig said wearily, and rolled his eyes.

"What do you want, Craig? And why didn't you call first? I'm busy."

"You're busy? At two in the morning?"

"I might have been asleep, Craig."

"Well, I took the chance that you'd be up. I know how you stay up all hours when you're writing. I was there once. Man, it's like a freaking sauna outside," he gasped, tugging at his collar. Tania half-expected a gust of steam to rise from his skin, like in a cartoon. Clearly he was overdressed for the weather, and for the time Tania wondered if he had come from one of the bars at the beach. Ever since he took up with his bimbo girlfriend, Craig

had become the world's oldest teenager, dancing and carousing and closing down bars with Bonnie and her perky-breasted friends.

Craig looked at her, puzzled. "You're drinking coffee in this heat? Are you kidding?" He dipped his head inside, however, and his face relaxed, feeling a gust of air conditioning.

"I happen to like coffee, regardless of the weather. I'd think you'd know that after being married to me for some time." Tania moved to pull the mug away. This gift was not for him. She felt truly disappointed. Boone was supposed to be at the door, and she was going to offer him the drink, and they were going to banter on her sofa, the one Craig had not spoiled. "And, in case you hadn't been paying attention while we were together, I'll have you know that I happen to like a lot of things you don't, like tennis and sushi and *monogamy*."

"Yeah, whatever. You got any Coke in the fridge?" Craig edged past her into the condo. It was clear Tania was not going to invite him inside to share the comfort of her cooled living room, and while he had sensed that immediately, she noticed he had yet to pick up on her irritation. Tania fumed, watching him pad into her kitchen and bend into her now open refrigerator.

She closed the door with her hip and followed him. "You can't come barging in here, not at two in the morning, not ever," she cried. "You don't live here anymore."

Craig rose, unscrewed a plastic Coke bottle, and downed a generous swallow. Stifling a belch, he said, "Maybe, but I'm still paying for this place."

"You didn't pay for that Coke."

Craig rolled his eyes, plunged his free hand into his pocket, and smacked down two quarters on her kitchen counter. "A small price to pay for your time. I should be afforded some rights here, you know. We are still married, for the time being."

"It shocks me that you would bring that up, Craig, since it was your decision to *end* the marriage, and you lost all rights to me and *my* condominium and my groceries the second you broke our marriage vows with Chesapeake Bay Barbie." She cast a suspicious glance toward the front window into the parking lot. "She's not waiting out in your car, is she? The people here are always concerned about property values dropping."

Craig ignored that catty remark, and Tania felt suddenly guilty for it. She had tried so hard not to be bitter.

"That's partly why I came here to talk to you about." He started into the living room.

"I hope she has clothes on. The police double their presence around here on the weekends. Wouldn't want her to get picked up for soliciting." *Damn it.* Why could she not stop herself? Why was she not writing this down for a later book?

"Very funny. She's not here, Tania," Craig muttered, and moved to take a seat on the sofa when Tania's cry froze his rear in mid-sit.

"You are never, *ever* to sit on that couch as long as I am breathing." Her voice was cold and firm.

"Why?" Craig cast her a bewildered look. "It's just a couch."

"It's *my* couch, and I have to sit on it. I happen to be very much attached to that particular couch and don't wish any ill associations with it, as with the last couch I owned."

Craig had to think about that one, and when realization dawned he groaned loudly. "Oh, for Christ's sake, Tania—"

She pointed to the recliner. She was not as wedded to that; it would be the first thing to go if the Eve TV deal was made. "If you have a piece to speak, you'll do it here or you'll do it standing up, since you're never going to oblige to my preference of you hanging from the balcony by your shoestrings over Captain Anderson's cactus bushes."

"Fine." Craig moved to the recliner, but an even colder look from his soon-to-be ex-wife stopped him from reaching for the handle to raise the footrest. No way was Craig going to make himself at home.

"Again, what do you want, Craig?" Tania returned to her office chair and swiveled toward him, sipping from the coffee mug. "I have a deadline to meet and I need every second I can get."

"Yeah?" Craig smiled wanly. "So you are working on another book, huh? More heaving bosoms and sweaty palms?" Craig, to her knowledge, had never read any of her novels, and while he had encouraged her writing in the past he never saw much value in the romance genre. The royalties she had earned, however, he appreciated.

"A thriller, actually, about a woman scorned who murders her ex-husband and his bubblehead girlfriend." Tania smiled wickedly. "I'm looking forward to researching it."

"Okay, I can see you're not in the mood to be civil, so I'll get right to it." Craig tightened the bottle cap on his Coke and set the bottle on the carpet. "It's about Nana's ring."

Tania felt needles stabbing her heart. Craig's grandmother's ring was a beautiful 10-karat ridged band encrusted with alternating rubies and diamonds. Craig had given it to her as her engagement ring, and she had worn it every day since receiving it until the day his infidelity was discovered. The ring was the most beautiful and most valuable gift any man had ever given her. While Tania could not fault its original owner, a woman she had never known, for the decline of her marriage, she could not bring herself to slip the piece of jewelry back onto her finger. All of the good memories attached to that ring had been usurped by Craig's infidelity. It was currently taking up space in the firebox sitting in her closet, in a velvet jewelry case with the simple gold

band Craig had given her on their wedding day.

Looking at Craig's grim expression, however, told her that she might never get the opportunity to wear it again. Her heart sank. She had hoped one day to see past the pain she presently associated with it, and put it back on her finger.

"This couldn't wait until a reasonable hour?"

Craig only smiled sheepishly. "I couldn't sleep."

He had had an argument about the ring with his living blow-up doll, is what he meant. "You gave me that ring," Tania said pointedly. "It is my property now, and you have no right to ask for it back."

"Tania," Craig sighed.

"You have no legal right to demand it back. I didn't sign a prenup to that effect, and good luck trying to prove in court that I agreed to give it back in case our marriage didn't work out." Rising anger festered within her.

"That ring is part of my family, Tania, it should stay in the family." Craig's hands tightened into a large ball, which he tapped against his chin. "You are no longer part of my family."

"And Barbie will be?" Tania felt sick at the thought of Craig's Psych 101 tart fanning out her fingers to display that glorious ring. She knew how it would clash with the girl's bizarre nail polish patterns.

"Her name is *Bonnie*, Tania," Craig said, exhausted, "and yes, she will be. I intend to marry her as soon as possible, when our divorce is final."

"Oh." Tania felt suddenly deflated. The needles twisted through the chambers of her heart now, sending warm blood tingling throughout her body. "Well, congratulations then."

"Thanks." He hardly sounded grateful. "I would like for my fiancée to have the ring my grandfather gave his fiancée, and one day I would like for my son to be able to give that ring to *his*

fiancee. Please." Craig leaned forward; the springs underneath him creaked and rocked with his every movement, sounding like a wounded bird in the brief pocket of silence.

Tania gripped the mug tightly and looked at Craig; the quiet plea reflected in his eyes was genuine, she saw, and it hurt her even more to see it. He truly was in love with this girl, and it was truly over between them. He wanted a son with his new love interest, while he had never mentioned the prospect of children with Tania. In the past Tania had attributed his silence on the subject to either their workloads not being conducive to parenting, or just general disinterest. With Tania it had never mattered one way or the other if they had a family, and with Craig it seemed their marriage was not quite rooted enough to have children. Not that it had bothered Tania, as she was rather fond of the unpredictability.

But he craved permanency now. A wife, a child, a home, a ring. Her ring. His gift to her. Barbie would have it all, and all Tania would have was a condo full of old furniture, the recurring nightmare of seeing her husband's bare ass bouncing atop a blonde bimbo, and a constant struggle against writer's block. Where was her stability?

"Please, Tannie," Craig repeated. He had not called her Tannie since their early courtship. "I hear your books are doing well."

"I might have a deal with a cable network to adapt *Bedeviled*."

"Really?" Craig's eyebrows raised, impressed. "You'll be coming into quite a bit of money, I imagine."

"I'll get what's left over after Cheryl and Uncle Sam take theirs."

Craig loosened the fist and held his palms up to her. "You see, you're finally coming into your own with your writing."

That's terrific. I always knew you had the talent, and it's paying off."

Tania could sense something behind all this flattery, and then it came.

"You'll be able to buy your own ring," he said. "Start a new tradition if you remarry and have children of your own."

"I like the ring I have," Tania said.

The calm broke, and Craig cringed. "Damn it, Tania! If you like it so much, how come you're not even wearing the damn thing!"

"How can I, Craig?" she countered. "It reminds me too much of you to wear. You think I don't want to wear it? Well, I do, but how can I wear it now and not be sure I'm going to look into those precious stones and see a reflection of you hump—"

Craig stood and waved her silent. The recliner rocked backward violently and swayed to one side, knocking over the Coke bottle. "I know, Tania. You caught me and Bonnie on the couch. I know, I was there. And I've apologized practically every day since, because that was not how I wanted you to find out, but it happened, and it's over, so stop bringing it up."

Tania said nothing at first. She had seen Craig angry before, but never like this. Usually his anger had built upon his frustrations over various failures, but here he was very assertive. It was so unlike him. Was this another side effect of living with Barbie? Had being married to her actually held back his confidence?

"I came to you in good faith," Craig said. "Despite our present animosity, I still care for you and still think you're a great lady. You certainly deserve much better than I gave you."

I deserve the ring.

"And for some reason I had thought you would have enough class to recognize that some things are precious to me, too,"

Craig continued. "That ring is a part of me, and I don't want it to leave the family."

"You're calling me classless?" Tania challenged. This from a man who held end-of-semester parties for his seniors at Hooter's?

"No, that's not what I meant," he said softly. "I know you're attached to that ring, Tania, but its meaning is gone now. I can't imagine why you want to hang onto it, unless you're doing it to deliberately hurt me." He held up his hand before Tania could speak. "I hurt you more, I know, but still..."

"You owe me," Tania said, but inside she had to admit he was right. She did want to hurt him. What better way to do that than by holding onto to the one thing that would complete his perfect picture?

"I do, and you're getting this condo free of mortgage *and* a healthy alimony payment. I'm having to work summers and overloads in the regular calendar year to regain my financial foothold. I might have to adjunct, too, at the community college, but I'm not complaining. That's not payment enough for you, that I'm working myself to death so you don't have to get a real job and support yourself?"

Tania glanced back at her work, her inspiration dissolved. There would be no joy in Cozelle, not until she could ignite her creative spark again. She sighed. It was nice that she did not have to worry about keeping the roof over her head while she wrote, though the implication that writing was not "real work" stung her. It was work to her, but Craig was indeed going the distance for her, providing her well. So yes, it was payment enough.

She also liked to think she could be the classy person Craig had called her, and hand over the ring, but a part of her still wanted to see Craig and Barbie suffer for their dalliance. Why

could that not be part of the payment? Why could she not be able to lord something over them?

Moreover, why could she not do that and not feel guilty about doing it?

Slowly she swiveled the chair back to Craig and squared her shoulders. "Could I at least have a few days to mull this over?" she asked. "Cheryl wants this book next week first thing, or it's my ass. If this falls through, there could be no TV deal or anything else, and I might actually have to look for a 'real job.'" Unbidden, then, came the thought of Tania teaching creative writing at Craig's school. *Wouldn't that be a laugh?* "I really don't want to deal with any divorce hassles until I'm done."

"If you hand over the ring now, there won't be any more hassles," Craig said calmly, but Tania's withering expression defeated him. "Okay, I'll give you one week. We can discuss it then, preferably with cooler heads. I'm sorry to have sprung this on you like this, too. Especially at this ungodly hour."

"Forget it. This was actually more pleasant than the last surprise you sprung on me."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" Craig's voice sounded more amused than upset now.

"I'm a writer, Craig. Writers' energies are born from suffering. Look at the masters, they never had it easy. Why should I?" Tania smirked.

"To my memory, Hemingway and Fitzgerald never had Fabio pose for their covers, either."

"They didn't have the right marketing people behind them." The two locked gazes for a moment, and laughed together. Despite the tension, Tania was glad they could still do that. Maybe the divorce process would not be too unpleasant.

"I should go then. Thanks for the Coke." Craig looked longingly toward the door but did not move. "I feel bad, though,"

he added. "Bonnie's expecting me to come home with something."

"She is? Well, then." Tania stood and reached for the wall, lifted the clock from its peg, and presented it to him. "Consider this an early wedding gift."

Eleven

Boone and Alisha arrived home around ten, whereupon they went about their separate business. Alisha disappeared into the bedroom for her nightly yoga practice, while Boone dressed down and hit the sofa. He watched a bit of television but found nothing to his liking, then tried to concentrate on the copy of *Bedeviled*, once he had managed to release it from Alisha's eager grasp. A perfect imprint of Alisha's amused expression upon his opening of the book lingered in the corner of his mind. "Going soft in our old age, aren't we?" she had accused him playfully. "Reading girlie books."

"Maybe I just want to rediscover my romantic side." Boone thumbed through the pages, not looking at her.

Now, an hour later, he was still stretched on the couch with the book splayed open on his bare chest. He felt out of the mood to read. It had nothing to do with the quality of the writing—the pages he had skimmed were tight and very well written—so much as the quality of his evening. He certainly hoped Alisha was not expecting sex tonight. All he could think of was Tania, alone in her condo, and how he longed to be up there instead of him, stretched across her couch, his body twined around hers and his eager cock pressed against her abdomen, longing for entrance.

Stop it. He slapped the book shut. He certainly did not need to be reading anything that might further agitate his libido. He might end up taking Alisha from behind while she was bent in

the downward facing dog pose, and probably slip by calling her by Tania's name during a particularly erotic moment. So much for the rest and relaxation his doctor ordered of him.

Alisha eventually emerged from the bedroom in a pair of ash shorts and white chemise. A thick layer of lavender-scented overnight cream was slathered on her face, only her eyes and lip area were bare. Without a word she darted into the kitchen and produced a cucumber. Boone immediately knew she was going to cut two slices for her eyes; this was a more than obvious sign that she did not want to be bothered in bed.

It also meant something else was going on.

"What's all this, then?" Boone pointed to her face, but he had an inkling, remembering previous conversations with Alisha as she cut up vegetables for cosmetic use.

Alisha looked up from the wide blade in her hand. "What do you mean? Paul's doing a nature shoot tomorrow morning at this state park and I'm going with him to pose for some pictures. It's going to be really early, though, so I'm going to bed now."

"A shoot? When was this decided?"

"At dinner. You don't remember? You were sitting right there while Paul was talking about it."

"He did?" Right. That must have been around the time he was fantasizing about Tania Tiramisu.

Alisha looked up at him innocently. With the cream on her face and her hair stringy wet from the shower, she looked comical, like she had been hit in the face with a cream and cucumber pie. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Hm? No, you do what you want." Quite the contrary, Boone was ecstatic. Alisha was getting out of the house, and that might afford him some time with Tania, if she was willing to give it to him.

On the other hand, it would further delay his breaking up

with Alisha. They had gotten back from dinner so late that Boone did not have the energy to say or do anything at this point. Perhaps the excitement of her first *bona fide* shoot with a professional photographer in weeks would help soften the blow, and he could do it tomorrow. He could convince her that she really needed to be back in LA, posing for magazines and preparing for this *Bedeviled* audition.

Alisha wrapped the remains of the cucumber in plastic wrap and returned it to the vegetable crisper. "When you were in the bathroom, I asked Paul if he knew where to find Tawny Garbo."

"You did?" Boone felt a weight against his chest.

"Yeah. He knows her name, but couldn't tell me where to begin looking for her. I even tried the phone book, but there's no listing."

Boone relaxed, and picked up the book again with the pretense of reading it. His eyes glazed over the same sentence over and again. "Well, I don't suspect Paul is too acquainted with the area's *literati*. Besides, I don't really see the point in tracking down the author. I'm sure once she signs away the movie rights she has no say in how the film is cast."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Alisha rounded the counter and perched on the edge of the couch, shuffling the cucumber slices between her polished fingers. "Marie told me once they had bought a book from another author who was very active in the casting and writing."

"Do tell." Boone turned a page and hoped Alisha would do the opposite.

"Yeah, the woman drove everybody insane on the set. I think they eventually barred her."

"Well, maybe they've learned from that mistake, and just want Ms. Garbe—, er *Garbo* to just sign away the rights, take the check, and let them worry about everything." He cast a

worried glance up at Alisha. She had not noticed the slip.

"Still," she shrugged, "I'd love to meet her, and I'm sure she has enough clout to negotiate adapting a screenplay."

Boone warmed at the thought of Tania coming to LA to work.

Alisha touched two fingerpads to her lips and pressed them against Boone's. "G'night. Try not to move around in bed too much, okay?" She would be sleeping ramrod straight on her back tonight, Boone knew, so as not to mess up her face. "I set the alarm." With that, she scurried away.

"Don't worry. I'm going to stay up for a while and read. If I fall asleep here, just leave me be." Boone had no intention of climbing into bed with Alisha. He could not bring himself to do it, even if just to sleep. The sofa would suffice.

Tania's bed would have been a better alternative.

* * *

Boone looked up at the ceiling and frowned. The walls were paper-thin here, he realized, to say nothing of the ceiling. It was well past two now, and something was going on in Tania's condo. Footsteps pounded within the vicinity of her living room office, and muted, angry voices vibrated downward into the first floor—the noise woke him immediately.

He felt suddenly jealous. Who was up there with her at this hour, and why were they fighting?

Tania had not mentioned having a boyfriend, then again he had not become acquainted enough with her to get into truly personal details. Had she gone out on a date this evening while he was out to dinner with Alisha and Paul, and brought him home?

A pang of sadness numbed him. She certainly had that right. Who was he to tell her different? He was just a stranger, a new neighbor asking for directions and making idle talk. He had not

even the guts to tell her he had a girl living with him now, if only temporarily.

He listened for more anger filtering from the ceiling, but all was quiet now. Maybe Tania and her fellow were no longer talking and had graduated to something else? Heaven forbid.

He sighed. Now he couldn't sleep. He doubted television at two in the morning would be any better than what was offered earlier, so he reached back for the lamp and tried Tania's novel again. The writing was good, as he had observed earlier, but his mind wasn't entirely into it.

Thoughts of Tania crowded his mind, thoughts of those lovely legs curling around his in full embrace, her bare, peaked nipples brushing up against his chest...that sweet pussy melting in his mouth. The stirrings of an erection tugged at his shorts.

He looked down the open page to find he was reading a similar description of Tania's fictional couple, Prince Oleander and the sorceress Darcy, in such a position. He closed the book again and shut his eyes. It was going to be difficult to resist Tania, he knew sadly, as he craved release from the sexual frustration building up inside him. Since he could not release it in the way he wanted, he opted for the next best thing, in his opinion. The temptation was strong to cup his growing shaft and masturbate into relief, but he saw no pleasure in sex for one. So he stood and willed the erection away as best he could.

His California Angels windbreaker was slung over the back of one of the captain's counter stools. Boone reached into a pocket for his pack of clove cigarettes. The captain had explicitly expressed to him not to smoke in the house, and while the patio would have sufficed, Boone instead decided to pace the parking lot. He needed the space, and maybe a short walk would expedite his relief. If not, he would cross the street to the beach and pace the shoreline, walking all the way to North Carolina if need be.

Cars lined the lot of the complex, as well as that of the coffee shop and the huge gravel area next to it, which Boone had learned earlier was reserved for overflow parking for the area bars. He noticed as he smoked, however, that a number of people parking there were slipping away to other bars and restaurants along the area. It surprised him to know that the local dives would still be open; he hadn't figured this to be a town that stayed open for twenty-four hours. He wondered if the tow trucks would be out in force, and on instinct he checked the windshield of his rental to make sure the parking permit was hanging from the rear view mirror. It was.

Movement from behind alerted him to a figure descending the stairs by the captain's apartment. A thinning blond in a heavy suit plodded across the lot, hefting a large clock that looked quite familiar.

What? Casually Boone approached the man as he unlocked his hatchback and unceremoniously tossed the clock in the back of his car. Yes, it was the aforementioned timepiece Tania thought hideous. Why would her date steal her clock, though? How could a date turn so wrong to prompt anyone to do something like that? Unless, of course, this man was not a suitor, but the equally hideous ex-husband, out for some kind of vengeance. At first glance, in the light of the yellowed lamppost overhead, he hardly looked the monster.

The man noticed he was being watched and turned to Boone with eyebrows raised. Boone smiled and flicked a bit of ash away from them. "Nice night for it," he said, friendly. "I'd ask you for the time, but I think I can manage it from this distance, thanks."

The man just rolled his eyes, his shoulders sagging and rounded the car to the driver's side door. "This town is just full of loons," Boone heard him mutter.

Twelve

Interminable seconds passed, clicking noises grated his senses, coupled with the patient breathing drawing him in and out of the crowd. When the dizzying sensation subsided, Siddron had signed his name alongside Nattie's on the marriage banns and announced without ceremony: "This union is recorded. Congratulations."

"What has happened?" asked Boone, bewildered.

Nattie's eyes reflected her joy. "We are married."

And slowly Boone smiled, reaching into his pocket with his free hand to produce a ring. The closest onlookers swarmed as one around the couple for a clearer view; it was a beautiful piece of jewelry. The gold band was ridged and set with alternating rubies and diamonds. It was a ring worthy of only the most regal beauty, and no doubt Boone was certain his fellow townsfolk now wondered how such a ring had come into his possession.

He looked to Giles, who nodded. The old man was well familiar with the story.

Boone held up the ring to a dazzled Nattie. "This ring was found on my person when Henry Pringle found me as an abandoned child. Nobody can say exactly how or why a young babe had come to possess it, but it was decided that this ring was somehow connected to my family, whoever they are, and perhaps one day I could use it to trace them.

"However, I would be much happier to pass this ring along

to my new family. If you are serious in wanting me as your husband—"

Nattie squeezed his hand. "I am. Make no mistake."

Boone's heart pounded as Nattie held up her free hand and, being released from her grip, he slipped the ring on her waiting finger. Their witnesses cooed in appreciation. "Then this ring is yours now, until death."

"It's beautiful." Nattie held up her hand for all to see. The sun reflected the deep reds and whites of the stones, casting tiny spots, which danced around the square like enchanted fairies.

"Not so fast!" shouted a voice from the background. There came a collective gasp, then a parting of the crowded as a harried, balding man in a cheap suit barged forward, dragging along behind him a buxom blonde wearing a tight-fitting dress with ice pick heels.

"That is my ring, and it belongs to me and my girlfriend, and you can't have it," the stranger whined. His pouting companion thrust out her ample chest as if to say "Nyaah! So there."

"Excuse me?" Boone raised an eyebrow.

"You heard me, big nose. Cough up the ring."

"Of course," Boone said calmly, unaffected by the man's insulting manner. "Let me first do this."

And Boone reached behind him, extracting the five-hundred megawatt phaser gun from the hidden holster in his pants, and fired. The stranger and his bimbo piece of ass were disintegrated on the spot, leaving behind a foul-smelling black stain on the ground where they once stood.

"Now." Boone turned back to his adoring Nattie. "Where were we?"

Tania highlighted the offending passage and hit delete.

Delicious as it sounded to her, it did not belong in the story. No more than Nana Garber's ring belonged in her possession, she realized sadly. She should have just given Craig the ring tonight and let it be, she knew, but she could not seem to let go of it, or her anger. It was not healthy, and here it was affecting how she wrote. Of course, she could have blamed the recent passage on lack of sleep. Craig had left not long ago, and she was too wired to go to bed.

While this book did have to have a certain balance of conflict to keep the action going, she knew if she injected too much of her bitter feelings into the story it would not read well, and therefore not sell well. Cheryl would probably throw it back at her and tell her to start over. This whole divorce business was going to ruin her career if she could not separate her creativity from her personal feelings.

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Maybe if she had some free time tomorrow, she would arrange with Craig to drop off the ring in a neutral location, get the monkey off her back, and finish the book. For now, though, she would try to finish this chapter before getting some sleep.

Just as she turned back, a point of light caught her peripheral vision, and she squinted into the dark to better see the glowing red ember bouncing around the lot. Somebody was out for a late night breather; Tania would not have minded joining him or her for a cigarette, if she smoked. Maybe she should start, get her mind off her troubles.

Looking more closely, she saw it was indeed a man, a man wearing only a pair of black shorts. In the dull glow of the lamplight, she took in his finely sculpted back and calf muscles as they flexed with each lazy step through the lot. The shorts appeared tight enough to accentuate his rear, one into which a woman could definitely sink her nails as he pounded his shaft

into her...

Ooh. Tania felt suddenly warm as blood pounded through her veins and desire pooled between her thighs, making her pussy ache. She definitely had to remember that image, if not for this book then for the next one. She felt giddy. *Welcome back, girl.*

Then his head turned toward the building, and a gasp caught in her throat. It was Boone.

And his front looked just as good—broad chest, strong shoulders, and a washboard abdomen. "Oh, my." LA had been good to this British boy.

As much as she had wanted to stay and spy on this fine specimen of neighbor, the pull to record her thoughts was too strong. She made it back to her computer and reread the last few paragraphs, deciding to eliminate any mention of the ring altogether. No sense in drudging up old memories in Cozelle when there were new ones to create.

Welcome back, muse.

"Okay, where was I?"

"What has happened?" asked Boone, bewildered.

Nattie's eyes reflected her joy. "We are married."

* * *

Her voice muzzled into his pounding heart. "Are you happy, Boone?"

"Very much so, Miss Natalie."

"Nattie," she giggled. "I think you can call me Nattie now."

She tilted her face upward and arched the balls of her feet upward to meet his parted lips. The kiss was soft, and robbed him immediately of his breath and his will to maintain composure. He tightened his grip across her back for support, wrinkling the fine material of the robe. He didn't notice her

hands retract and press softly against his chest, then reach back to tear at the button on her robe that Siddron had fastened.

As they swiveled around toward his bed—their bed—he remained in contact, gliding his tongue across her lower lip, tracing the corners of her mouth, responding in kind to her caresses. Quietly time stilled and the room melted around them. Boone acknowledged only her hands fumbling with his shirt, pushing the material away to reveal his bare, heaving chest.

She took his hands and pressed them to her hips, sliding them upward. "Help me, Boone," she pleaded and, with her hands guiding his, he had removed the shift. She was naked before him now, inviting him to take in her delicate bust, taut abdomen, and the hidden trove nestled between her thighs.

Boone opened his mouth, yet no words escaped, only a low groan of want to accompany the ache in his groin, which Nattie dared to gently massage. He hardened instantly with her touch, biting back a smile as her eyes widened with the discovery of his size.

"Oh," she gasped, and loosened the rope belt binding his trousers. "I'm ready for you now, Boone."

Now. With one hand drumming lightly on the keyboard, Tania's other hand slid down her shirt and toyed with the band of her shorts. Her fingers slipped underneath and bypassed the skimpy fabric of her thong, inching downward until she reached the cleft of her pussy and burrowed deep in a search for her clit.

Oh, this was gonna be good!

Boone kissed a trail down her abdomen. Each point of contact elicited a moan of appreciation from his new wife, but none so enthusiastic as when he reached her mound and caressed the soft, pale skin of her inner thigh.

Soon he was kneeling at the foot of the bed for better access. Stroking the silken triangle covering her cleft, he gently pried her folds apart and laved the tip of his tongue downward, his gaze fixed upward to ascertain her reaction. Nattie did not disappoint him; her eyes closed, her neck arched back as she gasped with delight. He paused to rest his cheek against her thigh and watched her; she looked so beautiful, so willing to receive his ministrations. His heart tugged at the mere realization, that he was making love to her.

Emboldened by this thought, he bent his head back down and kissed the throbbing bud before him, then suckled. He felt Nattie's body rock forward as two hands grasped either side of his head, keeping him in place. A few minutes later, to his satisfaction, she erupted.

"Boone." Her voice rang with ecstasy. "What are you doing to me?"

"Everything I can, until I wake from this dream."

And Tania typed slowly, with one hand, while the other stroked her clit in a circular motion. If only Boone, the real one or the fictional one, would do that to her...

"Now, Boone."

"Look at me, Nattie." And she obeyed. He pressed his forehead to hers, their gazes locked so that Boone could watch her reaction the second he entered her, the second he felt this new sensation. Her warmth, her safety, her soul. Guiding himself into her, gently at first, he saw her face contort sharply, then relax as she quickly accustomed herself to his length.

And Tania leaned back in her seat, shifting for better comfort as she sped up the attention to her clit. She throbbed all

over just reading the screen, and when she finally came she felt what little underwear she had on become soaked instantly. She was ready for that cigarette now. Actually, she was ready for more than that.

Abruptly she leaped from the chair for the window, her excitement fading instantly upon seeing the deserted lot. Of course, she knew. She had been at the keyboard for a while, certainly much longer than it took for somebody to sneak a quick smoke. What would she have said or done, though, had he still been pacing the asphalt close to three in the morning? *Come on up here, you have to read this scene with a character I based partly upon you. It's made me so damn horny...better we should act it out?*

She sighed, saved the chapter, and switched off the computer. That would do for this workday. Perhaps pausing on this high and hot note would allow for some rather pleasant dreams to fuel her through another day of writing. If only she *could* have researched that last scene further. A smile played on her lips.

"Thank you, muse," she said, her eyes on the floor.

The light switch was by the front door, and as she got there she heard a strange movement on the other side. Heavy breathing, coupled with thick footfalls. She glanced through the peephole, biting back her surprise upon seeing Boone's distorted profile.

What's he doing there? Not that she was angered, just surprised. Perhaps he had lit another cigarette and decided to counter its dangerous side effects with stair-stepping exercises. It seemed like an even faster track to a heart attack, however, not to mention being very ridiculous.

He gasped as her door flew open, and the two stared at each other for a silent, awkward moment. Boone's grin was sheepish,

as if he had been caught with a dirty magazine. There was no cigarette in his hand, but he had put on a T-shirt since she saw him last.

"You have to...er, I'm sorry," he stammered. "I had heard voices from up here in my apartment earlier. Sounded like you were having a row, and after that I saw some bloke making off with your clock." He shuffled on the hardwood landing. "I know it's in the wee hours, but I saw your light on and I couldn't get to sleep knowing you might need some assistance. I thought I'd be the good neighbor and check in on you. Make sure you're okay."

Tania heard his words, but wasn't listening. She was not looking at Boone the neighbor, but Boone the creation, the inspiration. Boone, Nattie's lover, whose practiced mouth and skilled hands had driven his new wife into a fit of erotic ecstasy. Tania focused on Boone's hands as he gazed expectantly at her, willing them to touch her and draw out her own passions.

"Everything is fine," she finally said with a growing smile. "Everything is so much better, now that you're here." And before she could catch herself and return to her reality, she reached a hand around the back of Boone's neck, drawing him into her condo and down toward her waiting mouth for a searing kiss.

Thirteen

What the deuce?

His last coherent thought was of Tania's well being. He had recalled the bitterness in her voice as she had mentioned her pending divorce, and he could only imagine how she might be feeling after seeing the man who had to have been her husband. He also wondered whether or not the clock had been given to him or thrown at him.

Or, maybe the bugger took it, thinking he would intentionally make her upset. Either way, after the man left he had noticed tense movement in her condo as he stole a glance at her window during his smoke. Her personal life wasn't his concern, but he couldn't rest until he knew she was okay, and he decided to check in on her after making himself reasonably presentable. If she told him to bugger off, he would apologize profusely and give her a day to cool off before visiting again.

Now he was here, where he had wanted to be since the moment they met, engaged in passionate lip-lock as one of her hands quietly snaked down his spine, the fingers interlocking with the other hand as they met at the small of his back. Their contact was surprising, to say the least, but he adjusted rather quickly and slowed his breathing, drawing in the scent of her honeysuckle shampoo, and feeling suddenly self-conscious, having smoked a clove cigarette. But Tania gave no indication that she was bothered by it.

He was still, however, a bit hesitant to reciprocate her

caresses. He tasted no hint of alcohol as her mouth parted on his, yet had no way to tell if anything else was currently distorting her frame of mind. To be sure, he was enjoying this, and did not want it to end. However, he did not want Tania to suddenly "wake up" and realize what she was doing, and somehow blame him for it.

She broke off the kiss and took a deep breath, smiling at him with a gesture to the sofa. "Please." Her voice was husky and inviting, and he quickly obliged her request, perching at one end like a nervous schoolboy on a first date. She locked the door behind them and moved to sit next to him, tucking her bare legs underneath her, her body facing him.

"Are you sure you're all right, Tania?" he asked, easily noting the way she stared back at him, the way she leaned forward so he could see her full breasts, which appeared ready to burst from her scoop-necked blouse. With no makeup, and her hair slightly mussed from a day's neglect, she was still more beautiful than Alisha after an intense session with a professional dresser. In just this simple pose, this innocent yet desiring expression in her eyes, she exuded more sex appeal than many of the models he had photographed over the years. He could feel his cock fighting its loose restraints in a struggle to become fully erect.

He wanted to pinch himself. This had to be a dream, he decided. He was going to wake up on the captain's couch with cum staining his shorts and Tawny Garbo's book lying across his face, and he was going to discover he had dozed off while reading one of the steamier scenes, his passion wasted in a fit of semi-conscious jacking off.

Tania nodded, saying nothing.

"If you are okay, then, I best be going," Boone started, but was frozen in his seat. She was so lovely, and he was so afraid to

reach out to her for fear of unexpected repercussion. "I know you have a deadline to make, but I would like to talk with you tomorrow, er...actually, later this morning, about something, if that's okay."

"Yes, tell me later, but now," Tania said, and reached behind her with both hands to remove her shirt, revealing a lacy white bra with thin straps, her darkened, erect nipples visible through the sheer fabric.

"Tania, what are you doing?" But he knew exactly what she was doing to him. He shifted for better comfort on the couch, but could see no way to do so without making his stiffening cock obvious to her. Finally he slid off his sandals and hugged his knees to his chest. The position was less comfortable, but more protective for him, he believed.

Her gaze still fixed on him, Tania rose from the couch and unzipped her denim shorts, shrugging them over her shapely hips to reveal a matching white thong, her shaven pussy visible, too, through the filmy lace. A soft cry of want rumbled in Boone's parched throat; he felt ready to explode.

This is a bloody dream, he told himself. I'm going to wake up next to Alisha and she's going to be screaming at me for messing up her bloody face, me having tossed and turned all night.

"Please, Boone, just indulge me right now." Kneeling back on the couch, Tania undid the front hook of her brassiere and lightly traced the lace borders of both cups. Before she could peel them away, Boone stilled her hands with a quivering plea.

"Tania, I'm warning you. You do that, and I won't be held responsible for my actions." He had no idea what to expect of her then, or what she was thinking at this moment. Was she looking for an old-fashioned one-nighter, or a rebound/revenge tryst against her louse of a husband? Did she want something

more than that? Could he give that to her?

Her smile was soft and inviting as she wet her lips. "I'll take that chance," she said.

"You're sure?"

"Oh, yes, Boone," she averred, and bared her breasts. She was so damn beautiful, her skin like cream. Her husband was clearly an idiot for willingly giving up a woman as passionate and lovely as she. Whatever, or whomever, he had left her for, Boone hoped it was worth the loss.

But he hardly felt sorry for the git.

Boone crossed his arms at the hem of his shirt and pulled it away, then let his legs slide down the couch, parting them to allow Tania to move closer to him. When she softly giggled, he was momentarily confused, but followed her gaze to see that his erection was quite evident, the tip visible just above the elastic waistband of his shorts. Chuckling nervously, he righted his shorts and beckoned her closer.

She pouted. "Now why did you do that?" she teased.

Boone grinned. "Don't worry, love, you'll see him soon enough."

He bent forward and kissed one breast, then the other, gently tugging at the nipple with his teeth, eliciting from her a throaty sigh as she bent to support herself on his shoulders. His hands lightly raked down her back and kneaded her buttocks as he nuzzled her. As he traced his tongue down her flat abdomen, he wondered how he was going to get past that lacy patch covering her pussy without having to break contact and make her gyrate on the sofa to get off her panties. Finally he felt for the string bordering her hips, twined it around both fingers, and snapped it apart.

Tania did not protest, but moaned in appreciation as he sank to the sofa and urged her hips closer and lower until her pussy,

slick with her passion, was directly in his line of sight. With a tentative feather touch he traced the moistened opening before inserting one finger, then two. Meeting her vocal approval, he smiled and laved her folds with his tongue, tasting and teasing her, then lapping gently at her clit.

She rocked on unsteady knees and arched backward, feeling blindly for the errant waistband of his shorts and tucking one hand inside to stroke his shaft with the same rhythm as he pleased her. "That feels so good," he heard her sigh. His response was muffled, but gained volume when her hand cupped his scrotum and massaged.

Anybody who had told him he would be doing this now, with this incredible woman, he would have thought daft. He still could not believe it.

Finally Tania cried out as her body stiffened and quivered into orgasm. Only then did he release his oral hold on her and lay back to relish the view of her arched body, a sticky, dazed grin on his face.

"Now," he breathed. He could not wait any longer and, with her still hovering over his chest, tugged his shorts loose and kicked them down his legs to the edge of the couch. Tania wobbled back slightly as if about to collapse, but Boone kept a gentle yet firm hold on her and eased her back to his hips, guiding her to him. Quietly he took his cock in hand and scraped its tip against her slick opening, cautiously, and searching her face for any kind of indication to stop.

She looked at down at him, and he saw only desire in those eyes, a pleading look to continue. His heart pounded to the ceiling, and he obliged by pushing upward into her.

She gasped with rapturous shock, and Boone felt suddenly embarrassed. Of course, he was aware of being rather well endowed, but had not considered whether or not Tania would be

able to handle all of him. For a moment he felt almost sorry for her, stifling a snicker at her soon-to-be ex-husband's expense.

"It's just like I pictured," she said, taking him deeper inside her. Boone's heart swelled. She *had* wanted him, she had thought about it, about him. This could not possibly be born of a gut reaction after seeing her husband.

Boone stroked the inner silk of her thighs, enjoying the rhythmic movement of her body—the sway of her breasts, the thrust of her hips, the way her hands slid across her collarbone, then down to pluck her nipples, taunting him. He could not quite reach them himself in this position, and had to be content with exploring her below until he found her clit once again and stroked it, causing another trembling fit from her.

"It feels so good being inside you, I could do this all night," he whispered, and that encouraged her to buck harder against him until he could no longer hold back. With a deep roar, he arched his entire body upward and came; his hands flew back to grasp the arm of the couch to keep him from surely flying away.

He wanted to sink deeper into the couch with exhaustion, and deflate like a tire losing air. Instead he lay back and felt his cock soften inside her as Tania lowered herself entirely on top of him. Riding the wave of afterglow, they kissed and caressed each other, tasting of clove and sweat. The bare space Boone spied on the opposite wall, where the clock had once been, only confirmed that time no longer had meaning. He wanted the rest of the world to go away, so he could just stay here, and not have to think about returning to California in a month. Holding this beautiful woman in his arms, he realized he could not let go.

A sadness crept over him then, one that could not be readily dispelled by Tania's loving touch. What if this indeed was just a fling for her? What if she wanted nothing more?

He pinched his eyes shut. *No*, he would not think about that

now. He had a month, and he would enjoy it now.

Tania brushed her lips against his chest, flicking her tongue against one erect nipple. "If I'd have known you were this good I wouldn't have let you leave here with just that map."

"Well," he said, once he had managed to catch his breath, "it's certainly one hell of a way to welcome a bloke to your hometown, isn't it?"

Fourteen

Eventually they made it to her bed and collapsed. Boone could not remember if she led him or if he carried her, but as morning dawned through her balcony windows they woke simultaneously to the sound of tapping rain and rumbling thunder. Boone lay on his side, facing away from Tania, and watched the water streak down the glass in long, angled trails.

He felt the heat behind him, felt her breasts crushed against his back. Tania slipped a hand underneath his arm and braced it against his chest. "The first rain of the tourist season," she proclaimed with a sigh. "It won't last long."

"I hope not," Boone said, and moved his right hand from under the pillow to check his watch. Alisha would have been long gone with Paul by now, and he wondered if Alisha had noticed or made much of his absence this morning, or if she had been aware that he never came back. Maybe she surmised he had gone out to the beach for an early morning walk. Moreover, would the rain continue, and cancel her outdoor modeling session, forcing her to come home early?

Alisha. Blast! He had cheated on Alisha. Boone cursed silently. This was not the way he wanted to progress. He did not love Alisha anymore, if he ever did at all, but she certainly did not deserve his infidelity. Why could he have just told Paul to postpone dinner last night so he could have taken care to end the relationship before starting another one?

Relationship. *Is that what this is?*

But Tania spoke again and all thoughts and worries of Alisha quickly dissolved. She kissed his bare shoulder and leaned her cheek against him. "I don't know, I love it best, when it's like this," she said. "Sometimes when I wake up to the rain I just want to stay in bed and let it lull me back to sleep."

Boone released her grip and rolled over to face her, taking her into his arms. "I can think of other things I'd rather do than sleep," he murmured, and they began to make love again, this time more slowly. Boone eased Tania on her back and took the advantage to explore every inch of her, leaving no patch of flesh without a kiss. He learned quickly what she liked and wanted, and gladly obliged to a submissive reclining position to allow her to straddle him in the sixty-nine position.

"My ex never liked to do this," she said, bending toward his swollen shaft to take him into her mouth. She slid one hand down to cup his scrotum, massaging gently as her head bobbed up and down, her lips pursed tightly around his cock, the tip of her tongue swirling around his throbbing head.

Your ex is an idiot. But Boone kept that comment to himself, preferring to use his mouth for something more pleasurable. He let one sigh escape as Tania continued to suckle him, then fixed his gaze to the dripping slit hovering overhead. Grasping the backs of her thighs, he eased her gently down until his tongue could lave her folds and tap at her clit without forcing him to lift his head. He did just that, driving her to a gasping climax again and again.

It was only as he reached the cusp of his passion did Tania break away suddenly and scour through her nightstand for a foil packet, and Boone realized they had not used protection the first time. It hardly seemed appropriate to broach the subject now as she took the bold liberty of sheathing him before laying back,

and as he pounded his cock inside her he decided to best leave it alone unless she said something.

The thought recurred some time later as he woke again, alone. Tania's side of the bed was rumpled. The rain had stopped.

Quietly he sat up and let his feet touch the floor, momentarily dismayed when he could not find his clothes. It was not until he heard the sounds of typing in the next room that he remembered they had left their clothing in the living room the night before, and Boone felt suddenly self-conscious. He was going to have to walk in there, naked, to retrieve his shorts. Walk right past Tania, working away on her computer! Why did that bother him so, after all they had done, all they had seen of each other?

The answer came, unbidden and pounding in his ears. *Because you barely know her, you git!* The sixties were over; people were not supposed to do things like this anymore, not with the specter of HIV and other assorted venereal diseases looming in everybody's unconscious, coming to the front only after the fact. What they had done, incredible though it had been, was dumb. He had known Tania but a few days, and knew nothing of her sexual history. Had that creep cheated on her while they were married? More than once, with God knows whom? It would have explained why they were divorcing.

What if she got pregnant? A tiny, fertilized cell dividing into a million compartments right this very minute, as she typed, unaware. Panic momentarily seized him.

He sauntered to the window and watched the beach come alive with early sunbathers and motorists on the way to work or others parts of the shore; the once gray morning sky was now streaked with blue. Was she thinking the same of him, concerned for her well being, and wondering how many starlets and models he had bedded in Los Angeles? Was she of the mind LA was one

constant orgy, and he an active participant? In truth, he could count his lovers on one hand, and he had always been careful. Even with Alisha, though they had been together a year, he did not dare slip into bed with her unprotected.

He thought of Tania again. Had she gotten up without waking him on purpose, pounding away at her book to take her mind off of any consequences they might have to face later? Of course, if she were truly upset, she would have asked him to bugger off, right?

Boone sighed. He most certainly did not want to bugger off, but he could not stay here, like this. There was only one way to find out what Tania was thinking and doing and feeling, and he would have to do it bare, on more than one level.

* * *

What the hell did I do?

What the hell did I do?

WHAT THE HELL DID I JUST DO????!!!!

These, of course, were not the thoughts of Boone, her creation, as Tania left him in bed next to his new wife. That Boone was clearly content with his current lot in life. The other Boone...who knew? Tania was not ready to find that out.

Tapping a fingernail on the spacebar, Tania stared at the screen with glazed eyes before erasing her angst. Who had taken over her body last night, and this morning? Nattie? Iona? Some other love-starved body snatcher? And now there was a naked man in her bed who had yet to emerge. Would he ever? And would he expect more?

Did *she* want more? She knew the answer to that, which was completely against her better judgment. Of course, she wanted more! She shrugged her robe closer around her shoulders and closed her eyes, relishing the memory of Boone's touch. He

was an amazing lover, doing things to her Craig probably never thought possible, and hopefully never did with Barbie. Her skin prickled.

Amazing lover or not, though, Tania still had to face the fact that she barely knew this man. He may be good enough to rent the captain's condo and inspire her to write some hot scenes, but what more did she really know about Wesley Boone, just call me Boone? What if he turned out to be some kind of con artist who travels to beach towns, scamming unsuspecting divorcees out of their savings? What if even his British accent was fake?

What if he sneaked out of her bedroom while she was typing and came up behind her, to kill her? She did not have much in the way of weaponry in there, but it would not take much to fashion a pillowcase or belt as a means of strangling her.

A chill replaced the heat on her skin where Boone's loving caresses had lingered.

Stop it. She did not know anything, but was only letting her writer's imagination get the best of her. She could always contact the captain's son if she wanted to, he was still in town. Maybe she would do that today after calling Craig to come get the ring. Now she needed to apply her imagination to more important things.

She opened her novel in her word processing program and scrolled to the last page. Boone and Nattie were reeling in the afterglow—Tania had not quite recovered herself—and now she needed to continue. She positioned her fingers on the keyboard, but no words came directly, not like they had yesterday. Something was different today, and Tania did not have to be told what that difference was.

She cast her eyes back toward the bedroom. Still no movement from within, nothing that she could hear, anyway. She

still could not believe she had left him there to sleep, and was amazed that he had not roused when she banged through her drawers for a pair of clean underwear and tank shirt.

But, maybe he was just a nice guy after all, and not a *faux* Anglo-Saxon serial killer/grifter. What kind of a villain could be blessed with such sexual skills? If that was the case, though, what must he be thinking of *her*? That she was some kind of loose broad whose bedroom was equipped with a revolving door? Hardly. Other than Craig, Tania had only bedded one other man, a boy actually, in high school. Neither could hold a candle to Boone.

There came the temptation to pad quietly down the hall, strip off her clothes, and rouse her sleeping neighbor into one more round. *For inspiration*, she thought with a playful smile. Every writer needs a muse, and it helped to have one so accessible.

Stop it.

Tania rooted herself to her chair and forced her eyes back to the computer. How was she going to explain to Cheryl that she missed a deadline because she was too busy getting her jollies? Cheryl would tell her to wait until after writing *The End* to celebrate. She wouldn't buy the research angle, either. "Just rent some porn," she could hear her agent scold. "You can always fast forward the plot."

"Come on, sweetheart, you can do this," Tania cheered herself. Try to forget the naked, sexy man in your bed, tangled in your bed sheets, his taut, muscled arms reaching for a pillow and feeling around the mattress for your body...

And the words came to Tania.

He opened his eyes. He still faced the wall. She was joined to him, her elbow clamped over his ribcage, her hand massaging

the feathered tufts of hair on his chest.

"I love you, Boone," said Nattie.

She wrote of newlywed afterglow, of Boone's restrained joy, and of Nattie's appreciation for her sexual awakening. She felt the worry stiffen Boone's body as Nattie asked him directly about his past lovers, particularly long ago visits to the infamous bathhouse on the edge of town. This Boone tried to reassure his new wife that she satisfied him more than any other woman could.

"It's only flesh and blood, it's nothing to be afraid of. Like this," he said, positioning her hand around the base of his shaft and guiding her grip. Soon she was stroking him on her own, still fascinated by his size.

"You like that, yes?" she asked, her voice husky.

"Oh, yes."

"What about this?" Her thumb circled the tip.

"I like that even more."

That was the last either of them spoke until they came up for air sometime in the small hours, when both eventually drifted into sleep, tucked within each other's arms.

End of chapter. Tania sighed.

I love you, Boone. Did she? Did he love her? Impossible, she decided. Love did not come with that speed, only in romance novels. Cheezy, implausible romance novels like the ones on her shelf, her pseudonym emblazoned on the spines. What she and Boone had now was lust, infatuation, a passion fostered by a need for intimacy, and for *her* a need to refresh her creativity. It could not be love. Could it?

She loved *being* with Boone, that much she could accept,

and she wondered if they would *be* together again. For all she knew, he was probably lying in her bed, regretting every moment of last night and earlier today, thinking her some kind of easy chick who lays every warm body she can find. He was probably also thinking of way to avoid her for the remainder of time that he would be here...

"Good morning."

Or maybe he was standing behind her with a belt as a makeshift garrote, aiming for her throat.

Tania squealed, and leaped from her chair. The figure looming above her was neither hulking nor threatening. He was naked, looking very delicious, and smiling sheepishly at her. And he was unarmed.

"I'm sorry," Boone said softly. "I've frightened you." He reached an arm out to steady her; the jolt sent shockwaves through her body, rippling her skin and warming her pussy. She shrank back and pressed her thighs together, suddenly coy.

"No, I'm fine," Tania countered hurriedly, "Sometimes I get so into my work and I shut out the rest of the world. The phone ringing puts me off a lot, too, when I'm like this." *Plus I don't normally have naked, well-endowed guys lingering around my condo, either.* She quickly saved her work and scooted her chair closer to the screen, hoping to block it from Boone's view. Had he read any of it? she wondered. Had he seen his name in the narrative?

She turned around and was relieved to see his attention was elsewhere as he quietly picked his shorts from the carpet and pulled them over his hips. He stretched momentarily, then found his shirt.

"What time is it?" he yawned.

"Early still, about eight," Tania said. "I tend to get up early, despite not sleeping much. I work better in the morning."

Boone smiled, melting her reserve. *Please don't be a serial grifter; that just wouldn't be fair.*

"I can see that, or rather I could hear it for all the typing you were doing," he said. "I see you didn't even stop to make coffee."

"Yeah." Surely he was not expecting her to do that?

"Allow me, then. Don't stop on my account." He headed into the kitchen; the automated coffee maker and a vacuum-sealed tin of grounds were immediately visible on the counter, and Boone went straight to work. Emptying the tepid contents left over from last night, Boone silently rinsed out the pot and replaced it on the burner before settling a filter into place with a few scoops of grounds. Within seconds, the front part of the condo began to fill with the aroma of fresh brewed hazelnut.

Tania inserted a page break into her manuscript to begin the next chapter, debating with herself whether or not to stay with Boone and Nattie, or switch to another point of view. Boone's presence was both a distraction and a comfort; it seemed almost domestic, as if they were a couple together for many years, with the way he moved around the kitchen. He seemed to know where everything was, and had to do little searching of cupboards to find what he wanted.

It was never like that with Craig, she remembered. She and Craig seemed to have very little time for each other in the morning, due to his erratic teaching schedules. Most mornings saw him choking down a bagel on the way out the door, and dinner was normally warmed over and eaten in the front of the television.

She looked back toward the kitchen. What Boone wanted, apparently, was a small skillet, which he brandished from the counter. Tania felt suddenly worried. Was he going to hit her with it? Why would he bother with making coffee first?

"Sorry to interrupt, but I'm going to assume, since

inspiration struck you so early this morning, that you didn't have breakfast, either." There was no mistaking the innuendo in Boone's voice; he must have believed he was responsible for some part of this morning's creative streak. *If he only knew.*

"I did not," Tania admitted. "Usually I don't eat breakfast at all. Just coffee and maybe a granola bar."

"Would you like me to fix you something?"

Tania made a face. "Ooh, I don't know. I don't think I could take any kind of English breakfast food today. Besides, I don't think I have any bangers and mash around." Inside, though, her stomach fluttered at this mirrored display—the real Boone acting like the fictional Boone, willing to cook for her. Real life imitating art. It was both thrilling and frightening.

"Rest assured, I've become quite Americanized when it comes to food," Boone told her. He set down the skillet and leaned against the counter, stretching his long legs behind him. "And it won't be a bother to scramble a few eggs, really."

"I'm not really hungry, thank you." That fluttering sensation spread back south, and she felt suddenly wet again; she was not hungry for food, anyway. "But if you want something, feel free—"

Boone was now pouring a mug of coffee. "I'm fine, too. I'm not going to mess up your kitchen." He brought the mug to her, and she accepted it gratefully.

"You don't want any?" she asked, deftly punching a key and bringing up a second document with her notes. Boone's name was nowhere to be seen there.

"In a moment." He grasped the back of her chair and leaned forward until their heads were level. The spiced scent of his aftershave lotion was faint, yet still obvious enough to set Tania's heart to throb. If only he would lean in a little closer...

"Do you think, if you have the time today," he began, "you

could indulge *me*?" His words tickled her insides.

Tania froze. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked, trying to mask the tremble in her voice. If he was implying what she was thinking, she was certainly not going to get any work done today.

But Boone only smiled, and bent to kiss her forehead. "I'll need to go back to my place for a bit, and I'd like to come back up, but if you don't want to be disturbed—" He eased back.

Tania shrugged. She really needed the time to work, but that pleading look on his face was too much to resist. If at all possible, she would brace the door tomorrow and make sure he stayed on the other side until she finished the book. Then she would drag him back inside to celebrate. "Do what you have to do," she said. "I don't plan on going anywhere today."

"I won't be long then. I promise not to take too much of your time." With that, he snatched up the sandals he had left on the carpet and was out the door with one last smoldering glance in her direction. Tania turned back to her computer and flipped back to her work in progress.

"Oh, Nattie," she breathed, "if my Boone's any more attentive than yours, I might as well retire because I'm never going to get *anything* done."

My Boone. She smiled. Was he really hers?

Fifteen

Bless Alisha's ignorance for once. She had left the door unlocked, thereby dissolving Boone's momentary panic when he descended the stairs and realized he had not brought his keys with him to Tania's when he checked on her earlier. He could not decide if Alisha figured Boone did not take a key on his "morning jaunt," or if she just forgot to lock the door, but that point was moot. At least she had not left it wide open for the city to see when she left for her photo session with Paul.

He found no note, and no evidence that Alisha had straightened up in the bedroom before leaving. The bed sheets were twisted into a thick rope and discarded along the foot of the bed; it looked as if Alisha had traveled from one end to the other in her sleep. She probably did not miss him at all.

Opened pots of makeup and lotion squeeze bottles lay scattered across the bathroom counter. Alisha's luggage, situated on one side of the room, looked as if a small dog had plowed through its contents in search of a treat; lacy underthings spilled from all sides. It was a stark contrast to Boone's belongings, all of which were neatly folded in their compartments.

He showered and shaved quickly, then dressed in a white Polo shirt and blue jeans extracted from the largest of his three suitcases. Next to that sat a small black bag, one he had not opened in a long time, one his doctor had recommended he leave behind, but Boone could not bring himself to totally abandon it, even though he had not touched its contents in months.

Carefully he unzipped the bag and brought out his camera. It felt foreign in his hands now, and he like an archeologist coming across some kind of unrecognizable relic. Next to the indentation in the case that cradled the camera were three lenses of varying lengths. For what he was planning, he would not need anything for shooting long distance, so he selected the 45MM lens and affixed it to the camera's front. Satisfied that the room was dim enough, he plucked a roll of film from the bag he got yesterday and loaded the camera, then tested the focus on the farthest object in the room.

Each movement felt strange to him, as if his joints were rusted from years of neglect. Would he ever be the same again? Maybe not, he realized, but perhaps what he had planned could be the start of an improved career, and his confidence would be renewed. Slowly, his comfort with the equipment returned and he placed the camera back in his bag, then draped the strap over his shoulder before heading into the living room.

He looked for Tania's novel, but could not find it anywhere. He could have sworn he had left it on the sofa last night, but it was not there, and the coffee table held only a few of the captain's fishing magazines. Alisha had to have taken it with her, he decided. Why, was a mystery.

Sighing, Boone made one last perfunctory check of the condo before pocketing his keys and cell phone and locking the door. Just the memory of Tania's smile, which hopefully had not yet faded, was definitely good inspiration for him, dissolving any doubts, and the thought of perhaps being able to capture that smile forever on film warmed him as he took the stairs two at the time, whistling. He felt like he was ascending Mount Olympus to meet his beloved goddess.

Then he stopped and snickered. Tania wouldn't make much of that thought, he decided. She seemed rather modest. At the

very least, she was definitely his muse.

* * *

The smile had indeed faded, but not on Boone's account. The dreaded writer's block had returned, filling Tania's head with doubt, and she could only stare at the monitor, wanting very much to put her fist through both of them.

So Boone and Nattie were together. Wonderful. Her readers would appreciate that, but something was going to have to threaten their relationship. Maybe Cor, who had wanted Nattie for himself? Perhaps, he would be the most obvious one to do so. Just because Tania had him about to marry Nattie's sister on the rebound did not mean he could not cause trouble for the happy couple. And, Tania knew, her readers would expect something from the spurned suitor. But Tania did not want to be that predictable.

Iona? Now there would be a wild card. Tania knew she would have to do something more with her, having given her such prominence at the beginning of the story. Perhaps Iona could come between Cor and Trina in a subplot? Or maybe, since she had hinted at Iona's political leanings earlier in the story, have her run in the next gubernatorial and evict the Boones from their cottage?

She scrolled back a few pages. She noted she had implied, too, Nattie's interest in government. Perhaps the two sisters would run against each other, and the end result could be dastardly, a splitting of loyalties in the village, a civil war. Regardless of whomever she picked for the task of villain, too, Tania knew she would also have to arrange said character's downfall so Boone and Nattie could live happily ever after.

Tania sighed, tempted to call Cheryl for some advice, but ultimately she passed on the idea. Cheryl might panic and think Tania was not up to finishing the work, and even go so far as to

suggest an assistant, or worse, a ghost writer to finish the book. Neither was an option; she did not want anybody writing under her name. She had written books before, and she could finish this one.

So it was the frustrated frown on Tania's face that greeted Boone's tentative knock. The smile on his own face fell slack immediately, and he looked ready to duck back onto the landing.

"I knew it, I am disturbing you," he said, his hand wavering the door back and forth, as if unsure to stay or leave. "I should give you more time—"

"No, please," Tania said quickly, and waved him closer. "It's not you, I promise. I'm just stuck on a plot point and I'm not sure in which direction I need to be heading." She made a growling sound and pounded the keyboard for effect, which brought a slight chuckle from the corner of the room as Boone approached.

"Don't ever become a writer," she warned him. "I love writing more than anything, but it's like being in love with someone who drives you insane."

"Really? That's an interesting analogy. I could apply it to photography myself, which, by the way, I wouldn't recommend doing, either." Boone took a seat on the sofa and Tania's heart fluttered. Only a few hours ago she had been with him there, making love. She tried to put it out of her mind, but Boone's presence drugged up the memory of it. Not that the memory displeased her, it was nice to have something pleasant to associate with a sofa, for once.

Pleasant? Try earth-shattering, girl. What was that she had said about loving writing more than anything?

Now, even in the simple act of unzipping the black bag he had carried with him, he was turning her on. She watched his tricep muscles flex under the tight sleeves of his Polo shirt, and

how a lock of his light brown hair slipped across his forehead and dangled in between his eyes. To just walk over there and brush it aside, run a hand through his hair and pull his face closer...she could see Nattie doing these things easily with her Boone. He had wanted it for years, and would welcome it.

Why was she so filled with trepidation at the thought of touching this man again? She dreaded rejection, of course, but he would not have come back to her condo if he was not interested in her to some extent, so what was wrong with her?

She needed to get her mind away from intimacy. "What's in the bag?" she asked, hoping he would extract a sex toy of some sort for later, or now. Given her current frame of mind, which rattled her, she was still somewhat rattled to see the camera.

"Did I tell you I found your book the other day?" Boone looked up at her.

"You didn't." Though, in his defense, she had not given him much opportunity to speak at all in the last several hours. "Which one?"

"*Bedeveled*. I figured out your pseudonym, wasn't difficult to do, and picked it up. I haven't had a chance to read much of it, but I like what I've read so far."

"Thanks." Tania blushed. Praise still came uneasily to her, more so than criticism. Whether it was a national magazine or an anonymous e-mail from a fan, any positive note made her giddy.

"I couldn't help but notice the cover," Boone added.

"How could you not?" A brief memory flash of the brawny, shirtless cover model filled her head. His name escaped Tania, but he was very well known in the industry, and she had even met him once at a romance writers' conference, and recalled being amazed with how he filled the auditorium of drooling, avid readers with his aura, his well-sculpted muscles, and his deep Austrian accent. "That's fifty percent of the marketing right

there. My agent tells me you could put blank pages between one of those covers and it would sell, but I'm sure she exaggerates." She snickered.

"It wouldn't surprise me." Boone nodded thoughtfully. "Pick up a copy of any fashion magazine and look at the ads. Cover models toting purses and kicking up five hundred-dollar shoes. That's what sells, too, only you're selling an image, not a book."

Tania twisted completely away from the computer to watch Boone fiddle with his camera. "Is that what you do, or did? Magazine shoots?"

"That, and some commissioned work. You look surprised."

"Hm?" Yes, her eyebrows *had* raised. "Oh, it's just when I met you and I heard 'L.A.' and 'photographer' in the same breath, I just thought..." She cringed, thinking she had hit a sore spot, but relaxed when Boone laughed.

"Yes, the City of Angels does tend to evoke stereotypical images, doesn't it? Well, I can assure you, Tania, that I've never had to hide in a palm tree and wait for Pamela Anderson to come bouncing into her backyard in her birthday suit in order to pay the rent. Not that I wouldn't consider doing it," he laughed at the disapproval marring Tania's features, "but that's not my style. What I would like to do is work on your next cover." He held up the camera, wound and ready for shooting. "Specifically, the back cover."

Tania sat back. "Come again?" She winced at her words, half-expecting Boone to say yes.

"Your book didn't have an author photo on the jacket. I'd like to take one of you."

"Me?" Tania's body numbed. True, *Bedeviled's* dust jacket had not been graced with an author photo, not even a yearbook-style pose in the back flap. The same held true for her other books, and that was entirely by Tania's request. She hated having

her picture taken, and had never considered herself photogenic, despite assurances to the contrary by family and friends. It seemed every time she smiled for a camera the end product would reveal a crooked smile, a cringe, or some other facial contortion that might suggest Tania had been offered a deal on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel. The last decent picture taken of her had been at her wedding, and to this day Tania was convinced it was because she was probably drunk at the time, upset with Craig.

How to let Boone down gently, though? After what they had been through, what they had done (and for how long they had done it)... how could she say no?

"It would mean a lot to me if you let me do this. I've been out of practice for a while, and something like this would really get me back into the swing," Boone said, and he set the camera down on her coffee table and approached her chair. Taking her chin with two fingers, he tilted her head up and gazed longingly at her. "The sun's coming out wonderfully. I bet I could get a nice shot of you on the beach, with the wind blowing through your hair."

And the back of his hand now caressed her cheek and grazed her ear as he flexed his fingers and raked them through her thick mane. Tania swallowed, and wondered if at this point they would make it to the front door.

"One roll of film, that's all I ask," he continued. "I'll be out of your hair, figuratively and literally." His released his touch. "I prefer to develop my own film, so that will take a while after I set up the captain's bathroom, and I'll probably have to make a second trip to the camera store for more supplies. You can finish your book here uninterrupted."

"You're not a bother, Boone." *Use my bathroom, use my bedroom. Let's see what else develops there.*

"You're not writing, though, are you?"

Tania reluctantly turned back to the screen. The cursor blinked like a warning beacon, and seemed to grow larger and more intimidating. "True," she began, her voice cautious, "but I've been blocked before, so please don't think it's any of your doing." How much of a lie was that? How could she be expected to write with him leaning so close to her, sending her skin to tingle with even the most innocent of touches?

Yet, having Boone around had inspired her so. The love scenes she had written for *Bedeviled* were not nearly as sensuous as what she had just written. They were quite tame by comparison. Cheryl was going to wonder what had happened to her.

"I suppose while I am blocked," she added, "it wouldn't hurt to take a break." She looked at him, her expression firm. "One roll, that's it. I think you'll find soon enough that I'm not like those supermodels you're used to working with. I do not like getting my picture taken at all. Last time a photographer managed a good shot of me, I was lying naked on a bearskin rug."

Boone's eyebrows nearly touched his scalp. "How long ago was this, and do you have copies?"

"Cool your jets. Nixon was in the White House then." Tania laughed. She closed the novel document, set her computer to sleep mode, then rose. "At least let me take a shower and make myself more presentable."

"You look fine to me." Boone's voice turned husky. Tania softened. Only now did she realize that she was not wearing a bra, and that her darkened nipples were visible through her shirt, which would have explained Boone's sudden change in timbre. Yes, *that* would have made for an interesting cover photo, a smiling Tawny Garbo with headlights a-blinking.

"Maybe, but I want to look good for my public. Not to mention respectable. It's a book cover, not *Playboy*," she joked. With that, she turned on her heel and was nearly to the hall when Boone's next request stopped her cold.

"You think I could read what you've written while I wait?"

Sixteen

"Huh?" For assurance, she turned back and checked the computer. Boone had taken her seat at the desk, but the monitor was still filled with flying toasters.

Boone shrugged, his grin sheepish. "I mean, if it's no bother to you. Of course, I know a lot of writers who won't let anybody see their writing until it's in print, so if you're one of those—"

"Huh?" she echoed, then was surprised to see her feet move, unbidden, back to the computer. "Oh, no, I'm not like that at all. It's just that nobody's ever asked to read an early draft before. Not even my hus—, er, soon-to-be ex, and I have to warn you that what I'm writing is a first draft. I mean, *very* first draft."

"Hey, even Hemingway had to write a first draft to get to the last one." Boone shrugged.

"I'm hardly Hemingway."

"Don't worry. I'm my own worst critic when it comes to my work, and I promise I'll be gentle." He winked as if to imply the opposite.

Panic filled her heart. She could not let Boone read her work, and see his name on the screen, or prompt him to conjure an image of himself making love to a fictional heroine, which he would automatically assume was a veiled version of herself. Who knew how he would take something like that? This was the first character she had based upon an actual person; it was something she had avoided in the past on the advice of a peer with whom she bunked at a previous conference. She could still

hear her author mate's words, clear as crystal, ringing in her ears:

Never, ever model a character after somebody you know. It doesn't matter how flattering you are, how beautiful you make them, or how heroic. They're always going to find a flaw or think you could have done better, and never speak to you again.

Moreover, would he think she had written the linchpin love scene after their own encounter? Would it upset him?

Then again, she thought to herself, watching Boone's patience, maybe a fresh pair of eyes could help her. She was still stuck on direction, and maybe he would be inclined to give her a nudge. Of course, he hardly fit the demographic of her readership, but seeing as how he was practically living the story...

"Why not?" she relented. "If I can't figure out where to go, maybe you'll know. Just let me do one thing." Playfully she pushed him aside, causing the chair in which he was sitting to roll away several inches, and brought up the document. She bent over the keyboard, making sure his view was blocked. "I'm just engaging a lock command, so the work won't get erased by accident." In truth, there was no such command in her word processing program; who knew if one existed at all, but Tania hoped Boone would buy the lie.

"Oh, come now, love." She could sense Boone pouting without having to turn around and look at him. "You think I'm going to hit one of those F keys and blow up your motherboard?"

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's this computer. It's served me well, but it's old. Next royalty infusion I get goes toward a laptop." Quickly she used the find and replace command to change every instance of Boone's name to another one. "You look at the spacebar wrong on this thing and the hard drive gets erased." She went to save the document as a secondary file and was momentarily distracted when a hand settled on her hip. It

traveled down the curve of her buttocks and around the robe, pushing away the material to stroke the back of her bare thigh, then up again to her waist.

Oh, please don't do that, she begged. His touch was driving her nuts, and deep down inside she knew Boone must have called her silent bluff as he now doubled the effort with his other hand. Settling both hands on her waist now, he gently pulled her back onto his lap so that his hands met at her abdomen, then tugged at the hem of her tank shirt and slipped underneath it. Tania bit back a groan as one hand traced a feather-soft trail across the swell of her breasts.

She leaned back into Boone's chest and edged to one side as he nuzzled into the crook of her neck. "Oh, love, what you do to me," he sighed, cupping one breast. "I know we haven't known each very long, but you've brought out feelings in me I thought were dead. I haven't felt this good in a long time."

"Welcome to my world," Tania murmured, wishing she had not sounded so acerbic, but it could not be denied. For a while it had seemed the people on paper were having it better than her. Not so these past several hours, however, and now.

Boone's other hand boldly dipped below the elastic waistband of her panties, and Tania let out a pleased moan when his fingers slid past her folds and curled into her. Boone explored blindly until he found her clit and began rubbing it. Tania let out a soft cry, and Boone shifted in the chair to accommodate his growing cock, jostling Tania in his lap. He found a spot along her collarbone revealed as the neck of her T-shirt pulled away, and he planted a kiss there.

"I want you, Tania, in the worst way. Since the moment you knocked on my door. I haven't wanted a woman like this ever."

"I want you, too." She felt her body lift, and realized Boone was unzipping his pants. His cock pressed against the cleft of her

buttocks and nearly ripped through her shorts. "Love," he whispered, "perhaps we ought to take this elsewhere?"

"No," she sighed, "wait here." Before Boone could protest, and before she could change her mind, she sprang from Boone's lap and charged into her bedroom. She returned quickly, foil packet in hand, to see the denim puddle around Boone's ankles. He was stroking his thick cock to its full erect length. Tania became wet just at the sight of it.

"Save some for me," she said with a wicked smile. In three steps she was kneeling before him, shaft in hand. "You are incredible." Without further pretense, she took the head into her mouth and pursed her lips tightly before working him all the way into her throat.

"Tania," he gasped, and bucked slowly to her rhythm and she worked him in and out of her mouth. She delighted in the sharp intake of breath, the rise in his voice's pitch as she sucked him. She massaged his thighs and dared a touch to his scrotum. She could feel it tighten in her loose grip; he was coming to come.

Uh-uh. She released him and shook her head. "Not yet," she said, and quickly sheathed him. The spring underneath the swivel chair squealed mildly, and for a second she wondered if it would be able to withstand what they were about to do.

The hell with it. If it didn't, that was an excuse to buy a better chair. She had fantasized once before about fucking at her workstation...why not with the man inspiring her to get some actual work done?

She stood and turned away from him, flushing all over with his next words.

"Oh, love, you have a sweet ass," Boone said. Tania shivered as his hands cupped her buttocks. "Bend over," he urged. "Let's see that sweet pussy of yours."

"Okay." Tania complied. Craig had never said anything like that to her. To commemorate the occasion, she offered Boone the full treatment by bending over and reaching underneath to rub her pussy in front of him. She fingered her lips and spread them apart to show him how slick she was for him. The satisfied groan she heard was reward enough, and coupled with the sensation of his cock impaling her when he urged her to sit multiplied her pleasure.

Slowly she rocked against him, enjoying the feel of his cock reaching places she never knew existed before. She was definitely going to have sex in this position more, she decided as her orgasm hit. Boone's wasn't far behind, and she basked in his heat as he pitched forward, his arms clamped around her as he rocked with his climax.

"Oh, yeah," he groaned, and with one last thrust held her closely to him. "That was good." He kissed her neck. "Maybe enough to give you a chapter for a hot romance?"

"At least." Tania giggled. She tried to stand. Boone's cock slid from her pussy, but he wasn't willing to let her go completely. He pulled her back, and she felt the making of another erection.

Oh, my. "Where do you get your energy?" she teased.

"Just call it inspiration." Boone rubbed his lips against skin, teasing her with his tongue. "So, what do you say? Shall we try for another chapter?"

"Hell, how about a whole new book?" But slowly, Tania's common sense was gaining control of her libido. This could not continue, at least not until enough time had passed where she could say with some confidence that she knew the man. The way they were going now, neither one would get a word in edgewise. Inside, she fought a valiant battle of conscience.

Damn it, what's wrong with that? You're the one who

initiated all this hot sex. Why stop?

You know, for a conscience, you really suck at your job.

Gingerly, reluctantly, she took hold of Boone's straying hands and brought them together with hers. "But, if you expect to burn through a roll of film, and me to finish my work, it's not going to happen if we keep getting distracted like this."

"I like being distracted," Boone murmured, his voice muffled into her neck.

"Boone," she chided. She expected further argument, hoped for one. She masked her disappointment when a heavy sigh of resignation shuddered down her spine, and Boone gently pried her away.

"You're right," he said. "We do need to focus." With one last grasp on her backside, he encouraged her to walk away. "Go take your shower. I'll be right here, hoping your novel doesn't get me too terribly excited," he said.

"I can't guarantee it won't." *I can guarantee, though, that shower will be cold.* She was almost to her door when Boone called her back.

She poked her head around the galley kitchen wall. "Yes?"

"One thing you should do when taking that shower," Boone said, looking at her seriously. "Lock your door."

* * *

She locked the door. The nerve of her. She should have known that he was only joking.

Blast. Boone quietly tried the knob again, just to be sure. The sound of rushing water on the other side was loud. He was certain Tania could not hear him trying to sneak inside to surprise her. Just as well, he figured. Had he succeeded, neither one of them would have gotten out dry, or at all. They would shrivel into prunes, plastered against the cold porcelain of her bathtub, going at it like a pair of naked, horny senior citizens.

He padded back to the living room and slumped down in Tania's office chair. The computer monitor was alive once again with flying toasters, but one tap of the mouse sent them into oblivion, leaving Tania's novel, what little there was to read, anyway.

It did not take him very long to peruse the draft, not by his own estimation, and he found that he rather enjoyed the story. It was not necessarily his preferred genre, he being more inclined to read biographies and other non-fiction, but he could see Tania had quite the flair for dialogue and setting.

That one love scene was not bad, either. Boone's blood set to pumping, and he twisted in the swivel chair, breathing deep to control the aching below. Maybe if he took a stretched-out wire hanger to the bathroom door and rigged the lock...

But his heart rate skyrocketed with the angry knock at the front door. Panic heated his face. Alisha? No, he decided. She had never seen him come upstairs to Tania's, or had she? Besides, if Alisha were suspicious of anything, would she not have come upstairs *before* leaving on her excursion with Paul?

"Tania, open up!" came a shrill alto from the other side, and Boone momentarily relaxed. Tania's guest sounded nothing like Alisha.

"I know you're in there!" the angry wheedling continued. "It's not like you go anywhere, with your ass always in front of your computer." Now the whining was coupled with the rough jostling of the doorknob. Boone remained motionless, unsure of whether or not to alert Tania to her visitor, or to answer himself. Maybe she would give up after a minute or so and leave. Given the guest's attitude, he could not guarantee a polite greeting had he decided to answer. In fact, he was rather tempted to answer and give the visiting shrew what for.

Now came a persistent door chime, as if that would spur

anybody into action. "Open *up*, you stupid bitch!"

Boone scowled. That was all he needed. He marched straight to the door and, without bothering to check the door viewer, yanked open the door. "Or what?" he demanded to the lithe blonde now standing before him in the baby doll dress and leather sandals, her hands on her hips and one wrist adorned with several wire-thin bracelets. "You'll huff and you'll puff, and you'll blow the door down? Well, I dare say you might have the lung power to do that, with your loud voice, and assuming this building is not up to hurricane code."

The girl, who could have been no more than twenty, or at the most Alisha's age, stepped back, looking startled. But her initial shock at seeing somebody other than Tania at the door gave way to a renewed sense of bravado as the young woman folded her arms. "Where's Tania?" she wanted to know.

"Indisposed." Boone let the syllables tumble slowly from his curled lips, lending a sinister tone to his voice that he hoped would imply something else. The girl was cute, he had to admit, with her dirty green eyes, long neck, and pert nose. A bit too bony for his tastes, though, as the dress she wore easily showed some ribcage. Who exactly was this little bird to Tania? "Might I take a message?"

"I don't know." The girl's expression enhanced her suspicion. She tilted her head and studied him. "Who are you, her new butler? I didn't think she made enough money from her books to afford something like *that*."

Boone chuckled and gestured to his casual clothing. "Well, let's just say I'm working *pro bono*, if you will, for the time being. As you can see, she's still scraping up for the tuxedo and feather duster..."

"Whatever, Jeeves." And with a force that surprised Boone, this petite fireball pushed past him into the condo, storming up

and down the living room floor. She checked the kitchen and the open doors of the spare room and guest bathroom before plowing into Tania's bedroom, calling her name the entire time. She must not have heard the shower running for her brash behavior, he surmised.

"Excuse me, miss," Boone called after her, his voice forceful. "I don't believe—"

"Did she say anything to you about a ring?" the girl demanded, returning to living room after her brief, unsuccessful search.

"A ring?" Boone tapped his chin in an exaggerated manner. "A ring, a ring...no, can't say as she had. But she did have this lovely wall clock which seems to have disappeared—"

A sound exploded from the girl's painted lips, resembling a cross between a sputter and a bird being strangled. "Yeah, that fright from the House of Frankenstein. I don't know *what* he was thinking when brought that home."

Boone raised an eyebrow, silently thanking the girl for her clue. If the soon-to-be ex-husband had made off with the clock, then this woman standing before him now surely was the reason he left entirely. *I hope she's worth it, mate*, Boone thought, now silently thanking the husband.

"I'm Bonnie Clayton, and I'm Craig Garber's fiancée," the girl explained, her voice haughty. "I'm here for my engagement ring, seeing as how Craig wasn't able to get it himself, after I threw him out to go get it. And until that ring is on my finger, he won't be getting any *at all*."

The plot thickened. Boone stifled a laugh; the notion that this young chit was going to wrest something away that some harried, beefy-looking man could not was too amusing. He returned to the swivel chair and fingered the computer mouse, pretending to read the screen. Bonnie sauntered behind him;

Boone was instantly aware of her scent—a combination of lilacs and mint gum.

"And you are?" she asked pointedly.

Boone did not turn around to face her. "I'm Jeeves, remember?" He set his fingers on the keyboard and exaggerated his own accent into something more posh. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I best be returning to working on the household budget before Madame returns. Then I suppose I'll have to get the kettle on."

Bonnie eyed him with suspicion, then nodded toward the window. "Her car's in the parking lot. Where'd she go, for a run on the beach?"

"Am I my mistress's keeper?" Boone shrugged and bit his lip.

"Cut the crap." Bonnie was at the window now, her back turned to Boone, presumably to give him a prime view of her shapely bottom, what with the way it swayed from side to side. "You her boyfriend?"

"Could be. I could have been robbing the place, though, when you arrived."

"You wouldn't have answered the door, then," Bonnie said. "Or let me in."

"Perhaps I'm a polite burglar," Boone said, smiling wickedly as Bonnie turned to face him. "Perhaps I'm planning a deft escape with a means of leaving you here to take the blame for my dastardly deeds."

"Right." Bonnie laughed, albeit uncomfortably, Boone noticed. "Doesn't look like anything here's disturbed."

"I could be hiding something in my pants."

Bonnie did not appear to take to the barb. "You can't be her boyfriend, you're probably one of her writing friends," she decided with a finality that implied she would hear no further

argument. "Besides, Tania's still in love with Craig."

"Is she now?" A needle-like pain pricked at Boone's heart. Could that be true, or were those the words of a triumphant home wrecker looking to further twist the corkscrew into Tania's back? "You're sure of this? She told you?"

Bonnie rolled her eyes. "She doesn't have to say anything. I could tell by the way Craig looked when he got home. Sighing and waving his arms. She doesn't want to let him go, that's why she won't give up the damn ring."

"Ah." He knew nothing of this ring Bonnie continued to blather about, but decided her theory could not possibly be correct. Tania may not be in love with him—not now, anyway—but no way could she still be pining for this Craig, not after the way she had touched and kissed him, the way she had called *his* name as she climaxed. There had been no hesitation in her voice, as if trying to remember the proper name. No, Bonnie's words had to be a spillover of Craig's own delusions.

"You know what I think?" he asked finally. "I think your Craig's off his twig." When Bonnie responded with only a blank stare, he added, enunciating slowly, "He's a first class nutter."

Bonnie scoffed. "Maybe you are her new piece. Figures Tania would wind up dating some kind of pig," she spat.

Boone stood and stretched, flexing his arms over his head and tightening his muscles. Best to let Bonnie have the full effect, anyway. "That's me, the other white meat," he said, and waited patiently for Bonnie to retort being a vegetarian.

She never got the opportunity, however, for Tania's entrance into the living room stunned both of them into silence. Barely wrapped in a white towel, wet hair slicked back behind her ears, she padded up the short hallway. Her voice carried throughout the entire condominium.

"You know I could use some help with these places I can't

reach," she was saying when she rounded the corner and looked up to see Bonnie. Immediately she stopped, loosening her grip on a long wooden handle of a slick and soapy loofah sponge so that it nearly touched the rug. The anticipatory smile on her face was instantly erased as she glared at a now bemused Bonnie.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Tania demanded. Boone felt suddenly invisible for the temperate drop in the room as the two women now circled slowly like cats preparing to fight.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your little party," Bonnie said, casting a surreptitious glance at Boone, "but I've come for what's mine."

"I gave Craig the clock last night. Did you need an instruction book?" Tania raised her eyebrows and spoke slowly in a kindergarten teacher's voice. "When the big hand is on the twelve—"

"Damn it, Tania, I want the ring." Bonnie's voice stretched into an impatient whine. "You know that's the only reason why I would come here."

"I know why you're here." Tania stormed back into her bedroom, presumably to put on something less revealing. When Bonnie followed, Boone decided to follow suit in the event of something ugly happening. The scene was growing so worrisome that not even the site of Tania bending into her closet, revealing a flash of her beautiful, heart-shaped bottom, could not be enjoyed.

He saw Tania, instead of dressing, heft a small firebox and set it on her dresser. Taking a key from the top dresser drawer, Tania unlocked the box and produced a velvet ring box. "I had planned to call Craig today to have him come get the damn thing," she said, shoving the box at Bonnie. "You saved me a phone call. Thanks."

Boone watched Bonnie's reaction. Gone was the smirking, sardonic Jezebel, replaced by an astonished mute whose age

appeared to reverse sharply. Bonnie gingerly turned the box in her hands before prying it open to confirm the ring's existence. She had clearly been expecting to fight for this piece of jewelry—physically, verbally, however—only to find Tania had delivered a punch from which she could never recover.

"Tania, I—" Bonnie began, but Tania stopped her.

"Bonnie, the next sound I want to hear coming from you is the front door closing as you leave. You got what you came for, that's it. Goodbye." Tania meant business, Boone could see, and Bonnie only offered a solemn nod in thanks and, casting one last confused look at Boone, left.

In the distance, the front door gently clicked shut, leaving Boone and Tania staring at each other for a long, silent moment before he finally opened his arms to her. To his delight, she slid against him and let herself be enveloped.

"A long story involving that ring, I gather?" he asked.

Tania nodded, her cheek pressed against his chest.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shook her head, no.

"Very well. I don't feel like talking anyway." With that, he grazed one hand across her bare shoulders, gathering droplets left from her shower, before finding where the towel was tucked and setting it free from her body. Her nude body crushed to him, he quickly set to rubbing away the sudden eruption of goose flesh that had overcome her.

Tania gasped. "What are you doing?"

But Boone only smiled and said, "Oink."

Seventeen

"Wait here," Boone instructed her, and rolled out of bed.

Completely wiped from yet another incredible lovemaking session, Tania barely found the strength to sit upright. She clutched the bed sheet to her bare chest and leaned to one side, but lost sight of Boone as he disappeared down the hall.

"Where would I go?" she called after him. She could barely move, but decided her exhaustion was well worth the memory of Boone's touch and sexual skill. Her nipples hardened just thinking of what he had done to her this time, how they had moved fluidly into positions she never before tried, and wishing he would hurry back and ease her soreness with his kisses.

He returned, camera in hand, and Tania balked. "No, no way," she said, "are you going to be taking any *boudoir* photographs of me." In her mind she saw bootlegged photos available on the Internet and who knows where else.

Boone just smiled at her and turned toward her bathroom door, granting Tania full view of his backside. And, oh, what a nice-looking ass! She watched him remove her white terry robe from the peg on the door and caught it by the belt as he tossed it to her.

He was looking around the room now, testing light switches and fondling the blinds. The room turned brighter, forcing Tania to shield her eyes until they adjusted.

"Tuck your legs under, like you're kneeling, and put on the robe," he instructed. "Don't tie it up tightly, but let it part just

enough to see the outline of your breasts. No, like this."

He set the camera on her dresser, and arranged the edges of her robe so that it formed a long, thin vee over her chest, coming to a point near her navel. He gathered the rest of the robe across her thighs, situated pillows and rumpled the sheets for effects, and ordered her to be still.

She expected him to hold out his palms to her, setting up the shot as she had seen photographers and directors do on television shows, but he just picked up the camera and checked the flash. Perhaps TV did not completely imitate real life. Any other photographer would not be naked.

"Keep that pouty look, don't move a muscle. Just like that, yes." And before Tania realized what was happening, Boone was snapping away. Five shots clicked in rapid succession before she found the courage to speak.

"How long does it take you to go through a roll of film?" she asked, confused by a momentary hand gesture that she surmised was a request to tilt her head.

"No, look toward the door. I want to get a profile. Yes, better." Two more clicks. "It depends, really, on the job and my mood and a million other factors."

"I thought we were going to the beach," Tania said through nearly closed lips. Boone had not ordered her to say *cheese* or smile. Exactly what kind of photo had he in mind? For all her experience in romance writing, she had never considered herself the romantic type, and certainly not the casual sexpot he seemed to be making her with these photos.

Boone peered up from the lens. "I changed my mind. Something like this seems more appropriate, don't you think?" He adjusted. "A touch of sensuality without looking too cheap."

Tania indicated the deep, open neckline. "Uh, excuse me, Mr. Guccione, *this* is not cheap?"

"No, it's beautiful. You're beautiful."

Tania's heart softened, and she leaned against the headboard while Boone snapped more photos. She found it difficult to look as staid as he requested when inside she was exhilarated. She had never done anything like this before; Craig kept only one photo her in his office, to her knowledge. That had been a distant shot of her waving from some kind of historical landmark, probably wearing a floppy hat and sunglasses, too.

She had done a lot of things with Boone that she had never before dared, she realized. What was it about him that seemed to wield some kind of thrilling power over her?

"How much longer?" she asked. She was starting to feel stiff in the neck and back. Looking sexy apparently had its downside.

"Just a few more shots, and I'll be more than happy to rub out the kinks." Boone winked. Tania could not resist a sly smile as parry.

"You've done that before, I take it."

"One of the hazards of work."

"Anybody famous?"

Click. Flash. Crank. "Now, I'm not one to rub and tell. Just one more, make it count, and...yes." The roll finished, Boone set down the camera and rested his hip on the edge of the bed. "Now, how about we take five, or twenty? Or sixty?"

* * *

He knew he should leave her alone to do her work. He had some of his own to do now, and it felt good to be able to think like that again, to be busy again. He had Tania to thank for giving that back to him.

She lay on her stomach, diagonally across the mattress with her arms to her sides, the robe pulled down to her waist. He kneaded her back and sides, and noticed she was much tighter

than he first assumed. He berated himself silently; he should have known Tania would not be used to sitting still for so long, not like the professional models he had shot.

Tania cooed appreciatively into the mattress as Boone pressed deep into a sore spot and moved his fingers in a circular motion. "Oh, that's nice."

"You're welcome." Boone spied the curve of her left breast, exposed from underneath her, and fought the temptation to flip her over and take the nipple into his mouth. "Just a few minutes more and I have to get downstairs. I don't want to waste any time developing these."

"Oh, do you have to?" Tania moaned, her words slurred.

"Yes, and you have a novel to finish."

She sighed. Of course she knew that, but Boone was flattered that she was becoming more willing to procrastinate for his benefit.

"And I expect one of my photos to be on its back cover," Boone finished. He focused his attention to her right side now.

"You're actually serious about putting one of those shots on my book?" Tania asked, incredulous.

"Why not?"

"I don't know...it's just not, *me*."

"It looks like you," Boone said simply.

"That's not what I meant."

"You write romance, don't you? You should look romantic, not posed like a mannequin behind your computer. Your photo should reflect who Tawny Garbo is and what she represents."

"What I represent?" Tania lifted her head slightly but Boone pushed it back gently against the mattress. "I'm just a novelist, it's not like I'm a delegate to some country in the United Nations."

"Let's discuss it later, shall we? For now, though, why don't

we talk about something else? Like what you were like when you were younger and had your whole life in front of you."

"Okay, if you'll do the same."

"Done." They talked of their childhoods and favorite things, hopes and dreams and disappointments. Boone intensified his ministrations and Tania seemed to lose all will to speak, but did her best to keep up the conversation. Boone welcomed the silent pauses, which enhanced the intimacy of the moment. This was something he could see doing more than once, perhaps more than once a day, with her, for a long time to come.

He smoothed a hand down her spine and straddled her for better access to her shoulders. After a lengthy pause in the conversation, after they had exhausted many topics, her muted voice rose from the bed. "Boone?"

"Yes, love?"

"Why did you burn out in LA?"

Boone stopped the massage, but did not release his hold. Yes, he supposed that topic would eventually be broached. No sense in holding it in any longer.

"Well, really, there's not much to tell," he began, slowly resuming his gentle hand movements. "You ever have one of those moments when you're going along happily in your job, just like any other day, then all of a sudden it hits you that what you're doing seems so futile?"

He could see Tania nod slightly.

"That's what happened to me, I suppose. I went to work on this shoot, a run-of-the-mill job for me, for some fashion catalog. The equipment was set up properly for once, props and models all in place, perfect lighting. Then I looked into the camera and nothing seemed right, you know?"

"Then my hands started to shake. I thought maybe I was having some kind of a stroke, but when it subsided nothing had

changed." A momentary pang of depression filled his heart as the memory of that dark day came into focus, with Boone kneeling in one corner of the stark studio, surrounded by concerned faces. Tentative hands had reached forward, unsure of whether or not to touch him lest his condition spread.

"Beauty everywhere one could see, in the clothes and the women, but I just couldn't see it anymore," Boone continued. "I was convinced I had lost my touch. But I can see now somebody must think differently." He chuckled, and waited for a gentle retort, but none came.

"Tania?"

He bent over slightly to see Tania's eyes were not just closed; she had fallen asleep with a beatific smile on her lips.

"Well, I'll take this to mean I've worn you out, and not bored you to death," Boone quipped, and slipped silently off the bed. It was time to go anyway, to complete his work, but he really did not want to disturb Tania. Hopefully she would wake soon and return to her own tasks.

He dressed quickly and grabbed his camera, but before taking his leave approached the bed and brushed his lips against Tania's hair.

"I dare say I may be falling in love with you," he whispered in her ear. "I'm not just saying that to prolong a fling, either. I've got a good mind to take you back to California with me, you can write anywhere. And I'd rather you be with me for all eternity."

He cast one last glance at her when he reached the door. She had not budged, and he quietly closed the door behind him, anxious to finish his work so he could return.

Eighteen

"Hell."

One eyelid popped open to allow her to inspect her surroundings. In this position Tania could not see the clock, so she hefted herself from the bed to check. Yawning, she wrapped her robe around her, securing the belt. How long had she slept? Moreover, where was Boone?

She called out his name and received no answer. A quick check of the bathrooms and living room confirmed his absence, so she slumped with a heavy sigh at her workstation. *Nice, love me and leave me*, she thought, but her mood quickly changed after spying a yellow square of note paper sticking to her monitor.

Get back to work, love, was all it said. Tania smiled. At least he was not as surly as Cheryl. She would not even begin to compare his skills as a lover against her agent's.

So, she set back at work. She noticed, in addition to the sticky note, Boone had left behind some written comments about the novel in progress. She smiled to herself, looking at one particular line about the name Bob not quite being conducive to a romance hero. If he only knew.

While not wholly glowing, he made mention of sections he liked and suggestions to bridge what he thought were gaps in the story. After a quick reread of the novel, Tania saw some of his points. Having Cor waiting outside Boone's cottage all of a sudden did not seem to make too much sense. Where had he

been? How had he learned of the marriage?

She went back to the fifth chapter and renamed it Chapter Six. Inserting a page break before it, she began a new, different scene, one taking place right after the ceremony, a celebration in honor of the loving couple.

Laughter, good-natured and loud. Drink, cold and intoxicating, almost gone. Sisters, crouched in a corner and sulking, more so for the lack of attention brought on by their collective mood.

Piro set two filled mugs before them, his face glazed with the effects of the ale. "Will you not drink to your sister's good fortune, then?" he admonished them.

"Of what fortune do you speak?" Iona bit. "My sister had the wherewithal to be joined to any of a hundred eligible men in the province—dare I say even you might have made a preferable brother-in-law," she waved off the young man's sneer, "and my sister chooses the gardener, of all people! A gardener who's stingy with all household provisions which don't even belong to him!"

"Dare you say I would make a better husband than brother?" Piro raised an eyebrow and chuckled along with Tully. Iona shrank further into her chair.

"I'd just as soon marry a goat."

Tania chuckled as she typed. The gossip between sisters provided a good bridge between chapters, and the rumor of Boone's sexual exploits and the intimidating appearance of Cor at the end of the chapter fit in nicely with the story. A reader would hopefully surmise that Cor learned of the marriage from either Giles or somebody at the party. Not only that, the mention of Boone possibly siring an illegitimate child would add another

dimension to the story. How she would come back to it, however, was not entirely decided. She hit save; she would worry about it later.

Tania glanced at the rug, boring a hole through the floor. "See what you made me do?" she addressed the real Boone, down in what she assumed was a makeshift darkroom. Actually, he could be anywhere. His note had not indicated his whereabouts, nor could Tania guess if or when he was going to return and disrupt her work any further. "Now, how exactly am I going to bring this kid into the picture?" She mentioned him, so he would eventually have to make an appearance, more than likely as cause to rift Boone's marriage.

Then again, she already had Nattie saying that what Boone did in the past did not matter to her. Would the discovery of this child change that? Would she reject Boone as a result, or would she act differently and want to take custody of the child? That might make for some interesting conflict with the adoptive parents, Tania decided, and made a note to explore both options as she continued to shape the story.

She inserted a page break for the next chapter. She would think of a way to bring it all together; it would come to her. For now, though, the bug had bit and she was ready to continue. Now seemed like a good time as any to move the story forward in time, no sense waiting for a knock at the door.

Nattie's pregnancy needed only to span the length of a chapter. Tania did not see the need to stretch out the story with filler. The story needed to move. So, with Chapters Five and Six settled, she continued:

For Boone, every day was bliss, every night a honeymoon. Boone let neither the minor discomforts of their cramped living quarters nor Nattie's expanding belly deter him from ensuring

his wife's constant happiness. If Nattie felt displeased with anything, she never let it show, even during the most trying weeks of her pregnancy when she could barely keep down a morsel of food Boone prepared for her.

He felt relieved that the remaining members of the household—Trina had fled to the capital not long after her union to Cor—complained little when Boone set everyone on a blander diet to accommodate Nattie. Despite being freed from servitude, Boone insisted he continue his chores, if only to be constructive and assure Nattie that he would not worry himself to death about her.

Trina and Cor. That one sentence seemed sufficient for the time being. Tania knew they would enter into the mix again, but not right now. She was still not sure exactly what to do with them, but perhaps inspiration would soon come. Perhaps Boone could help her there, if they could manage to spend five minutes together without wanting to tear off each other's clothes.

Concentrate, she warned herself. Her eyes fixed on the screen, she segued from the bland passage about the household's eating regimen to a steamier scene involving Boone, Nattie, massage oil, and loving conversation. She wondered at first how readers might react to a scene depicting a woman, heavy with child, making love, but in the end decided to write it in all its rounded-belly glory. Surely some of her readers had kids, or were pregnant, and needed to know that a man could still find a woman in the family way desirable.

Would Boone find her desirable, swollen with child? Tania shook her head. She was getting way ahead of herself on that one.

His touch against her skin was feather soft, and Nattie clamped her own delicate hand around his as she pulled him

*upward for a kiss, only one thought between them.
For all eternity.*

Tania saved her work, feeling a slight chill. Why did that last line sound so familiar? She could almost hear Boone saying it directly to her. Boone downstairs, and this one before her. This was getting spooky.

And arousing.

She fingered the soft vee neck of her robe, bringing the collar to her face. It smelled of her floral-scented detergent, but there was also evidence of Boone. His aftershave, yet faint, lingered on her. Tania imagined he had left a similar imprint in her bed. How nice it would have been to go back to bed and find out, envelop herself in his scent, and will him to return.

"No, no, no, no," she muttered. "Keep writing, girl. You're doing good." She inserted a page break for next chapter. The sooner this one was written, the sooner the next one would be, too. The sooner the novel would be done, sent to Cheryl, and the sooner she could allow Boone back into her bed.

She stopped. *What am I thinking?* Let him back into her bed? They had yet to go out on a real date. With Craig, it had taken nearly a dozen dates before she would let his fingers pry away the underwire of her bra. Even then, he did not seem to know what to do. How could she let this wanton behavior with Boone continue?

Because you love it, girl.

Shut up.

No, she would have to place a moratorium on her lust. Maybe she could talk Boone into dinner at one of the nearby restaurants, and become better acquainted. A public setting would be have to be necessary.

Then, after dinner, they would go back to bed.

Nineteen

Tania winced as her fingers cracked with their flexing. "All right," she muttered. "Now to give birth." This was something she had yet to depict in print, not because she didn't think it appropriate for a romance story—a number of recent releases, she noticed, centered around the heroine experiencing childbirth—but it was not something she had experienced, and therefore did not think she could accurately describe it.

She thought of Craig and Bonnie for some reason. Now that the girl had the heirloom ring, how long before the two would celebrate by starting their own family, the one Craig had been so reluctant to give her? She felt nauseous just thinking about it, and tried to block it from her mind as she pressed forward with her story.

* * *

Forced out of his cottage by the formidable Mrs. Cavendish, the town midwife, Boone was left with no recourse but to go about his chores. Naturally, he was doing a terrible job of it, as Tania had Iona observe. The two then launched into conversation which, to Iona's surprise, was rather pleasant. Tania thought it good foreshadowing to a possible friendship between the two. Should she decide to make Trina the bad sister, Boone and Nattie would need allies.

Right now, though, Tania decided to have Boone's ally-to-be get him some clean clothes to replace the ones dirtied while he cleaned the chimney in the big house.

She felt a clammy touch to her bare wrist. Nattie looked up from the bed. Thank you, she seemed to be saying with her eyes. Iona felt her unspoken words pierce her heart.

Iona clutched the clothes to her chest and returned her sister's smile. Streaked with sweat, her skin blotched, she still looked pretty. "I'll bring him," she said, and parted with a disdainful glance at the midwife, who only clucked and fussed about the foot of the bed.

* * *

Boone would be standing in one of the two outside stalls used for bathing, and Iona noticed immediately the top of his dark head poking from the wooden wall, a thick but slow shower of well water sprinkling down from a rusted faucet. Iona could hear the water hitting the muddy ground as she approached.

"Boone?" she called softly, but there was no answer. She dreaded having to come closer and knock on the stall door; she surmised she might frighten him if he were not paying attention, and he seemed so edgy earlier... she might drive him into a heart attack.

She clutched his clothes to her chest, her footfalls silent and soft in the dirt, then still as her gaze fixed on the stall. Iona bit back a startled gasp.

Boone had his back to her, this she could clearly see for the door to the stall had somehow come unhinged and was now resting against the house on the other side. Here Iona was granted full view of Boone's naked body, and as she watched her brother-in-law arch his neck to allow the water to cascade over his forehead she felt a fluttering in her body she had not before experienced. Her gaze lingered over the tightened muscles in his back and shoulders, his backside, his thighs. He was lean and

strong, which definitely must have come from years of working around the house and garden. Why had she not noticed him like this before?

Timidly she called out his name and received an answer.

"Wait there," he said, and emerged from the stall wrapped waist length in the large beige towel that had been draped over the empty stall. Under the noonday sun, the droplets beading on his skin glistened and appeared to evaporate quickly.

Boone gladly took the clothes from Iona's hand; if he had noticed her twitch, he made no mention of it. Iona tried not to look at him, and wondered how he would continue dressing in front of her. He seemed oblivious to her embarrassment, something she attributed to his preoccupation with Nattie's labor. Her head cast downward, she risked a surreptitious glance upward in time to see Boone slide the trousers underneath the towel, which fell to the ground as he fastened the ties. She had meant to sigh with relief, but sensed more regret in not being able to spy another look at him.

Wow, what possessed her to plant seeds of Iona's infatuation with her brother-in-law?

Duh, conflict. Every story needed it. Maybe it would turn out that Iona and Trina would form an alliance—Trina to gain power, and Iona to steal away Boone? It could happen, if she chose to write it.

Tania sighed. Would she ever see the real Boone again? What was she thinking, of course he would come back. He had taken pictures of her, and had promised to show them to her.

But a cold chill seized her as the thought of who else might see those pictures came to mind. The chill morphed quickly into panic as images of Boone, a series of her cheesecake snapshots fanned in his hand like playing cards, dialing a phone with his

free hand to talk to *Playboy* or some other girlie magazine. She could see the slug lines on the next issue now: *Author of bodice-rippers rips off own bodice*. What had she done, letting him loose in her bedroom with a camera? Had she been that derailed by a roll in the sack to suffer such a lapse in judgment?

She stared blankly at her monitor. She could not possibly work any further on this, not while these thoughts preyed on her. She had to see Boone, now, and get those pictures.

She tore into her closet and threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Underclothes and shoes were moot, hopefully this task would not take long, and once she had custody of the snapshots she could return with a clear conscience and a fresh focus. If she were lucky, perhaps Boone had left the front door unlocked and she could "accidentally" surprise him in the bathroom/darkroom, and expose the pictures. Hopefully, though, Boone had not changed his mind and taken the film to a camera shop.

Great, she thought at the prospect of that happening. How many shop clerks and curious customers would see the end result if he did that? She bit back a curse as her bare foot slammed against the frame of her bedroom door in her haste. She hobbled down the hall, shaking the injured foot until the painful sensation dissolved, thinking all the while that this would be so much easier to do if she wasn't attracted to him and willing to sleep with him one more time if he did turn out to be a rat.

She grabbed her keys from the kitchen counter and dashed out the door. "Please be home, Boone," she begged. She would get him to see reason, and get the pictures. Nothing more. At least, no more than half an hour.

Twenty

The captain's smaller guest bathroom with its double sink and narrow tub made for a satisfactory darkroom, enough for Boone to accomplish what he wanted. He had found a dishpan in the cabinet underneath the sink to use, and to his delight the red bulb he had bought at the camera shop fit into the lower socket of the lighted vanity mirror. The only daunting task had been to remove the remaining light bulbs lining the mirror, and Boone carefully placed them in a plastic grocery bag at one end of the tub, away from the clothesline he set up at the other end to catch the drippings from developed photos. It seemed highly unlikely he would step on them in there.

Just as the ease of taking the photos had returned through his time with Tania, so came the developing process. As each shot of Tania came into focus Boone's smile widened, and his confidence strengthened. He had hoped for good snapshots, something suitable for reproduction on a book cover, but what he saw took his breath away. As beautiful as Tania was, he had not expected any pictures, much less those from a rusty professional, to do her justice. But Tania seemed to overpower each photo with her presence.

Her pouting lips, piercing eyes, the simple gesture of a hand brushing her robe collar...each shot enhanced her serene sensuality. Any man seeing these pictures would not help but fall in love, Boone decided, then pondered the wisdom of his idea to reproduce her image where the world would see it. The mere notion brought forth a wave of jealousy that ruptured within him.

Carefully he clipped each finished product to the line, taking care that each shot did not curl in the drying process. No, Tania deserved to be seen. Her readers, the majority of whom were probably female, should have a face to match the name emblazoned across those floral covers, and he would be the one to provide it. Tania was going to love the shots, too. How could she negate his idea?

He was clipping the last of the photos to the line when a muffled thump from the other side of the door interrupted his thoughts. It sounded as if somebody had come stumbling through the front door and landed hard on the ground. Tania? Possible, as he had left the door unlocked, but surely Tania would have knocked or rang the bell. Of course, he had been so occupied with the photos that he might not have heard either.

As his hand curled around the doorknob he heard voices. His heart stopped. Alisha was back.

Blast! He had forgotten all about her. Of course she would be expected to return eventually from whatever Paul had planned. Squinting in the dark to see his watch, he realized both had been gone a rather long time, but Boone surmised that there must have been some travel involved with their shoot. He did not know where anything in Virginia was; Paul may have had to drive a number of miles to the park in question for their shoot.

He waited for Alisha to at least call for him to see if he was home. Instead he heard giggling, followed by an admonishing squeal, something that sounded rather intimate.

"Stop it, Paul," he heard Alisha chide. "He might be here."

"He'd have come out already, with the noise we're making," came Paul's voice, whining but playful. Boone's grip tightened on the knob, but he did not dare turn it. These were clearly not the voices associated with a strictly business relationship.

"The car's in the parking lot," Alisha said.

"So what? He's here to relax, so he probably went to the beach now that the sun's out. Come on."

More giggling, then kissing noises. At least, Boone had to assume that and more was happening now for the sudden silence. There was more stumbling and more talk, only now the voices had faded somewhat. They had moved to the bedroom. Boone listened for the eventual sound of squeaking bedsprings but heard none. By now, though, the blood pounding in his head was certainly overpowering any outside stimuli.

He slumped against the door, not knowing what to feel. Should he be angry with Paul and Alisha for their betrayal, or relieved? Knowing this bit of information would have to soften the blow of his pending breakup with her. Only question was, how to approach the situation? He could quietly open the door and clear his throat to announce his presence, or simply exit the bathroom and act startled.

Or he could explode through the door, playing the jealous lover.

No. He was not jealous of Paul at all. He felt nothing for this situation that would imply that he wanted Alisha. Aside from the relief, there was guilt, for what he felt for Tania. He would have to tell Alisha, and maybe they would be able to resolve this triangle—or quadrangle, whatever it was—amicably and quickly.

He took a deep breath and turned the knob again, but just as he pulled back the door he heard a cry of surprise. It was feminine.

And definitely not from Alisha.

* * *

Boone had left his door open wide. Not a very wise thing to do, Tania knew, not so much for the risk of burglars but because certain parts of the beach area made for notorious mosquito

breeding grounds. Boone could infest the captain's condominium with all sorts of flying, bloodsucking critters if he was not careful.

A patch of hem from her top had come undone, and she tucked it back underneath the elastic waistband of her shorts. For a moment she wished she had chosen something more conservative to wear, something that did not accentuate her breasts the way the low neck of this shirt did. It gave her a foreboding sense that Boone would not be concentrating on her words when she asked for the photos, but only relocating their passion to the captain's bed.

Admit it, you're wearing this on purpose. You want him to look at you, touch you.

Shut up.

She closed the door quietly behind her. "Hello?" she called meekly, but there was no answer. The front room and galley kitchen, from what she could see of them, were still, but she detected slight movement in the back bedroom from the shadows cast on the far door frame. Maybe he had not heard her; it made sense if he had been in the bathroom, working on the photos.

"Boone? Are you back there?" she called as she approached the bedroom, then stopped with a gasp. On the captain's rumpled king-sized bed she saw two naked, intertwined people. The man's face was not visible for the thin yet flawless blonde bouncing atop him, and both were oblivious to her greeting until she screamed.

The woman thrashed upward and turned around, her long, unruly hair cutting a swath in the dry air and falling behind her. Seeing Tania, she let loose a scream to rival the first, while the man underneath her propped himself on his elbows, bewildered at the scene. It did not register with Tania that the man was not Boone until he spoke.

"What the hell?" he cried in a distinct American accent, and tried to cover himself and the woman with the large pillows that had been pushed aside to make room for their tryst. "Who the hell are you? How did you get in?" Then a thought dawned on the man's face and he groaned. "Ah, damn it, the door."

Tania's entire body flushed. What had she done? Was she in the right apartment? She had to be; this was the captain's place, and Boone had sublet it. Who were these people, then? Had Boone come from LA with a friend who happened to get lucky on his first day in Virginia, too? Why had Boone not said anything about a roommate?

Did you ever give him the chance, came her nagging conscience, what with your tongue down his throat so he couldn't speak?

"Oh, God," Tania gasped, slowly backing away. "I am so sorry. I was looking...for somebody else...obviously, somebody wearing clothes." She had to get out of there before threats to call the police were made. "I'll just be going."

But the man sat up and called after her. "Wait a sec. Do I know you?"

Tania stopped, but would not look up at either of them. The woman, still stunned, had done nothing to cover herself, while the man was now out of bed, holding a strategically placed pillow. Her heartbeat quickened as he moved closer to her.

"You look familiar," he said, grinning slyly. "You're not a friend of Alisha's, are you, come to join in on the fun? Even if you aren't, I have no objections."

"Paul!" chided the woman, who was clearly annoyed by Paul's offer.

Tania was horrified. "Of course not!" She glared at the presumed Alisha. "I live upstairs. I was looking for somebody else, and not for what you're thinking." *Not anymore, anyway.*

This was a mood-killer. "If you'll excuse me."

"You mean Boone? What do you want with him?" Alisha asked. "Did that captain ask you to check up on us? We're paid up for the month."

We? How many people were living here for the month, and who was this woman to Boone? Tania began to feel uneasy about the encounter, and moved to leave again.

Paul's next words, though, rooted her to the spot. The man snapped his fingers.

"Tawny Garbo."

Tania's voice cracked. "What?"

"Tawny Garbo?" whispered Alisha in awe.

"I-I'm sorry, you have the wrong person." She truly had to leave now. This was hardly the place for a fan gathering. How had this guy recognized her, anyway?

The naked man, however, was not convinced. "Yes, you are her," he said. "I remember you from a literary festival at Old Dominion University two years back. I covered it for the *Folio* here in town. Alisha," he turned to the woman, who was now frantically searching a bag for a robe, "this is who you were looking for, right?"

"God, yes!" Alisha, now swathed in red satin, fastened the robe at the waist, yet it did little to conceal the budding breasts flashing from its folds. She rushed over to Tania and took her hands. "Miss Garbo, my name is Alisha McFadden and I am a *huge* fan of your books, but you probably get a million people who say that."

"Huh?" This was too surreal to imagine. Where was Boone? His front door had apparently led to the Twilight Zone. "No, I wouldn't say a million people...wait a minute." She could think of no other words, not even the one she really wanted to say, which was *goodbye*.

Alisha's babble continued, though Tania heard only parts of it. The girl was an actress, or an aspiring one at best with a few walk-on roles to her credit. "But I heard *Bedeviled* is going to be adapted for TV, and I *know* I would be perfect to play Darcy." Her eyes suddenly widened and she clasped her hands to her mouth. "Ooh, wait a moment."

She dashed back to her bag and pulled out a thick folder. "Let me give you one of my glossies," she called over her shoulder. "It's got my resume and agent's number on the back. He said I was nuts to take this time off, but wait 'til he finds out I met you."

Tania tried to push away the proffered black and white photograph but found her body's movements came not of her own will. She was merely a witness to the chaos now. Thankfully, she could somewhat still control her voice. "Uh, thanks," she said, "but, honestly, I am not Tawny—"

She managed a step in reverse, and backed into something solid, warm, and familiar. Boone's hands cupped her shoulders; his scent tickled her senses. Part of her wanted to melt against him and make all of this go away, while the other half wanted to pound him for luring her into this madhouse.

"This is Tania, she lives upstairs," Boone told the couple, "and she's a very busy woman. I think we've taken up enough of her time, don't you think?"

Tania expected a rebuttal from either Alisha or her companion, and was thrown off a bit to see both of them looking over her shoulder at Boone, their expressions ashen. They looked as if they had been caught doing something wrong.

"I'll be back in a minute," Boone said. "I'll just escort our neighbor back to her condo..."

Alisha turned meek. "Boone, sweetie, I'm so sorry," she whined. "I didn't mean for you to find out like this."

Sweetie? Find out like what? What could the girl have meant by that, unless the man concealed by the pillow was not Alisha's only companion on this getaway?

She craned her neck to look at Boone. His eyes were downcast, admitting guilt. Tania's heart numbed as it hit her: Alisha had been his ladyfriend, not Paul's. Officially, anyway. Boone had belonged to Alisha, never to her.

Suddenly his touch did not seem so welcome. Slowly she twisted away from him.

"That's okay," she said quietly and started for the door. "I can manage by myself."

"Tania, wait," Boone called after her.

Tania, though, did no such thing. She continued walking, out the door and up the stairs, double-locking her own door before taking her seat at her workstation. Every movement was automatic, as if she was preprogrammed, and she picked up where she had left off in the story. It was all she had left now; there was no reason to do anything else, or think of anything or anyone else.

One good push on Nattie's part brought forth a squalling, bluish newborn girl whom the midwife immediately wrapped in a blanket to take to the water pan. Only when the afterbirth followed and splattered to the cottage floor did Iona take to Nattie's other side and relish the look of relief on the new mother's face.

"Did you see her?" she asked of Iona. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Iona assured her.

"She's beautiful, just like her mother," Boone said, tears in his eyes.

"Shall I get Father?" Iona asked, but Nattie did not answer immediately. She looked up to see her sister's eyes flutter closed.

"Nattie?" she prodded, then looked at Boone with concern. "Poor thing, she's exhausted."

Boone's face, however, told a different story. Panic filled his eyes as Nattie's grip on the child went lax. "Nattie?" he called softly, the again, louder, as her head drooped. "Nattie!"

The child mewled. Boone motioned for Iona to take her. He patted Nattie's face and called her name again and again. "Nattie, wake up. What is wrong?"

"No, she's not breathing," Boone said, his panic spreading to Iona. The baby must have felt it, too, as her cries renewed in strength. "I'll get Father," she said, and dashed out of the cottage with the babe in her arms. What Giles could do, though, Iona did not know. Boone was the only one at The Grange who had any skill for such an emergency.

She found Giles finally in his bedroom, but did not give him the opportunity to greet his granddaughter. "It's Nattie, hurry!" The urgency in her voice brought forth the speed in the old man's gait, and they were back at the cottage in no time.

No time, however, proved to be too late. Iona opened the door with her free hand to the sight of rumpled blankets and a filthy floor. There, too, was Boone draped over his late wife, sobbing uncontrollably.

With that, Tania saved her work, turned off the computer, and threw herself on the sofa for an intense sobbing session of her own.

Twenty-one

They just stood silently, the three of them, gazing at each other but not meeting each other's eyes. Alisha awkwardly crossed her arms over her bust while Paul rocked back on his bare heels, looking very much the fool he was with the pillow still clamped over his pelvic region.

It was Boone who finally broke the silence with a labored sigh. "Right, then," he said, his voice tight. "On to the first question."

Paul and Alisha sighed in unison. Boone ignored them and edged further into the bedroom, stopping at the dresser, leaning back against it.

"This photo session at the park this morning," he began. "Was it really a photo session?"

"Yes," Alisha replied defensively, then let her arms fall slack. "If you want proof we'll have the pictures ready later today."

"Quite all right, Alisha, I've seen enough as it is." Boone grimaced. No sense in asking when exactly Paul had scheduled photo development in between their trysts. "So, this is a new development that started over dinner, I presume?"

Alisha's hangdog expression implied a different answer, which Paul provided. "Actually, guy, it's been going on a bit longer than that. About a few months now."

"In LA?" Boone raised an eyebrow, shocked. He had not expected that. His contact with Paul over there had been

minimal, and Alisha never spoke of him either, in the personal or professional sense. They had been seeing each other secretly for that long? If that were true, then she was a better actress than he surmised.

Alisha nodded.

Boone looked at Paul. "This is why you suggested I come to Virginia, then, knowing Alisha would insist on joining me, so you two could be together."

"Yeah, that's about it," Paul sighed. "Guy, I really don't know what to say, I'm sorry you found out like this."

"Yeah," Boone echoed. A touch of sympathy welled up inside him for Alisha, who looked close to tears. All this time, he had been out of love with her, while she was seeing another man on the sly. Why stay with him at all if she was unhappy? He knew he could not possibly have been encouraging her, and they had made love on their first night in Virginia. What was that all about?

The only answer that came to Boone was Alisha's career. While Boone simmered in the wake of his professional burnout, Paul continued to work, here and in California. His contacts had to have remained strong, and Alisha had plans. She would not want to linger with somebody who could be detrimental to her rising stardom, and Boone had to wonder now if Alisha was hedging her bets, and would have dumped Paul to stay with Boone if he recovered.

"Man," said Paul with a nervous chuckle. "I wish there was something that could make this situation less awkward."

"You could put on some pants," Boone suggested.

Paul blushed. "Right." He dipped around to look for them, adjusting the pillow where necessary, and proceeded to dress. Alisha remained still, yielding slightly with surprise when Boone drew her into a gentle hug.

"You-you're not mad?" she asked.

"No, I'm not." Boone kissed the top of her head. "Just a little bewildered that I didn't see this sooner. The way you and I have been lately, I'm surprised you stayed around as long as you did." He tried to sound flippant, but the emotion in his voice betrayed him. Yes, he had hoped to break it off, but he still found it painful to do. "You could have saved me a trip to Virginia if you two had just run off from there, you know."

As soon as he said that, though, there came the thought that he would not have met Tania, would not have fallen madly in love with her, and his heart would not be breaking now with the prospect of facing her again only to be told to sod off. He released Alisha and stepped away from her.

"I guess I should pack my stuff," Alisha said, looking at the now-dressed Paul. "No reason for me to hang around here, huh?"

"No, I suppose not," Boone said, but did not add that he was thinking the same thing of himself. "But there is something you should know before you leave."

Twenty-two

The phone rang. Tania threw a pillow and missed. She did not want to talk to anybody, or see anybody, especially Boone. Though, she could not be certain he was the one calling; she did not recall giving him her number, which was unlisted. There were many things she had not told Boone, and apparently he could say the same thing about himself.

She checked for the time, and remembered the clock was gone. Damn. She knew several hours had passed; it was getting dark outside her window.

She lay back on the couch and stared at the ceiling, her eyes glassy and her vision blurred. They had made love on this very couch, produced a happy memory now reduced to ashes in her mind. Why had he not said anything to her about having another woman with him? True, she was technically still married to Craig, but at least she had the decency to mention that before she and Boone had seen each other naked.

She sprang from the couch on the fourth ring; the answering machine triggered. Another piece of furniture she could no longer use. She wanted to throw herself somewhere and cry, but where? By this logic, the bed was off limits as well. She might as well burn down the complex.

Cheryl's lilting voice, badly impersonating Casey Kasem, filled the room. "And now, it's time for our long distance dedication. This one's going out to Procrastinating Writer of Virginia Beach from Frustrated Agent in beautiful downtown

Los Ang—"

But Tania managed to cross the living room and cut off the machine before Cheryl could get much further. "You said you weren't going to call me this week." She was able to keep her voice from cracking, but had to cover the receiver while she sniffled.

The tone of Cheryl's voice offered no hint of apology. "Well, I hadn't planned on it, but I thought you'd might like to know that Eve is greenlighting the *Bedeveled* project, and get this: they decided on a *miniseries* instead of just hacking your book into two hours with commercials! Isn't that great? That means more money for you."

"Terrific." Tania was hardly enthusiastic.

"Not only that, they want to see the one you're working on now, but if it's as good as *Bedeveled*, they might even consider optioning it sight unseen. And Hollywood doesn't do that for just *anybody*."

Get in line. Nobody was going to read a book she could not bear to finish now. "That's really great news, Cher."

"You could be a little more enthusiastic, you know," Cheryl said, annoyed. "How about something like, 'Thank you, oh goddess of agents, for helping to broaden my readership and ensuring me a halfway decent retirement?' So," Tania heard the sound a phone receiver switching ears and fingers against a keyboard. Cheryl was multitasking again. "How we doing so far, while I got you on the phone? Don't worry, I won't keep you too long from your next bestseller."

"Okay," Tania lied. "Eight chapters, close to twenty thousand words."

"Not bad, not bad." A pause, then, "You think you could e-mail what you have? I could get the editor started on it, and maybe if you sent a summary of the rest of the book I could whip

up a treatment to send to Eve."

Tania fired up her cable Internet connection and attached the work to an e-mail message, which she sent immediately to her agent. For all the good it would do either of them, to say nothing of EveTV. "Done, though don't get too excited. I don't have any idea how I'm going continue beyond what I've written so far."

A sputtering, like a scoff, ripped through the line. "So what?" said Cheryl. "I'll trust you to come up with something. You work well on the fly, or I could suggest something after I read this. Ah, here it is now." More keyboard clicking, followed by the appropriate impressed murmuring.

"There's something you should know before you get into it," Tania said.

"What?"

"I killed off the heroine."

Silence. No background noise, no faint computer beeps or clicks. Not even a heavy breath, until, "Come again?"

"She died in childbirth."

"You're sure she didn't just pass out? I know I did when Tory was born."

"I wrote it myself. Read it. She's dead. Gone. Finished."

Cheryl, as usual, was unfazed. "Is she really important to the story?" she asked. Tania could sense the panic creeping into her agent's voice, however well she tried to hide it. She was probably picturing many dollar bills flying out her office window on gossamer wings, rained upon by the confetti shreds of a television contract. "What the hell am I asking? Of *course* a heroine is important to a romance novel, unless you're planning to make the hero gay. You're not planning to do that, are you? Because even if you are we would have to approach another publisher and network to get something like that in print and

optioned."

"I haven't really given the rest of the story much thought today." All Tania could picture was Boone, wrapped in the arms of the downstairs blonde. What were they doing now? Making up and forgiving each other? Maybe they were well into a *menage* with Paul of the Pillows. The thought made her skin crawl.

"Well, how far have you written past her death?"

"Not one word."

"Well, then." The sigh of relief blew into Tania's ear. "Go back and make it right. Say she was just resting. And they lived happily ever after."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" Tania could picture Cheryl on her feet now, itching to kick or throw something.

"It just wouldn't feel right to me, Cheryl. The story seems to have lost me. I would be cheating my readers if I wrote something just to make them happy, because to me it wouldn't be genuine." Even as she said the words, Tania wanted to laugh. Her readers would never get a hold of this. She was the story, she and Boone, and the story was over. The muse was gone; he was sleeping with the blonde downstairs. Death was the only appropriate ending for this novel.

"What kind of crap is that, Tania? *Bedeviled* was all about pleasing others, your royalties reflect that. It sold because it was what people wanted."

"It sold because it was what the publisher wanted people to want." Tania was becoming angry. "It's not what I want anymore. Cher, maybe I'm just no longer cut out for writing romance—"

"Yes you are, girl. You are very good at it, and I can tell you now just reading these first few pages that you haven't lost

your touch, either. This Iona chick appears to be quite well rounded. I can't imagine why you'd kill her off."

"She's not the heroine. Nattie is. Read further down."

She waited a few seconds. Cher, she knew, was a master speed-reader, and probably would have read the entire document had she not been jawing on the phone with her.

"I see. She seems good, too." More clicking. "You know, you could have Boone hook up with Iona or the other chick. Or both. Or make his part secondary, put Trina and this Cor dude in the spotlight instead. Whatever, just finish it, okay? I know you've had a rough year—"

You don't know the half of it. The real Boone did not seem to have any trouble hooking up with other women. Tania's blood boiled at the mere thought of it.

"...but maybe if you concentrate on finishing this book it will help take away some of that frustration with the divorce. I know the check you'll be getting from Eve will."

Tania smiled, weak. "You don't know when to quit, do you?"

"I'm an agent. *Quit* is a four-letter word. Finish this damn book. Twenty thousand words is good, but eighty thousand would be better. I'm calling next week for the rest of it." Cheryl hung up without saying goodbye, as was her fashion. No sooner than Tania heard the click on the other line did the doorbell ring.

"No," she groaned. She did not need this right now. She never wanted to face Boone again, and she certainly had no intention of accepting any apologies, much less letting back into her home, and her heart. How would she be able to believe anything he would say to her?

A second ring gave way to urgent knocking. He was not going to give up; Tania sighed, resigned to at least this encounter. She would have to think of a way to get her errands

done with risking running into him in the parking lot.

"All right, I'm coming," she shouted, and did not bother to check through the peephole when she yanked open the door. "I'm only going to say this once—"

Then she gasped at her visitor. "What the hell are you doing here?" she asked Craig.

Twenty-three

Craig edged past her into the living room. "Is this how you're going to greet me from now on?"

Tania reached for Craig's arm and checked his watch. Had that much time passed? "Are you going to keep dropping in unexpected in the middle of the night?"

"I'd just as soon you slam the door in my face."

Tania gestured to the deck outside her door. "Step back outside, why don't we give that a trial run?" she asked. "Really, why are you here? I gave Bonnie the ring, anything else we can take care of through our lawyers."

Craig was pacing the room, and stopped to look at her. "Have you been crying?"

"None of your business. Nothing I do is your business anymore, Craig. Please leave."

"It's about the ring, isn't it? I knew you'd be upset—"

"I could care less about that damn ring, Craig," Tania exploded. "You were right, it's not mine anymore, and it's not part of my life. It's all you and Bonnie now, and I've accepted that." Craig and Bonnie. Boone and Alisha. Cheryl and EveTV. Everybody had somebody or something, a future of jewelry and photographs and happiness. She had a half-written novel about a man mourning his wife that was supposed to warm the hearts of women from Jersey to Walla Walla, and right now she did not care about any of the aforementioned.

"Well, you have no right to be upset, you shouldn't be

upset." Craig was digging into his pants pocket and produced a familiar box. "Here's something I hope will make it right."

"What's this?" Tania took the proffered box, her eyes widening at the sight of Craig's grandmother's ring. "Craig," she said, astonished, "after all that talk last night about how you wanted me to hand this over, and with Bonnie this morning, you're giving it back? Why?"

Her astonishment quickly turned to shock, then disbelief, when Craig answered her by dropping to one knee.

"Oh, no," she groaned.

"Tania," Craig began, but she cut him off with a look.

"You're losing your mind."

"Tania, I was a fool to have cheated on you, and an even bigger fool to have left you for Bonnie. I don't know what I was thinking—"

"Neither do I, but I know what you were thinking *with*. Do I get half credit for that?"

Craig continued, unfazed. "But I want to make things right with you. Tania, please, we can get counseling and get back on track. Let this ring symbolize a new beginning for us."

Tania fingered the box. The ring was beautiful as always, and had not lost any of its luster since the first time Craig offered it to her, but looking at it, and Craig, sparked nothing in her heart. Craig's words rang hollow in her mind, and she could detect a false sincerity in his pleading expression. Something was not right.

She set the box on the head of the recliner. "Have you talked to Bonnie?"

"Yes. She had no right to come here and demand the ring. I told her I would take care of it, but she defied my requests. I'm sorry for that."

"Then she knows you're here with the ring, proposing to me

again?"

"No." Craig's head drooped. "I haven't told her that yet. I told her I was going to get some drive-through for a late night snack."

"You said nothing because you're waiting to see what I'll say now," Tania finished what she believed was Craig's intent. "You did talk to Bonnie, and she probably also told you with great pleasure and/or disgust that I had a man in my condo this morning while I was cavorting around in a bath towel. You got to thinking that perhaps this man had been in my bed, and you couldn't stand the thought of that."

"That's not how it was," Craig said, insistent, but his expression told Tania differently. He was jealous. He did not want to stay married to her, but the idea of her with somebody else was eating away at him. Only he could have a life beyond this marriage. How it would have overjoyed her to be able to lord her passion with Boone over him, but she did not have to heart to do even that, not as she tried to forget what she and Boone had shared.

"You can't have it both ways, Craig," Tania told him. "You can stay married to me and be faithful, which I doubt you'll do, or you can go back to Bonnie. And I know you don't want to stay here, you just don't want me to move on with my life as you're doing with yours. How dare you." She was angry, and why not? She did not take to the idea of being manipulated, not by her soon-to-be ex or to a photographer with a beguiling British accent.

"I-I think if we work things out, Tania, we can be better again." Craig's voice stumbled. Tania wanted to laugh. Whom was he kidding? They would last a month before Craig started casting longing looks toward the door, asking himself 'What if?'

"So prove it," Tania dared him, reaching for her phone and

dialing seven numbers. "Tell Bonnie right now where you are, that you're leaving her and coming back to me, and I'll believe that you're being sincere. We can schedule a counseling session first thing in the morning."

She handed him the receiver as he stood. The ring tone could be heard by both of them as Craig slowly took the device, his face contorted with fear. Tania heard Bonnie's bland greeting just as he pressed the receiver to his ear.

"Bonnie," he returned the greeting, "just wanted to check in. Yeah, I'm fine, I just wanted to let you know..."

Tania moved closer, her arms folded, her eyes boring into his. She sensed Craig's resolve quivering like his knees. *Tell her*, she mouthed, hardly surprised by the look of discomfort in his eyes.

"To let you know..." he faltered. "That, that I'll be home in a little while. You need anything else? Okay. Yeah, I love you, too." He rang off with a leaden sigh, unable to look at his wife.

Tania next handed him the box. "Craig, you were never serious about a reconciliation. Go back to Bonnie," she said. "I wasn't going to take you back even if you did tell her that you were leaving her. I think you knew that."

"Yeah." He shoved the box back into his pocket. "I don't know what I was thinking. Bonnie comes home from what I thought was a morning run, only to find out that she came here for the ring. I was mad at first, but then she mentioned you had a guy here and," he looked at her with apology, "I just lost it inside. For a second, I think I could imagine how you felt when you caught me with Bonnie. I just didn't want it to be. You were my wife."

"I know, but I won't be anymore. That's going to be Bonnie's job." Deep down, she wondered the same thing. Could Craig ever really sympathize with her? She had always been

faithful to him.

"I'd think you'd be happy that I was moving on with my life," she added. She would not give Craig the satisfaction of knowing, however, that things with Boone were pretty much over. Within a few weeks, Craig would be out of her life save for the monthly alimony checks; he did not need to know more.

"It's easier to picture it than to experience it," he said with a sheepish smile. "I'll get out of your hair now. I'm really sorry, Tannie."

"Come here." She drew her husband into a friendly hug, relishing his warmth. She needed the touch right now, however platonic, though it did little to assuage the pain she felt inside for...

"Boone?" she said.

There he stood at the slightly open door, watching her and Craig. He looked stricken. "Am I interrupting something?"

Twenty-four

He did not want this to be what he thought it was, that Tania had become so upset she called for her husband's sympathy, and perhaps something more. He had seen the man's hand pause at the small of her back, as if deciding whether or not to try for points further south. Boone would not have blamed him for trying. A woman like Tania was a pleasure to touch.

He wondered if he would ever experience such pleasure again.

Craig slowly, and reluctantly it seemed to Boone, drew away from Tania's arms and patted the square-shaped bulge in his front pants pocket. "No, you're not. I was just heading home, is all," he said. Boone blocked the man's exit, and Craig sized him up with a curious smile. "Anglo-Saxon accent, lithe frame, prominent proboscis. You must be Jeeves," he said with a touch of sarcasm.

"*You* must have read Roget's this morning. Do you have the time, *guv'ner*?" Boone shot back, and moved to one side to allow Craig to pass. Before the interloper did, however, he turned back and shot Boone a warning glance.

"Regardless of what has happened and what will happen between Tania and me, I still care about her, very much," Craig said. "Any man who hurts her will have to answer to me."

"I'll be sure to warn that man, but you'll have to get in line. I won't let that happen, either," Boone replied, and offered a slight nod in farewell.

Craig ignored him. "Tannie, you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine, Craig. Go."

Craig took one last wan look at Tania and left.

Unmoved and upset, her arms now folded, she still looked beautiful to Boone. The frost in her stare should have shamed him back downstairs, but it only made him want more to rush over and take her in his arms and make her pain dissolve. He could only imagine how she might react to that, however, so he remained by the open door.

"I-I wanted to give you some time," he began. "I went for a drive, got lost..."

"That's a load of bull," she snapped.

"I'm serious. I don't know my way around this bloody town."

"I was talking about you saying you wouldn't let me be hurt."

"I meant every word. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you." He could see, however, that the words were lost on her. "May I come inside?" he asked.

"I don't think you should," she said in a voice to match her expression. "In fact, I don't think you should come back here ever again."

"May I at least have the opportunity to explain myself?" He dared a step closer and received no protest.

"What's to explain? You came here from California with another woman and turned my life upside-down. She *is* your girlfriend, right?"

"Was." The recent memory of Paul hefting Alisha's luggage out of the downstairs condo as she tossed him a sad smile of farewell over her shoulder burned in the front of his mind. "She left with Paul hours ago. Apparently the two had been sneaking around behind my back for quite a while. And even though I

only found that out, I had every intention of breaking it off with her before then...before I met you."

"But you didn't," Tania said. It was more of an accusation than a question, and Boone had no other recourse but to affirm. He had to be honest with her this time. No more compounding deceit with deceit.

"Tania, please." He stepped forward again.

"Don't," she warned, and he froze, his heart aching. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears, and it pained him to think he was the cause. "I don't want to hear any explanations, or apologies, or anything else. The only one who should be hearing those is that girl, Alisa?"

"Alisha."

Tania waved away the correction. "She's an actress, isn't she? She shoved her resume in my face, wanting the lead in *Bedeveled*, which nobody is supposed to know about yet. How can I be sure you and she didn't concoct some scheme to seduce me so I'd recommend her for a job?"

"Hey," Boone countered. "What we did had nothing to do with her. There were no ulterior motives, and there was no sinister plan. I had no idea who you were when we met."

"Whatever. The fact remains that you willfully cheated on her. I've had that happen to me, and you have no idea—"

"Excuse me." Boone's voice found a strength that he suddenly worried would be misinterpreted, but he desperately wanted Tania to listen. "I would know, too, having found out about Alisha's infidelity, seeing it for myself."

Tania shook her head. "Boone, it doesn't make right what you did. It's terrible that Alisha was fooling around on you, and I can sympathize, but you're not justified in doing the same thing."

"You're a married woman. What you do is right, then?" He instantly regretted the words.

"I'm legally separated," Tania pointed out. "And it's not your business what I do. Not anymore. I don't think it ever was."

"You think I didn't feel bad about what I did, lying to the both of you? You think this isn't tearing me up inside?" Boone was shouting now. He wanted to be closer to her. She would only back away further, probably to the balcony and over the ledge, just to get away from him.

"You should have been up front with me from the beginning, and this never would have happened," Tania was saying. "You should have said no when I came on to you last night. You should have left me alone. It would have saved us both so much pain."

"But I wanted that to happen, Tania. I wanted *us* to happen. I didn't think it would so quickly, but I'm glad it did. I'm not sorry that we made love, and given the choice I'd rather take the pain of losing you than the pain of never knowing what it would have been like to hold you and love you the way I did." He felt weak at the mere thought of it, and eased back onto the couch. Tania looked as if he had committed something worse.

"Don't sit there," she warned.

Boone crossed one ankle over the opposite knee, making himself comfortable. "No," he said defiantly. "I want to be here." He stroked the fabric. "I was here with you...making love."

"Please don't," she begged, her voice breaking.

"I can still see the way you bit your lower lip and closed your eyes as rocked against me. Your breasts swaying over me, so beautiful." He gazed at her, forlorn. "They still are, so beautiful."

Tania looked down at her shirt, mortified with how her nipples stood out against the thin fabric. She crossed her arms over her breasts and turned away from him. Her reserve was crumbling, he could see. If he could only keep talking, keep the

good memories from being usurped by recent events...

"Please leave," Tania said.

"I don't want to leave, Tania. I'm in love with you."

"No." She shook her head violently. "This isn't love. You haven't known me a day."

"Yet you were willing to make love with me."

"I was insane."

"I don't think so," Boone said. "I think you knew love can come quickly. It did here."

"Not here. Please don't say that."

Boone did not stand. He leaned forward instead, elbows on his knees, his hands gesticulating. "Tania, what we had was wonderful. Before you knocked on my door yesterday, I was dead inside. I had no love, no hope for my career or my future. You changed all of that with a simple smile. Please." This time he could not stop his own tears from trickling down the corners of his eyes. "Tania, we can work this through."

"I barely know you, Boone."

"We have all the time in the world to rectify that. I can find another place to stay at the beach when my sublease is expired—"

"Just stop it, okay?" Her words pierced him. "It's not going to happen. What you're saying now, it doesn't change the fact that you were unfaithful with me to another woman, and you can't guarantee that a year or two down the road you won't cheat on me with the next love of your life."

"I would never do that to you," Boone said.

"Did you ever tell Alisha that same thing?"

Boone was silent now. To be honest, he could not remember much of the past few weeks with Alisha, to say nothing of their entire relationship. He watched Tania, who appeared to take his silence as affirmation. The dam had burst.

"Craig promised 'til death do us part, and you know how that ended," she said. "I don't want to live through that again, and given today's surprise I don't think I can trust you, Boone. I'm sorry. We just moved too quickly. What happened between us was a mistake."

I'm sorry, too. "Don't say that," he begged of her. "Don't say what I think you're going to say."

She did. "Goodbye, Boone." She punctuated this final word by opening the door for him. From outside a stream of moonlight shot through the threshold. The heat, combined with a salty breeze, felt inviting, but to Boone it was an exile to the coldest place on Earth.

Reluctantly he rose from the couch, absorbing the memory of their lovemaking, and left without another word. He did not wait for the door to close behind him before his own dam burst, and he sobbed all the way downstairs, through the captain's living room, and into his bedroom.

When the throbbing in his head subsided, and when he found the strength to lift himself from the bed, he searched several drawers for a pen and notepad and filled only half a short page. Next he gathered everything that was his, checked the lights and air conditioning unit, and left the condo keys on the kitchen counter next to the note.

Lastly, he reentered the bathroom. The lightbulbs he replaced, the dishpan he emptied, leaving only the photos, now dry, on the clothesline. One by one he took them down and gingerly stacked them on the sink. How excited he had been, thinking of Tania's reaction upon seeing how beautiful and photogenic she was. All that, gone now, replaced with a burning hole in his heart that not one photographic smile could ease.

He found an envelope in one of the kitchen drawers, and slipped in all the photos. Flipping the lock on the doorknob, he

closed the door behind him without looking back and turned for his car, but stopped. He looked down at the envelope in his hand, clutched so tightly his thumb was certainly leaving a crease in the photo paper, and with a deep breath he stole silently up the stairs. Even if she did not want to see him again, she needed to see what he had done, how she had helped him if just for a short time.

He set the envelope by the door, tempted to knock but pulling away quickly. He kept his face forward for the short but arduous walk down the stairs to the car, carelessly tossing his luggage and camera equipment into the trunk before roaring out of the complex. Had he bothered to look upward, he might have seen a silhouette guarded by the curtains in the window above his, watching his exit, followed by the turn of an upstairs doorknob.

Twenty-five

Two months later

Summer in Los Angeles was murder. Where Boone lived, in a neat little apartment complex off of Sunset Boulevard, there were no trees or lush landscapes, only cracked concrete and miles of storefront. Not that Boone could see it from his bed, where he spent the majority of his time, feeling miserable and worthless.

It would have to end soon, he knew. What money he had on reserve was slowly dwindling, and despite having lived on Ramen noodles and luncheon meat, when he did think to eat at all, he figured he would not be able to pay the rent come autumn. He needed to find some kind of work, and fast.

Offers had come in the time since returning from Virginia, but he always turned them down, citing some lame excuse. It was a bad habit, and he knew if he kept it up the phone would stop ringing altogether and he would truly be in trouble. He could not work, though. He could not pick up a camera without thinking of Tania, and threatening tears.

He thought of her constantly, and had even made a trip to Book Soup to buy up the rest of her catalog, including a spare copy of *Bedeviled* since Alisha had taken his other one. He read everything within his first week home, then over again. Reading her words kept him close to her, and he wondered what she was doing now. Was she still writing? Had she finished that book she was working on when they met? Had she gone back to Craig, or

perhaps found a new lover? He did not want to consider the latter questions, for the thought of her lying naked next to another man—next to, underneath, on top of—only made him feel worse, sometimes nearly to the point of suicide.

Lying in bed, he chuckled morosely at the thought. Days would lapse before anybody would think to check on him, he decided. Even then, his death would likely only be dismissed as that of yet another Hollywood dreamer gone astray. So much potential, so little luck.

"Dear God," he whispered to the pockmarked ceiling of his one-bedroom apartment. "Make it go away. Come take me now. I don't want to live if she won't live with me."

Seconds later, there came a distant clicking noise, followed by a woman's voice. "Boone? Are you here?"

Boone's heart thudded against his chest. "Mother Mary, is that you?" he called, weakly lifting his arm to summon the angel he thought would have descended from the sky rather than come through his front door. "I'm in here."

He tried to mask his disappointment when Alisha, not the Mother of God, wandered into his bedroom and scowled playfully at him, hands on hips and carrying a shopping bag. Mary would not have been too keen on tight shorts, flip-flops, and a pink T-shirt that read *Mama's Little Bitch*, he decided.

Alisha had changed quite a bit in the last few months; her figure had filled out significantly and her hair was darker. She no longer looked the part of the skeletal blonde who skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner in order to look decent for the cameras. In fact, she looked a bit like...

He closed his eyes. She looked like Tania. This was no angel. The devil had surely answered his call instead to taunt him.

"Don't tell me you've been lying there in bed all this time,"

she scolded.

"How did you get in?" Boone demanded, but in his state he hardly sounded authoritative.

"I still have a key. I keep meaning to bring it back, but I've been so busy lately," she said as she perched on the corner of his bed and idly stroked his covered foot. "I've been working on a television miniseries."

"Bully for you," Boone groaned and shifted to lie on his side, facing the wall opposite her. "Be a dear and leave it on the counter when you leave, would you?"

"Don't you want to know what miniseries?"

"Don't you want to be somewhere else?"

Alisha said nothing. The rustling of the shopping bag filled the silence as Boone continued to stare at the blank wall before him until a book cover crossed his line of vision.

He lifted his head. "What's this, then?" But he need not have asked. The second he saw the picture of Alisha dressed in a medieval gown and headdress, he knew he was looking at the movie tie-in cover of *Bedeveled*, Tania's book. Posed with Alisha in passionate embrace was a bare-chested Fabio-clone topped with a long mane of dark hair pinned down by a jewel-encrusted crown. He had that look of ecstasy about him that some might mistake for stomach discomfort.

"So you got the part of Darcy, eh?" He should have been happy for her, but he felt nothing. "Congratulations. Here. I already have a copy." Casually he flipped the book behind him on the bed.

Alisha retrieved the book and slipped it back into the bag. "It wasn't as easy as all that, getting the part," she said. "Three callbacks, but I managed to convince them. *And* I know I did a good job. It airs next month during EveTV's 12 Day of Christmas Romance series. You're gonna watch, right?"

"But of course. The only reason I was put on this bloody planet was to follow your meteoric rise to fame and fortune."

"I didn't come here to gloat, so you know." He felt the mattress lift as Alisha rose and rounded the bed so she could face him. "In fact, I'm here to offer you work. I know you need it."

"What kind of work?" Like he had to ask. He wondered if Alisha had spotted the grease-splattered application for In and Out Burger on his kitchen counter, left there as a maudlin joke to himself. A lifetime of stinking of French fries and failure seemed preferable to picking up a camera again.

"We need some publicity shots for *Bedeviled*, for this Canadian entertainment magazine, and I recommended you," Alisha said.

"What about Paul?" Boone asked snidely.

Alisha offered a grim smile. "I don't know where Paul is. We broke up," she said. "Last I heard he was back in Virginia setting up his own studio." She retreated toward the bedroom door.

"Sorry to hear that." A pang of jealousy for Paul roiled his empty stomach. He was so much closer to Tania now, and Boone would not put it past his former friend to call her up for dinner. Paul rather seemed to enjoy playing the vulture, scraping for Boone's leftovers.

"Anyway..." Boone heard a dull knock against his nightstand behind him. "The job's tomorrow at two. I put the directions here if you want them."

"Tied to what, a brick?" He lifted his head but did not turn around to face Alisha. "What was that noise?"

"Just a lot of words I think you should read." Alisha bent forward and kissed the top of Boone's head. "Go take a shower. You smell." With that, she departed.

Boone rolled lazily to the other side to see that Alisha had

left a thick book on the nightstand. From his vantage point, he saw slivers of two beings in period dress against a floral background. Immediately his heart rose to his throat and he swallowed it back. This could not be...no, he had just been to the bookstore last week. Nothing new from Tania was available.

A bright blue sticker partially covered the heroine's torso, reading *Advance Reviewer's Copy, Do Not Sell*. Alisha must have received it as a perk for starring in *Bedeviled*, for the book was Tania's; part of *Garbo* was obscured by the sticker.

What was wholly visible, however, were the images of the intertwined couple, two very familiar-looking people, and the title of Tawny Garbo's latest: *Boone*.

He swallowed. "Bloody hell?" He flipped open the cover to read the inner jacket flap. She had renamed her hero, and the whole bloody book, after him. Even the man on the cover looked like him. Why do that, after the way they had parted? Unless in the course of the story the gentle manservant he remembered had quickly morphed into a philandering photographer who gets eaten by a dragon or something.

He was ready to drop the book in the trashcan next to his bed, but thought better of it. Though his parting with Alisha had not been entirely amicable, she did not seem so vindictive as to taunt him should the book reflect him in a bad light. Obviously, she was trying to tell him something by gifting him with this.

He checked the back cover, seeing a graphic depicting what had to be The Grange, with advanced words of praise superimposed upon it in a script font. None of the photos he had left behind were used for the jacket. His heart sank; they had probably been reduced to confetti the moment she found them. He had kept none for himself, and though he still had the negatives in a box somewhere he could not bear to make more copies. Seeing her seductive smile would only send him into deeper pain.

Tucked next to the front flap was a sticky note from

Alisha—"Read this, you jerk!"—underneath which the directions to the job were detailed. He did not particularly feel like doing either, but, given the other option, having to face Tania's wrath in the written form was preferable to getting out of bed and on with a life that seemed meaningless without her. Sitting up, he sighed heavily and turned to the first page, where the familiar exposition of the Pringle sisters took hold of his attention.

* * *

He skimmed through the chapters he had already read in their earliest incarnation, noting that Tania had indeed utilized some of his suggestions. The parts where Boone and Nattie consummated their passion he found difficult to read, for it reminded him too much of being with Tania. Some of Boone's endearments to his wife, he noticed, rang familiar in his mind, though he did not find that odd. He had read her other works so many times that it seemed he could gauge what Tania's frame of mind was when a particular scene was written. Here, she was very happy. He had made her happy.

Then came the end of Chapter Eight, where Nattie died in childbirth. He identified immediately with Boone's loss, and knew Tania's own pains were reflected in the despair that cast a pall over the next two chapters. It unnerved him to read that this fictional counterpart took to his bed in his widowhood, neglecting his work and those around him, including the little girl whom Giles and Iona would name Gianna, after Nattie's mother. Iona would bring the girl to Boone, only to discover Boone calling the babe by Nattie's name. It left Iona to guess that delirium had taken its hold on her brother-in-law.

Boone wondered that same thing, but thankfully did not have to read much further to find out if his counterpart would snap out of it. Fictional Boone's recovery would be spurred on by the return of Cozelle's new golden couple, Trina and Cor, fresh

from the capital city with plans for the Grange, and Gianna.

Tania's knack for world building included more odd customs than women choosing their spouses. Motherless children of Cozelle, Boone read, were traditionally handed over to the custody of an older sibling. Here, Iona had stepped willingly into the role of surrogate, yet Trina, being the eldest, had come to challenge her younger sister's position.

Not only that, with Giles's pending retirement she had also goaded her husband Cor into announcing his intention to run for Giles's seat. Well aware of Cor's infatuation with Nattie—something that had not faded entirely, as Boone read a scene depicting Cor barging into the cottage to taunt his invalid namesake—it was enough to get Fictional Boone out of bed. By the end of the eleventh chapter, he had mended the garden, scoured The Grange and his cottage, and repaired the broken shower stall he had earlier neglected, but not before one last bath that Iona made sure to witness.

"Blimey," Boone muttered, turning the pages. "She's got it bad."

The next few chapters focused upon Iona's determination not to let Cozelle and Gianna fall into Cor's corrupt hands. Her own announcement to attempt to succeed her father was met with general approval from the townspeople, though a pervading concern for a female in authority cast doubt on certain victory. This, Boone noticed, despite Cozelle's tendency toward female-superior traditions. Odd, but this *was* a romance novel he was reading. Not everything had to make sense, he supposed, so long as the sex was hot. And since he was only halfway through the book now, he imagined there was still more of it to come, assuming Tania had been able to find enough inspiration.

He hoped she had not found it through another man.

Twenty-six

In order to seal her victory and keep Gianna, Iona realized she would have to marry, and it only made sense to lure Boone to the town kiosk and request his hand. He was Gianna's father, after all, and marrying one of the town's most loved citizens would surely boost her popularity come the election. What Iona did not realize, though, was that she had to act rather quickly.

Iona had to remind herself that Boone was no longer a manservant, but a landowner of great skill. His love for Gianna demonstrated well his gentle qualities, and, Iona realized one night while eavesdropping on a group of girls at the playing fields, legend of his sexual prowess still circulated. Boone was a prize, one she needed to win in order to win custody of Gianna, and the gubernatorial seat.

Her mind was decided: though the prospect did not thrill her entirely, she would have to marry Boone. At least, Giles would approve.

And on it went. All of Cozelle's eligible daughters came a-calling to The Grange, bearing loaves of bread and bouquets of lavender the way a Miami widow would haul a casserole to the nearest senior citizen still in possession of his teeth. While Iona had an edge in the knowledge that Boone would never remarry, for he still mourned Nattie, she had a disadvantage in that she knew Boone would never remarry, for he still mourned Nattie.

She needed a hook.

The real Boone's stomach growled, and he cast a forlorn glance toward his kitchen. Nothing waited for him there but a box of macaroni and cheese mix and a bottle of spring water. It would have been nice for the In and Out application to morph into one of its edible products, but for some reason he could not tear himself away from the book. He could sense Tania's presence on every page, sense her recovering emotionally from their spat as the story progressed. It fascinated and worried him. Now he could not tell if it had to do with her recalling the more pleasant memories of their brief time together, or if somebody else was responsible for shifting her into the proper gear. If he could finish the book soon enough, maybe he would better know the answer.

He predicted Iona would appeal to Fictional Boone's sense of family, knowing he would not want to lose his daughter to Cor and Trina. It should have been enough to sustain motivation for marriage, but he was surprised to turn to a new chapter and find Iona being escorted by Tully to the infamous southern edge of town, where Boone had patronized the bathhouses in his youth, in search of the girl who allegedly bore Boone's child.

The young prostitute Iona interviewed, naturally, turned out to be the mother of Boone's illegitimate child, one Boone never knew existed. Apparently this bit of town gossip either never reached his ears, or he chose not to believe it. Iona wasted no time in tracking down the boy, now eight and the mirror image of his father, toiling away on a farm in the next village. The adoptive mother had recently passed, leaving Iona to negotiate with an indifferent master of the household.

By the next chapter, she had the boy at The Grange, cleaned up, taken to the garden, and introduced to his biological father, who oddly enough did not appear surprised to meet him.

"All this time," Boone said to the boy, "I thought you were a rumor. I should have known better. I should have done something sooner."

Boone rose to his full height, arching his tired back and closing his eyes to the noon sun. "It will be time for Gianna to have lunch," he said, and smiled down at Goran. "Your sister is already inside. Let's see what we have for you today."

Iona watched the two retreated into the kitchen side door. She should have been elated that Boone had agreed to marry her for the sake of the children; it would resolve so many problems. The children would remain at The Grange and she would not be separated from dear Gianna, and she would certainly become governor of Cozelle. But she was not happy, and she could not understand why this was so. Perhaps she had expected more of Boone than a simple yes.

She wanted more, and could not figure out why.

"Because you're in love with the bugger, you silly twit," Boone muttered to the book. Anybody with a sixth-grade education could plainly see that.

He turned to the next chapter. The wedding of Iona and Boone, much like that last one, was a blur that more resembled a business merger. I do, I do, this union is recorded, then off to the pub to get drunk, which is what everybody in town did. This time, however, the bride and groom did not run off immediately to consummate their vows in the confines of Boone's cottage; rather, they got drunk in the pub with everybody else.

Almost everybody, Boone noted as he read. Trina and Cor remained sober and exchanging furtive glances. Something was afoot between the two, something that would surely come into play soon—maybe an assassination attempt, or kidnapping the

little girl. Something to surely try and destroy Iona and Boone.

When they did start for home, Iona literally had to support her new husband, who was absolutely wasted. They trudged the road toward the cottage and stopped just inside the yard, while the rest of the family had long since turned in for the night in the big house.

"Are you happy, Iona?" Boone asked her.

"What?" They stopped walking. Boone tottered in place as Iona could only stare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nattie asked me that the day we were wed," Boone said. "It just seemed an appropriate question to ask."

They were not five more steps forward when Boone slipped in the dark and crumpled into a mud puddle. Iona managed to wrest free of his grip and avoided falling as well, but for Boone the damage was done. She shone the lantern's light up and down his body—his clothes were a mess, and the rest of him fared no better.

"Boone," she scolded. "You're all filthy. You can't go to bed like that..."

The next words died in her throat as Boone quickly regained composure, a feat in his current state, and removed his tunic.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, and looked around them. The Grange was dark and quiet, no insects chirped in the night. They were alone, but it hardly made her comfortable to have Boone removing his clothes before her, even if they were married.

Boone tugged at the waistband of his trousers. "I'll be fine," he murmured. "The laundry can wait 'til morning, but I'm going to shower now."

"Now? It's the middle of the night."

Boone smiled. "We have water in the middle of the night, too, Iona." He was naked now, and clearly not ashamed as he bunched his dirty clothes into a ball. Iona resisted the urge to lower the lantern and illuminate his body. Instead she kept it at a chaste distance as Boone walked away from her, toward the shower stalls.

"Go on to the cottage," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be there momentarily."

Right, thought Boone, turning a page. Like that was going to happen. He looked up from the book, craving a cigarette. The pack on the nightstand, dwindled to one stick, was just out of reach. He sighed and turned back to the story, skimming through Iona's conflicting feelings about whether or not to follow Boone and going straight for the money shot:

She heard Boone exhale, and he pressed his palms against the stone wall of the house for support. Emboldened by this seemingly acquiescent move, Iona pressed against him and circled her arms around his waist. His dampened skin felt cool and soft to the touch, the muscles underneath solid. The soap quickly became an afterthought as she pressed it in a circular motion against his abdomen, then lowered her touch to discover Boone's arousal.

The real Boone's arousal, meanwhile, was fast becoming evident to its owner. Boone shifted in the bed and sighed as one hand took his cock and stroked it stiff, while the other propped up the book. What he had missed by telling Tania to lock the bathroom door that day!

One hand braced the small of her back, while the other

gently explored the secrets hidden beneath the triangular tuft of hair between her legs. She wanted to shout when Boone's thumb found her nub and gently massaged it, but he seemed to interpret her opened mouth as an invitation for further exploration, and his tongue filled this end while two fingers quickly slipped inside her warmth. Iona closed her eyes, seeing only white fire before her, and was vocally disappointed when Boone broke off the kiss and released his other touch at the same time.

"I can't wait any longer," he buzzed in her ear. His free hand smoothed down her back. "Look at me," he said.

Iona obeyed, melting at those two blue eyes looking back at her with desire, then cried out when a new sensation, at the same time pleasurable and painful, tore through her.

She could not believe this was happening. Boone had taken her virginity and was making love to her, and she had initiated it, had wanted it. Her sister's husband. No, her husband now. Boone, a man she had hated most of her life, was her husband. And now, she loved him. She knew she did, and knew she could not deny it anymore.

As Boone picked up speed and eventually shuddered his own release, she felt that, too, and arched further into him until he could no longer stay tucked inside her.

She straightened against his spent body, allowing the last of the shower water to wash away the bumps prickling her skin. "Boone," she sighed in his embrace, "I love you."

Boone kissed the top of her head. "My Nattie."

"Oh, dear."

Boone released his hold on his cock, his orgasm forgotten. He turned the page to learn of Iona's reaction, only to be met with a blank page. He turned more pages, flipping to the end. The rest of the novel was blank. Not one word.

"Bloody hell?"

On the last page was affixed another sticky note in Alisha's handwriting. *You want to know how this ends? Be at the job. And wear something nice.*

Boone slapped the book shut and sank into his mattress, frustrated.

Twenty-seven

The directions given him led to a warehouse in the Valley. This Boone did not find unusual, as many movie-related businesses were located in the San Fernando Valley, particularly those involved in the technical aspects of filmmaking. To be sure, he had worked a few shoots in the area, and it would not surprise him to learn that EveTV had rented out such a warehouse in the area for a promotional shoot.

What did unnerve him, however, was the fact that the parking lot was abandoned. He was told to come at two, and he had a minute to spare. Where was everybody else? Alisha's own Volkswagen bug was nowhere to be seen.

His equipment bag slung over his left shoulder, he rapped on the front office door and called out a tenuous greeting. When nobody answered he tried the knob and was startled when it turned easily in his hand to grant him access. Inside the compact, adjacent office, the air conditioning had been disabled and it was very stuffy. Blocking a second door was a bare counter, which he rounded to find a chair with metal legs and torn yellow upholstery, on which sat a folded note with his name written on it.

"Go on inside and set up. We needed to step out for replacement lights and gels," he read aloud. There was no signature, and he did not recognize the handwriting; he sighed. Surely it did not take an entire crew to make such a trip. This whole business seemed odd, but he needed the work, and as he

had nothing better to do, he entered the main warehouse area to a more comfortable climate and dimmer lighting.

What he saw before him, when his vision finally adjusted, took his breath away. EveTV had brought over what appeared to be part of a movie set. Boone now stood in the interior of Fictional Boone's cottage, only instead of walls the one-room abode was cordoned off by large, sheer curtains draped from the above rafters. The detail taken from Tania's book was nothing short of impressive. Everything—the bed and rough carpet, even the vanity on which Fictional Boone had kept his many vials—was present. Lighted votive candles were scattered around the ledges and vanity—a dangerous thing to be left unattended, he surmised.

Then another odd feeling struck him. "Hold on a second," he muttered aloud. Why would *Boone's* cottage be part of promotion for *Bedeveled*, an entirely different book? *Bedeveled* contained no such setting as this, not from what he had read in that book, anyway. That story was set mainly in forests and castles.

This was not right. What in bloody hell was going on here?

"It is a bit unorthodox, I know, but it's what they want," came a voice from behind him.

Boone whirled around and squinted into the shadows to see a darkened figure lingering by the closing warehouse door. He had been so entranced by the set he had not heard the woman enter. She, however, could obviously detect his bewildered expression.

"And who is *they* when they're at home?" he countered.

"Actually, it's not so much a 'they' as it is an 'I,'" the woman said, stepping forward to reveal herself. "It's what I wanted."

Boone's heart lurched. "Tania," he whispered.

This had to be her ghost, come to haunt him. Her stunning,

voluptuous ghost, clad in a form-fitting green dress with a scooped neck that looked soft to the touch. He wanted to find out for himself, but was too shocked to move.

"I'm sorry we deceived you like this," she said, moving past him to a wooden chair situated next to the bed. In her hands she clutched a thick sheaf of papers, which she set on her lap as she sat. Boone followed her every movement—her crossing her legs, the idle way she brushed a stray hair from her shoulder. Ghosts did not do these sorts of things. She was real. She was here.

"What? How?" Words failed him. All he wanted to do was to rush closer and take her in his arms, feel her body pressed against his once again, and kiss her, but he could sense she wanted some preliminary distance. Instead he let the camera bag slide down his leg to the floor, hitting with a soft thud.

"I'll assume," he managed out, "that 'we' in this case somehow involves Alisha."

Tania nodded. "Not long after you left Virginia, she came by my place. I didn't want to talk to her at first, because she reminded me a bit of Bonnie, and a lot of what happened between us. But she was quite persistent."

"She can be," Boone agreed.

Tania sighed and scraped a fingernail against the stack of papers, creating an annoying sound. "Anyway, she and I got to talking, mostly about you. She talked you up a great deal, you know, even though she was smitten for that Paul fellow. I think her only complaint about you was that you seemed to give up so easily, going back to California."

"Really?" Boone never would have expected Alisha to do anything like that, especially after he had admitted to sleeping with Tania before officially calling it quits with her. "And you recommended her to the filmmakers?"

"No, Alisha did that on her own. I was never consulted

during casting, but I've been down for some of the filming, and she is very good in the role. I think it will turn out well."

Boone paled. "You've been here in Los Angeles," he said, "all this time?" To think she had been so close to him...

"A few weeks." Tania's eyes lowered. "I was still angry with you, but Alisha continued to point out what a wonderful guy you are, and that your recent health problems might have clouded your judgment, and that I shouldn't take it to heart. She's actually a very articulate girl."

"More than I would have given her credit for," Boone murmured.

"Eventually my agent, Cheryl, got into the act, insisting I extend an olive branch for the sake of my sanity, and the book."

"Your sanity?" Boone took a seat on the edge of the bed. She smelled real, too, of that same honeysuckle scent he detected when they first kissed. It flooded his senses. His cock stirred to life. Perfect timing.

"I was a wreck when you left, Boone. I barely finished the book. Did you read it?"

"Hm? Oh." Boone's head jerked down to where he had left his bag, and he realized he had not brought the book with him. Why would he, though? "I did, I did. Rather, I read what I was given."

"Cheryl loved the first eight chapters, what I had written when you were living downstairs from me," Tania said. "The few chapters after that were middling, and the rest of what I turned in to her at deadline was pure trash. My editor wanted to just light a match and walk away."

"Oh, I'm sure it wasn't as bad as all that," Boone tried to comfort her, and was buoyed when she did crack a smile.

"Trust me. What I had written would make anything by Jackie Collins look like Pulitzer material. My only salvation

came in the fact that my publisher was bought out by a larger company that same week my manuscript was due, and all of their current projects are delayed until the restructuring is completed, so I was granted a reprieve." Tania shrugged. "In a way, it's also bad, because they were hoping to publish *Boone* to coincide with the miniseries, but at least I won't be putting out a mediocre product."

"Meaning that the galley I was given—"

"Is all that exists of *Boone*, until I rewrite the ending," she finished. Tania's eyes were glassy, yet warm. She held aloft the sheaf of paper, then set it on the ground. "This is the original draft, and if you read it you can tell the best parts are in the beginning, when you were around to inspire me."

"I inspired you?"

"You think the hero's name was originally Bob, as you had read it?" Tania smirked. "He was Boone all along, and when the real Boone was around it helped make my Boone all the more authentic." Her smile faded. "But it took a number of months for me realize that I needed you to help me continue breathing life into this title character."

"You needed me," he said slowly, "just for that?"

She returned a sheepish smile. "I needed you for other things, too. I still do."

"Tania—"

"One other thing." Tania bent forward to rifle through the papers. Boone could not help but tilt his head downward for a look at those lovely breasts as they threatened to spill from the neck of her dress. He watched as she pulled out an envelope.

"I never got the chance to thank you for these," she added as she pulled out the stack of photographs he had taken of her. They were intact, and still breathtaking. "I've always hated having my picture taken, but these were just incredible."

"You inspired me that day," Boone said. "If I ever thought I could have your forgiveness, you could continue to inspire me, and I would never have to worry about losing my confidence at work or anything else again. Tania," he moved closer to the bed so that his knee barely brushed against hers, "I should have been up front with you about Alisha from the beginning. I should have waited until she was gone before I let things get out of hand with you. Would you be able to see past the ugly way we left things and forgive me?"

He held out a tentative hand, charged with electricity the moment Tania curled it into her own. He had missed her touch; experiencing it again nearly sent him into shock. He could only imagine what a kiss would do.

"Do you think you could forgive my stubbornness, and my distrust?" she asked.

His answer was to pull her out of the chair and onto his lap. Sliding his arms around her waist, he took the risk a slow, passionate kiss would have on his heart, and was grateful that he was not yet sent into cardiac arrest. Tania melted into him as his tongue gently explored her mouth, and they remained in that position for a few minutes, becoming reacquainted with each other intimately. The months between them, the anger and the pain, seemed to disappear as their breathing slowed into one rhythm.

Eventually they tapered off and Boone brushed his lips against her cheek. "So, you liked the photos then?"

"Mm." Deep-throated laughter buzzed in his ear.

"You didn't use one for the back cover, I noticed."

"Because the book isn't finished." Tania drew away and positioned herself more comfortably on his lap, stroking her fingers through his hair. "I was hoping you could help me pick the right one."

"Don't make me choose," he teased.

"And, since you did such a good job critiquing the first part of my book..."

"Say no more, I'd be happy to patronize this kind of art. Now..." His hand snaked up her back and he toyed with the tiny zipper at the nape of her neck. "Last I left *your* Boone, things weren't going too swimmingly."

"Unfortunately for Iona, no. I gather you've read all that you were given, so you know Boone accepted Iona's marriage proposal, albeit reluctantly," Tania said. "He realizes he needs to do what's best for the children, and their union is sealed."

"I read that. They came, they saw, they said 'I do,' and proceeded to get drunk." Boone nuzzled into Tania's neck and nipped at her tender flesh. "And later on, they did much more."

"Yes, and you know how *that* ended." Tania made no protest as the zipper slid down her back and his fingers caressed her bare skin. "What you didn't read was that after that disastrous wedding night Iona decides to defy Boone's wish and moves back to The Grange."

"Doesn't that hurt her chances in the election?"

"Are you kidding?" Tania turned her head and caught Boone's lips in a playful kiss. "She wins in a landslide, pisses Cor and Trina off. Everybody else is happy, but Iona soon comes to realize she wants more than just that."

"Of course. Don't we all?" Down her spine and around her ribcage his fingers trailed. Tania was not wearing a brassiere. Bless her for eliminating the middleman.

"Her victory celebration is held at the pub, where Boone gets plied with too much drink, *again*," Tania continued, responding in kind to Boone's touch by fingering the buttons on his shirt, undoing them slowly. "Being the dutiful wife, she puts him to bed at the cottage, but finds she is not so anxious to go to

her own bed alone. That one night with Boone was too memorable and too wonderful, despite how it ended, and right there she decides she wants to truly be his wife, and make him forget Nattie."

"And they make love."

"And Iona tries to make love to him, but Boone is just sober enough to know what's happening this time and stops her."

"Ouch." Boone winced. "Big mistake. Like I'd throw a hottie like Iona out of my bed."

Tania giggled and lightly slapped Boone's shoulder.

"Is Iona upset?" Boone asked.

"At first, but Boone *was* drunk, so she convinces herself that might have been a factor in his rejection of her, and it only makes her more determined to win him over herself."

"So tell me." The dress slid off her shoulders down her front, but stopped just before revealing her breasts. "How exactly did Iona demonstrate her want that night?"

"Well, it started out easier than she had anticipated. Boone was already filled with amorous feelings, remembering Nattie," Tania said, easing Boone back onto the bed. Then she stood and shrugged off her dress, revealing the curved, bare body he had dreamed about for months. She had to do nothing more to arouse him but stand there.

Stepping out of her heels, Tania bent forward and unzipped Boone's jeans, stroking the growing ache hidden within his boxers. "Yeah, kind of like this. Iona wanted to be different for him, do something for him she did not think Nattie would ever have dared."

Rather than explain further, Tania instead went into demonstration mode by sliding his shorts with his jeans down to his ankles and kneeling before him. Boone arched into the stiff mattress in response as she closed her grip gently around his

swollen shaft. He gasped softly as she took the tip into her mouth and suckled.

Boone stared unseeing at the ceiling, his smile glazed. "Oh, I love this book," he sighed, chuckling as he heard Tania's muffled giggles, then moaning as she took his cock deeper into her mouth and moved up and down in a gentle rhythm. The sensation sent rapturous heat coursing through his body, and he knew he could not let it continue, lest it end too soon.

He waited until he knew he could stand it no longer, then roughly pulled her up the length of his body and rolled her on her back. He kissed her neck and breasts, trailing his tongue down to her navel. She quivered to his every touch and, as much as he wanted to prolong the foreplay and spend some time reciprocating the oral pleasure, he knew it physically impossible. His cock was close to exploding. He stretched back on top of her as she eased her thighs apart to accept him.

"Forgive me, love," he whispered. "I promise next time it will last longer." But Tania did not complain as he drove his shaft into her pussy with one rough, upward stroke, then quickly settled into a calmer, gentler rhythm. She cried out his name, and his heart expanded. She was his again, and he liked to have burst with joy.

"I missed this so much," Tania murmured. Her head lolled from side to side and she bit her lip, which tempted Boone to pick up speed. But he remained at his pace, watching her writhe and moan happily.

"I love you, Tania," he said between kisses. "I don't want to be separated from you again. Please don't leave L.A. without me." He could start over in Virginia, if that was what she wanted, or she could write in Los Angeles, be closer to her agent. It did not matter to him, so long as they were together.

"I love you, Boone," she said, stroking his cheek, "and I will

stay with you."

* * *

Later, they snuggled underneath the heavy blanket, almost exhausted to the point of falling sleep. Boone was too excited to completely succumb, however; he watched the shadows from the candlelight play on the curtains, feeling safe in this corner of the otherwise vast and empty warehouse. They were on a set, but it was very real to him. She was real, and she was here. Only that mattered.

"This is very nice, I could live here," he said, looking around the cottage set. "It's nearly what I pictured when I was reading the book."

"It's a prototype set," Tania explained, sitting up slightly and gathering the blanket around her. "EveTV bought the rights to *Boone* as well. Nice of them to let us test it out, you think?"

"God bless television." Boone arched an eyebrow. "They bought the rights to a book that isn't finished?"

"It's not unusual. Some movie companies have purchased rights to books that weren't even written, just trusting the reputation of the author." Tania shrugged. "I haven't completely reached that plateau yet, though. Maybe with the next book."

"Well, I suppose we should finish *Boone* first before you start thinking of something new." Boone pulled her closer. "So, what did you have in mind?"

Tania snaked an arm around his waist and nuzzled his shoulder. "Obviously, Boone is going to warm up to Iona. Her growing devotion to him is going to make him realize that he needs to get on with his life. It was suggested that Nattie's ghost visit and express her approval to sort of seal his fate."

"I don't like it." Boone made a face. "Too corny."

"Okay, we give up the ghost." Tania laughed at her own joke. "But it won't be easy for Iona and Boone."

Boone nodded. Was love ever easy?

He turned on his side, brushing away the rough fabric to get to the soft skin underneath it. "You seem to have the heart of the story worked out, but you never mention Boone's mysterious past." He cupped one exposed breast, studying it like a work of art. "Maybe there's something there that connects him to the Pringle family. He could be the lost son of a millionaire, or Cor's elder brother even."

"Or Iona's?" Tania smoothed a hand down Boone's bare arm. "Heaven forbid."

"Let's hope not."

"Well," Tania nipped his ear. "Perhaps the real Boone would care to give more insight on who my Boone really is? To think more of it, my readers would want to know, too."

"Gladly." Boone drew her closer and pulled her on top of him. "Your Boone is right here with you. He's not some character on paper, but a living flesh and blood being, who wants nothing more but to inspire you and be inspired by you." He kissed her. "For all eternity."

THE END

About the Author

Leigh Ellwood is the pen name of a writer of mysteries; the name she has chosen for the purpose of writing romance (be it chaste, sensual, or spicy) is derived from the names of two favorite entertainers (close to it, anyway—she doesn't want to give away too many secrets). She lives and writes in the sweltering South and seeks inspiration in the many people she has met and loved over the years.

Having found moderate success in writing mystery and suspense, Ellwood decided in 2004 to try her hand (and pen) at romance.

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