

# MASKS

A man with dark hair and green eyes is shown from the chest up. He is wearing a white, form-fitting mask that covers his face, leaving only his eyes and mouth visible. A large, light blue, stylized mustache is drawn on the mask, extending from the sides of his face and curving upwards. The background is a solid blue color.

M. L. Rhodes

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...Andee entered a darkened area, where thick velvet curtains draped on either side of her, cocooning her. Suddenly, a warm hand closed around her upper arm, and she found herself being tugged into an alcove.

“You came backstage.” Max’s low, seductive voice swirled around her like rich, dark chocolate, and heaven help her, she wanted nothing more than to drown in it.

“Yes. Did you think I might not?” She was a bit breathless and lightheaded at being so close to him again.

He settled her against the back side of a curtain-covered baffle screen and twined his fingers through hers. He was still in full Phantom costume, including the mask. But there was enough light in the shadowy corner where they stood that, for the first time, she could make out some details. Like the soft, brown stubble of a newly growing beard. And the vivid green of his eyes. The intensity in them caused her heart to skip several beats.

“I honestly didn’t know.” His voice was gruff-soft. “I was afraid I’d scared you off last night.”

“You didn’t.”

“Andee...I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

His scent surrounded her, and the heat of his hard body seeped through her clothes and into the deepest core of her. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you either,” she admitted.

“In a good way, I hope.” His voice grew even huskier and he leaned closer.

“Yes. In a good way.” Her nipples tingled in excitement, and a pull low in her womb reminded her what it felt like to be a woman...

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# MASKS

BY

M. L. RHODES

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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## AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

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*This is for everyone who's ever been  
infatuated with and dared to fantasize about someone  
they've seen on stage or on screen.*

*With special thanks to reader  
Karen Morris, who came up with the name  
Andrea "Andee" Matthews for me.*

*To my mom, who helped me  
reinvent Andee and make her the character  
she turned out to be.*

*To my friend, author Marin Thomas, who  
always makes time to read my work and offer feedback no  
matter how swamped she is with her own writing.*

*And last but not least, to my husband,  
who, as always, is a saint when it comes to being  
there for me and our family when I'm down to the  
wire with a book deadline.*

# CHAPTER 1

“Andee! Wait up!”

Dr. Andrea Matthews ushered the last straggling student out of the room, pulled the classroom door shut, and slung her leather tote over her shoulder.

She turned and smiled at the sight of Judy Risso trotting down the columned corridor of Howard Hall, the epicenter of history and political science at Williams University. Her friend’s shoulder-length dark curls were wild and wind-blown, and her flowing, geometric print skirt swirled around her legs.

“Hey, Jude, what brings you slumming to the halls of conservative thought?”

“These.” Judy huffed to a stop next to Andee and waved two blue slips of paper in the air. “I have tickets to *The Phantom of the Opera* for tonight over at the Playhouse. It’s supposed to be superb. But Russ found out he has to work late, and Dean Parmenter called this afternoon



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and asked me to attend the Arts Council meeting tonight.”

“I thought you weren’t going to any more of the Arts Council meetings because the members are ‘uptight, elitist pricks.’”

Andee hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and began the long walk across the white marble floor to her office on the other side of the building. Judy’s Birkenstocks kept up a shuffle alongside the quiet patter of Andee’s low-heeled sling-backs.

“I did, I did. But let’s face it, when the dean himself calls, he obviously wants that endowment from the council in a big way, so what can I do?”

“Say no?”

Judy snorted. “I have a mortgage payment to make, thank you very much, not to mention kids’ music, sports, and dance lessons. And now with the economy so bad and Russ’s job at OptiTec in limbo, I can’t afford to piss off the powers that be.”

Andee smiled. “Somehow I doubt the university is going to fire the chair of their Fine Arts Department because she doesn’t attend a meeting.”

“That just goes to show what you know. Our darling dean believes himself to be an artiste of the first order. We artistic types don’t work under the rules of logic like your stuffy lot does. Anyway, I want you to take these tickets to *Phantom*, find someone to go with, and have fun.”

“Thanks for thinking of me, but I haven’t been to the theater in years, Jude. It’s not really my thing.”

Judy grabbed Andee’s arm, pulling her to a stop in the middle of the corridor.

Mid-October sun beat down on them through a beveled skylight as Judy’s dark eyes welled with concern. “Then make it your thing, Andee. You can’t keep hiding away in the halls of academia by day and at home with your nuked Lean Cuisines and nothing but a bunch of hacked-out undergraduate papers to grade by night. You’re too full of

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life to shut yourself down like this. You've got to start getting out. It's been eighteen months since Jared's death."

Andee swallowed past the sudden knot in her throat. "I know how long it's been and I'm fine. I'm not hiding away. I'm just going about my business the same way I always have."

Judy sighed and shook her head so hard her unruly brown curls bounced around her face. "You're wallowing, hon. There's a difference."

"I'm not wallowing. Life goes on. I have obligations to the university and to my students. And even though I can still feel people's eyes on me after all this time, and I'm perfectly aware of what they're saying about me, I can't toss aside my responsibilities any more than you can ignore Dean Parmenter when he asks you to jump."

A spark of frustration flared to life in Judy's obsidian eyes. "We've been over this a hundred times. I know those first few months were hard for you with all the questions and speculation, but it's old news now, Andee. So quit using that dried up excuse to push people away."

Andee began walking again. They were nearly to her office where she could shut and lock the door and nurse her reopened wounds privately without having to face the truths her well-meaning friend seemed determined to pound into her.

"Then explain to me why I used to have friends on campus, people I knew long before I married Jared, and now the only person who even tries to give me the time of day is you. You, Jude. One solitary person. People don't know how to act around me. I'm like some kind of morbid celebrity—they can talk about me from afar, but it's awkward for them to carry on a direct conversation with me. And who can blame them?"

She stopped in front of her office door, dug her keys out of her tote, but couldn't quite manage to get them into the lock because her hands were shaking so hard. "Damn it!" she muttered under her breath.

Judy laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Have you forgotten that

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I've known you for seven years? I remember you before Jared ever came into your life. And I hate to tell you, hon, but you suck as a martyr."

Andee leaned her forehead against the cool oak door, and closed her eyes. Yeah, maybe she did. But every time she'd start to think she had all the emotional muck under control, there it was it again, popping up to grind her face into the dung hill some more.

"Sweetie, when Jared died with Kate, it was awkward for everyone on campus. The anthropology department lost two professors in one fell swoop, and one of the most respected profs in the history department lost her husband. No one saw any of it coming, and they certainly didn't have any inkling Jared and Kate had been seeing each other for so long. "

Andee shook her head and sighed, but Judy continued. "Yes, your real friends should have tried harder to comfort you, but you shut us all out. I'm ashamed of the people who didn't keep trying, but it's hard to keep slamming yourself against a brick wall...and that's what you were when it came to accepting support. What you continue to be, even after a year and a half, as if *you* have somehow done something wrong and aren't worthy of having friends. But none of it was your fault. Jared made his own choices. You were an innocent."

A dry laugh escaped Andee's aching throat. "Innocent," she whispered. "That's a pretty pitiable thing for a thirty-four-year-old woman to be, don't you think? I shouldn't have been innocent. I should've known, should've suspected something." Then she squeezed her eyes closed. "Jesus, Judy, listen to me! I can barely stand to be around me sometimes. No wonder no one else wants to."

"I'm not giving up on you, my darling friend, so you just keep trying to push me away all you want, but I'm not going anywhere. My grandmother always says it's the Italian genes and too much garlic in the food. Makes the women in my family mean and unrelenting. Just

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ask my father.”

A grudging smile curved Andee’s lips. Judy’s mother and grandmother were scary in an old-word, Macbeth-witches kind of way.

“Yeah, you get the picture, don’t you?” Judy grinned. “So save your disdain for those stuffed shirts at your next history department meeting. Professor Balmendash, for example, needs someone to whip his withered ass into shape. How old is that guy anyway? He’s got to be at least a hundred. And he’s crotchety as hell. I don’t know how the students stand him.” Judy shuddered.

“They don’t,” Andee said matter-of-factly, regaining a bit of emotional balance at Judy’s inane chit-chat. She lowered her voice since Balmy’s office was just two doors down from hers. “They usually sleep through his classes. He’s so near-sighted he never notices.”

Judy sniggered. “And they pay the man good money.” She grabbed Andee’s keys from her, jabbed the one neatly labeled “Office” into the lock, turned it, and pushed open the door. When she handed the key ring back, Andee found the blue tickets in her palm also.

“Jude—”

“No arguments, hon. Those fascinating papers on Ancient Middle Earth can wait one more night. Go. Have fun. Lighten up.”

Andee shook her head as she stared at the tickets. “My course this semester is High Middle Ages, not Ancient Middle Earth—you’re confusing Tolkien with real life.”

“And neither one of them have anything to do with the *Phantom of the Opera*, which is the issue at hand. I’ve heard they have a huge hit on their hands this fall—supposed to be an excellent cast, and the guy playing the Phantom is, apparently, phenomenal.”

“I don’t know...”

“I do. Curtain rises at seven-thirty. I expect a full report tomorrow.” She gave Andee a quick hug. “Gotta go. The meeting with the elitist pricks starts at five and, God knows, I don’t dare be late.” With a wave

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and a grin, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Andee sank into her front row seat in the darkened theater just moments before the curtain rose. She'd debated until the last minute whether to come, but decided in the end that the energy she'd have to expend defending herself to Judy would be more trouble than just going to the show itself. She was already going to catch hell for not finding "someone" to go with her, as Judy had ordered.

The Sommerville Playhouse had opened five or six years ago. Although Andee had never attended any performances, she was familiar enough with the place to know they put on a couple of shows each year...one during the spring/summer season and one during the fall/winter season. The company was known for high quality, Broadway caliber productions in spite of the fact it was located in a sleepy, rural Illinois college town and sat smack dab in the middle of rolling corn fields. The owners had remodeled and expanded a huge, old barn in the grand style of the auditoriums of old, with creaky velvet seats and gilt ornamentation in the lobby and around the stage itself. It drew in theater-goers from as far away as St. Louis and Chicago on the weekends. Even now, on a Thursday night, it was a full house.

When the pounding rock-organ beat of the *Phantom of the Opera* overture began, echoing through the building and throbbing through the velvet seats, goose bumps spread up Andee's arms and legs. She had a memory flash of the time her parents had taken her to see *Oklahoma* when she was a girl. It had been the very first stage performance she'd ever attended, put on by a local group in the small town where she grew up. Though it had been nothing as grand as this, she'd forgotten until just now how magnificent and exciting live theater could be. There was an energy to it that just couldn't be felt in the two-dimensional medium of film.

As the *Phantom* music built to a powerful crescendo, booming in

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the rafters, the fine hairs on the back of Andee's neck stood on end. And from the moment the curtain rose, she was riveted.

The sets were opulent, the costumes gorgeous, the music electrifying, and the cast...well, the cast was superb in every respect. Any one of them, down to the most minor player, could easily have graced a stage on Broadway or in London.

But, as Judy had indicated, the tall, dark-headed man playing the Phantom stood out even above the rest.

A spellbinding aura hovered about him. When he was onstage, the entire theater—not just the audience, but the walls, the ceiling, the very air—hummed with intensity. He was like no one Andee had ever seen before, with a confident, sensual power that called to her soul. As he moved about, his long legs eating up the distance of the stage in a few short strides, her body surged with unexpected and long-repressed desire. Every time he sang, shivers raced up and down her spine, and heat pooled in her core. She could almost feel his hands stroking her, could almost hear his sensual, gritty voice whispering in her ear. At times it even seemed as if his piercing gaze was on *her* and he sang for her alone.

For two-and-a-half hours she sat in the dark, her heart both aching and swelling with some unexplainable emotion, her palms sweaty, and her feminine hunger raging.

But it wasn't just the man's physical presence that enthralled her. He performed the role of the Phantom with such emotional depth that Andee found herself weeping for the Phantom in spite of his scarred face and his twisted love for Christine. Weeping, yet yearning for him at the same time.

By the time the last note of music echoed through the theater, Andee felt as limp as a rag doll who'd been through the laundry one too many times. The audience rose en masse with a thunderous ovation when the cast came onstage for the curtain call. Each cast member

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stepped forward in turn to take a bow, and when the Phantom, the last to be acknowledged, stepped up for his, the din in the audience was deafening. Standing on wobbly legs, Andee clapped until her hands went numb and tears stung her eyes.

The Phantom bowed over and over as the whistles, catcalls, and pounding applause continued, then graciously turned toward the rest of the cast and applauded them, indicating he couldn't have done it without them. His modesty only made the audience—and Andee—love him more. Even now he was mesmerizing.

When the cast had finally disappeared backstage and the theater lights came up, Andee blinked, feeling like she'd just been jerked out of a stirring, Technicolor dream and once again found herself in the lackluster gray of reality.

She was the last to join the throng of people making their way out of the auditorium and into the lobby. She felt a pull to stay, to remain tucked away here in this haven where she could continue to feel alive again—truly alive—for the first time in eighteen months. Outside lay her job, her lonely house, yet another microwaved TV dinner, and a stack of student papers awaiting her perusal. A life of existing, of getting by from day to day, going through the rituals that defined her. A life that paled in comparison to what she'd just experienced.

A sudden, overwhelming sense of pressure hit her, squeezing her chest, and tightening like a noose around her throat. The crowded lobby closed in on her, making it hard to breath, hard to think. It was as if the pain and loneliness that had pervaded her system since the discovery of Jared's long-term relationship with Kate Mulcahey, and then his death, had somehow bubbled to the surface like a gas pocket in water. It forced her to feel things she'd attempted to bury deep inside, things that had always been too painful to deal with, so the easiest solution had been to ignore them, hide them where they couldn't affect her. Build that brick wall Judy had accused her of.

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Seeking escape, not having the strength at the moment to push through the crowd to exit the building, Andee slipped into one of the rear doors of the auditorium. No ushers stood on duty now—no need, the performance was over, the cast gone, the lights had once again been snuffed except a handful burning dimly on stage. Grateful for the solitude—and perhaps another few minutes to bask in the oddly comforting womb of the dark theater itself—she sank into an aisle seat midway from the stage.

A hot tear slipped down her cheek, and she dug in her jacket pocket for a tissue. The Phantom's plight tonight had hit home with her. She'd felt his pain, had been angry at his actions, yet at the same time understood them. On a gut level, she knew how he felt. He loved one who could never truly love him back, just as she'd loved Jared, who clearly never could have loved her back the way she'd wanted. But in the end, both onstage and in her life, nobody had won. It was all a tragic waste.

Yet she couldn't kid herself. While the Phantom's story had certainly struck a chord with her, it was the performance of the man who'd played him that had drawn these powerful emotions out of her. Who was the man—the real man—behind the mask? She realized she'd been so swept away during the performance that she hadn't looked at her program a single time. Now, she bent down and rummaged through her purse on the floor, found the glossy, ivory-colored booklet the usher had handed her when she entered, and flipped to the cast listing.

*Phantom ~ Maxwell James*

Maxwell James. The man whose gaze and voice had burned into her soul with fierce determination.

Andee buried her face in her hands. His voice continued to ring in her mind, sending new waves of goose bumps over her skin, and causing a deep-down longing in her. The man had done something no one in the past year-and-a-half had been able to do...he'd broken



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through her walls and made her *feel*.

A large presence suddenly filled the area next to her and a clean, lightly spicy scent wafted around her. Andee glanced up, startled to discover she wasn't alone.

"I saw you from up on stage. Are you okay?"

Her entire being tingled to life as if it had always been in tune to the man who crouched next to her seat. His soft-spoken words were a more intimate version of the voice she'd heard during the performance, but there was no doubt they came from the same man. He no longer wore the dramatic Phantom costume and mask, but instead was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt and looked warm, solid, and wholly masculine. She couldn't make out any details of his features in the dark theater, and found herself craving to know if his eyes were as filled with light and energy as they'd appeared on stage.

"Yes...I was just..." He no doubt thought it strange to find her sitting in the dark by herself when everyone else in the audience had long since left. A twinge of embarrassment at being caught like this caused her to reach for her jacket and purse. "I was just leaving."

"No, don't. Please," he said, resting a gentle, non-threatening hand on her forearm. The heat from it pulsed through her silk blouse and spread into her skin.

She hesitated, and looked back up into his face.

"Don't go. I didn't mean to rush you off or intrude. I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

Andee clutched at her jacket, uncertain. She wanted to stay, yet felt a bit foolish and emotionally exposed as well.

"Now I've made you uncomfortable. I'm sorry. I'm not doing very well here as far as social skills, am I?"

The genuinely contrite tone with the touch of self-deprecating humor in it caused her to relax and smile. "Actually, I think you're doing better than I am."

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His laughter was intoxicating, like a balmy summer night. It sent the last of her discomfort fleeing.

"I tell you what...let's pretend we didn't just experience an awkward moment, and let's start over, shall we?" He held out a hand, palm up. "I'm sorry if I startled you. I'm Max."

Entranced, Andee placed her hand in his and his long fingers closed around it like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to hold her hand. "Andrea. Andee."

"Did you enjoy the show, Andee?"

"Very much. Your performance tonight was...amazing."

"Thank you." His quiet words pulsed with that earlier modesty she'd seen him exhibit on stage during the curtain call. "Do you come to the theater often?"

"Actually...no." She felt her face scrunch up in an I'm-embarrassed-to-admit-this look. "I only came tonight because a friend couldn't make it and gave me her ticket."

Another of his low, rumbling chuckles rippled through her, leaving her weak-kneed. "Well, it doesn't matter why you're here, just that you are. I'm glad you came."

"Me, too," she breathed.

He squeezed her hand and his voice grew huskier. "I have a confession to make."

"A confession?"

"When I told you I'd seen you from the stage, I didn't just mean a few minutes ago. I meant all night." His voice was whisper-soft. At her quick intake of breath, he sandwiched her hand between both of his. "I saw you in the front row. I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Me?" she whispered. All those times during the performance when she'd thought he was looking directly at her, had wanted to believe he was singing for her...had that been for real? No...it couldn't be. She'd fantasized that.

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“Yes.” One of his warm fingers caressed her cheek. He leaned infinitesimally closer, and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her. Her pulse thrummed in anticipation for a millisecond before she mentally shook herself back to reality.

“I loved seeing how much you enjoyed the show,” he was saying. “You have the most expressive eyes. They’re so blue I could even see their color from the stage.”

Andee could barely breathe at his words. He wasn’t making this up. There’s no way he could see her eye color in the dark right now, yet when she’d been sitting in the front row and the lights were bright on the stage—

“It’s been a long time since...” His words trailed off as if an unpleasant memory had intruded on his thoughts. “Well, since I’ve felt like what I do could matter so much to anyone.”

“How can you say that?” she protested. “You have your finger on the pulse of what makes the Phantom who he is. Angry, tragic, yet sympathetic at the same time. The audience felt it all—I felt it. You were brilliant.”

Max laughed, but she detected a melancholy undertone. “Well, thank you. But sometimes I think the Phantom, the whole mask thing, is a strange reflection of myself, and maybe that’s why he works for me.”

The last was said so quietly she wondered if he’d been speaking to her or to himself. What had caused the pain she felt in him?

“I suppose we all wear masks of one sort or another,” she murmured, thinking of how she’d spent the time since Jared’s death hiding from her own demons, pretending she was one person, when inside she was another.

“Yes, I suppose we do.”

The sadness he conveyed in those words tugged at her heart, and gave her an even stronger sense of connectedness with him. Then he

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drew in a deep breath, as if to cleanse away the pain, and she felt him refocus on her. Felt his gaze lock with hers in the darkness. A strange earnestness suddenly seemed to hover in the air between them.

“Would you like to come to the show again?”

“I’d love to see it again sometime.”

“If you don’t have other plans, I could leave a ticket at the box office for you tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” Startled, she gazed up at him, still not able to make out his features in the shadowy theater. Was he just being nice...or did he perhaps want to see her again? Her pulse fluttered and her heart cried, “*Yes!*” But her cautious nature forced her to say, “Thank you, that’s very nice of you, but I’ll probably be tied up tomorrow night. I...I have work to do.” *All those ever-so-important history papers to grade.*

“I thought Friday nights were supposed to be date nights,” he teased.

“Well...I...” Once again she clutched at her jacket, concentrated on smoothing out one of the sleeves.

“I’m sorry,” he said almost immediately, as if he sensed her discomfort. “It’s really none of my business. I’ll tell you what. I’ll leave a ticket for you at the box office, just in case. Then you can decide tomorrow whether you can or want to use it. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough...thank you,” she managed to get out past the stupid lump in her throat.

A brief silence stretched between them and before it turned awkward once again, she realized the best thing to do was to make her exit. “I should probably go. I’m sure they’d like to lock up this place and you probably want to get home.”

She rose, and he stood with her. The top of her head barely came to his chin, and his clean-smelling, warm closeness sent another one of those rippling surges of longing through her.

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“It was nice meeting you, Max.”

He clasped her hand and squeezed her fingers in an intimate gesture that left her trembling before letting go almost reluctantly.

“It was a true pleasure meeting you, Andee. I hope I might see you again?”

“I...I don't know. We'll see.”

She'd barely gotten ten feet from him when she realized she'd left her purse on the floor by the seat. When she turned, she discovered him still standing where she'd left him. For a moment, she could barely breathe. Was it her imagination, or did a sensual aura of yearning radiate from him in pulsating waves? Her entire body quivered in response.

Neither of them spoke for several long seconds. Finally, Andee took a step toward him. “My purse,” she offered, unable to pull her gaze from his.

He glanced down, spied her bag by the seat, snagged it, and held it toward her.

She stepped closer to him. When her hand brushed his as she grabbed the leather strap, a spark of electricity shot through them both.

They stood frozen, staring at one another. Desire curled through her with an intensity that shocked her.

Finally, Max reached out like he wanted to touch her, but then paused, as if unsure whether or not he should. “Andee...I...”

The husky timbre of his voice vibrated deep within her. Like a magnet inexorably drawn to steel, she found herself moving toward him with no conscious thought about why or how. Suddenly they were closer than they'd been all night. One of his big hands cupped her face, the other steadied her at the small of her back, and their mouths moved in hungry earnest against one another like they'd always known each other; like this had been inevitable from the moment they met.

Time slowed to a dreamlike crawl. Max's lips were gentle, yet

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exquisitely erotic as they explored every inch of hers and his tongue delved into her welcoming depths. He tasted of butterscotch candies, comfort, and strength, and that, strangely enough, aroused Andee more than if he'd been blatantly sexual.

When they drew apart at last to catch their breath, he continued to cradle her face in his hand. "There's something magic about you," he murmured. "I saw it from the stage tonight, and it's even more powerful up close."

Andee could only drag in shallow, shaking breaths and wonder who this strange woman was who'd moved into her body tonight. Because this certainly wasn't the person she'd known for the past thirty-four years. Andrea Matthews, even before Jared, didn't kiss strange men she'd only known for a matter of minutes. She didn't get aroused to the point where she lost all track of reason and time.

Yet somehow, in the darkness of this theater, in the music and passion of the performance tonight, and in this man's alluring and oddly kindred presence, she'd lost herself and a new and strange woman had arisen.

That realization, on top of the emotional tempest that had torn through her earlier, scared the hell out of her. It was all too much change at once.

"I have to go," she said in a warbling voice, pulling out of his embrace, clutching her purse to her chest like a shield. "I...I have to go." She spun on her heel and bolted, needing to escape into the brisk night air, to reach her Volvo in the parking lot that would take her home.

Home to a life that unfulfilling as it might be, at least was recognizable.

\* \* \*

*Andrea. Andee.* Her name, and the memory of her gentle voice and even gentler lips, sent a surge of need through Max as he watched her

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retreat from the theater. Every instinct in him urged him to go after her, not to let her disappear. But after the unexpected kiss, he was afraid if he followed her, it would just scare her more.

The kiss...had just happened. One moment standing there looking at each other, the next in each other's arms. And it had felt so damned right. More real than anything he'd experienced with a woman in too long to remember. She'd sparked something in him. An intuitive emotional and physical connection. And he'd felt it the moment he first saw her, as she slipped into her front row seat just as the lights went down before the performance.

It was an old habit, something he'd done even on movie sets. Just as the filming was about to start—or in this case, the performance—he'd scan the audience, even if it was only cameramen, make-up artists, and other behind-the-scenes workers as it was on a movie set. He went through the action every time to remind himself that he did this work for the people. Unlike actors who thought they were the center of the universe and everyone else was put on earth to pamper and adore them, Max had never kidded himself that he had a job because, for now, he pleased the audience. Without them, he'd be nothing. And that hadn't changed just because he'd recently switched venues from location shoots and Hollywood sets to a darkened stage with music booming in the rafters.

It was during his pre-performance scan that he'd seen her. And immediately known there was something special about her.

She had soft, natural curves rather than a high-priced, made-to-order body like Hollywood was so fond of these days. Her silk shirt and dark pants spoke of simple elegance, and her shoulder-length, honey-blond hair haloed a face with the timeless beauty of a Grace Kelly or an Audrey Hepburn. Her features—and speech when he'd finally spoken to her—hinted at intelligence and compassion, rather than oozing with the ersatz sex appeal he'd grown used to hearing from

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women in the movie business. And as the show had progressed tonight, her expressive eyes had filled with tears more than once, speaking volumes as to how profoundly the performance affected her. He'd been touched by her honest emotional reaction—the first one of those he'd seen in eons after living in the plastic world of Hollywood for so long.

Max had found himself performing for *her*, wanting to heighten her emotional reaction, wanting her to feel the role as he himself did. By the time he'd taken his final bow, he'd been unable to see anyone else in the packed audience, had barely noted the thunderous applause, so caught up was he in the whirlpool of longing that radiated from her. He'd wanted to jump off the stage, pull her against him, and show her just exactly how deeply she'd affected him.

Momentary insanity, he'd decided backstage, as he doffed his costume and worked free the rubber prosthetics that gave him the Phantom's scarred appearance under the mask. He'd probably never see her again.

Yet he hadn't stopped thinking about her.

Then, when he'd come out of his dressing room and returned to the stage to shut off the last of the lights, he'd found her...as if it had always been in the cards for them to meet. And now that he'd actually spent time with her, talked to her, and held her soft, natural body against his for a brief moment, then been forced to watch her leave, he felt lonelier than he had even after Jada had died a few months ago.

Since he'd been here in Sommerville, he'd had very little contact with anyone aside from his friend Kevin, who ran the theater, and Kevin's wife Joann, who currently played Christine in the show. The other cast members didn't know who he really was. Even during rehearsals he'd always worn the mask. He arrived before they did to get into makeup and costume, and made a point to leave after them each performance night. He was often the last one out of the theater, locking up and leaving even after Kevin and Jo sometimes. Aside from



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performance nights, he stayed tucked away in privacy and seclusion in a remote house on Kevin and Jo's farm.

*And that's exactly how I want it*, he reminded himself as he shut off the last of the stage lights and made his way through the now dark hallways to the side door near where his Tahoe was parked.

Outside, he saw Kevin and Jo just getting into their van and returned their wave.

"Max," Jo called just before she shut her door. "Come to the house for an early dinner tomorrow night before the show. The twins made Uncle Max a present today."

Max chuckled and nodded. Kevin and Joann's four-year-old girls had decided he was their new favorite person. The present was probably another round of crayon pictures they endlessly drew. Libby's were nearly always horses, and Leslie's were fairy princesses. But he kept them all. It was so damned nice to enjoy the perks of a real life, no matter how small.

He'd spent the past seventeen years living in the spotlight, every aspect of his existence dissected, photographed, filmed and plastered all over creation via the media. He'd always resented the intrusion in his personal life, but he'd done his damndest to tolerate it as best he could, knowing it was part of the package when you were a "star." However, after Jada's death and the fiasco that followed, he'd had enough.

When he came here, he hadn't planned on doing anything more than lying low, nursing his wounds, and hoping like hell the press wouldn't find him so he could have a few months of peace to get his head back on straight and reevaluate where he was going with his life. The only person in Hollywood who knew where he was living was his agent, whom he'd had for fifteen years. Max trusted him implicitly not to spill his secret, and he hadn't.

Playing the Phantom had been Kevin's idea. Max had resisted at

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first—too risky to make public appearances. But Kevin had accused him of feeling sorry for himself, then had proceeded to convince him the role was perfect for him. A way to do something Max loved—and he truly did love acting—while remaining completely hidden. No one in Hollywood had a clue he could sing. Twenty-one films to his credit, along with some of the highest nominations and awards in the film industry, but nary a note had he ever even hummed in a movie. It was perfect, Kevin had said, and had suggested he go by an assumed name.

So here he was. Even at the moment on stage when the mask was removed and the Phantom revealed, the scars apparently made him invisible to an unsuspecting audience. The reviewers who'd come in from Chicago and St. Louis hadn't even caught on to him. But Max wasn't willing to take chances, so for added insurance, he'd just begun growing a beard—something else he'd never sported in Hollywood.

Yet in spite of the thrill of being onstage with the freedom to be whomever he wanted, of being able to let go of all expectations that the famous Max McKendrick would perform a certain way, and sharing a little slice of his friends' daily life, he couldn't deny the loneliness was beginning to eat at him.

As he slid behind the wheel of his SUV, started the engine, and cranked the heater, Andee's image filled his mind again, and he felt a tug in his chest at the same time a surge of desire tightened his groin. Damn. Why hadn't he asked her last name? Then, if she didn't show up to claim the ticket tomorrow night, at least he would have had a chance to find her. Although...she said a friend had given her tonight's ticket. Kevin could probably get the friend's name for him.

But that would be a very bad idea. He couldn't afford to expose himself in order to find out who Andee-of-the-beautiful-eyes really was. His only saving grace tonight had been that the theater was dark when he'd seen her sitting alone, her face buried in her hands. He'd gone to her without thinking. He'd barely been able to make out her

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features, so he had to hope she hadn't been able to see much of him either.

Oh, but he'd felt her. Felt the power of her soft voice, and the press of her breasts against his chest as they'd kissed. For a moment, as he'd spoken to her, touched her, he'd forgotten he was Max McKendrick. Had forgotten about that gaping chasm in his gut from his sister's death. Had forgotten everything that had turned his world upside down over the past months. Instead, he'd discovered what it was like to be an ordinary man, free to be and say and act however he wished, without having the entire world breathing down his neck.

God help him, he wanted more of that. But most of all, he wanted more of the woman who'd allowed him to experience it for a short while.

Yet to get involved with her would mean telling her who he was. He couldn't lie to a woman he cared about; it went against the grain of everything in him. But by the same token, he couldn't expose someone as genuine as Andee seemed to be to the vultures of the press if the truth got out. He already had to live with his guilt about doing that to Jada. He couldn't put anyone else through that nightmare.

No...he wasn't ready to face the press blitz again. It had only been four months, and the pain was still too fresh.

Yet his heart and body urged him to find her again and not let her go the next time. Somehow, in a very short time, this woman named Andee had filled a void inside him that had been dark and empty for far too long.

## CHAPTER 2

Andee didn't sleep all night. She tossed and turned, her mind filled with images of the Phantom onstage, then blurring with the hard to discern image of Maxwell James. Her body burned with a fever, except this fever had more to do with long-repressed desire and the feel of Max's hands on her, than a sign of illness. Unless mental illness presented itself in this manner.

Every time she'd finally drift off, she'd shudder awake shortly thereafter, her body on fire, her breasts aching, and the damp cotton of her panties clinging between her thighs. At one point she awoke to find her fingers stroking her wet folds, and the sound of the Phantom's—Max's?—low voice urging her on in her mind. Never in her life had something like *that* ever happened to her.

Finally, around dawn, she dropped into an exhausted sleep, and barely managed to awaken and drag herself out of bed in time for her afternoon office hours at the university. At least she didn't have to

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teach today. Just pretend to be awake and attentive to the students who dropped in for help.

She sat at her desk, her cheek resting on her palm, attempting to concentrate on reading a student paper on the Crusades. But her mind wandered. Every time she closed her eyes, which, unfortunately, she did often in her exhausted state, she heard Max speaking softly to her in the dark and felt his sensuous lips on hers, probing, exploring, but never demanding more than she was willing to give.

Finally giving up on doing any grading, she pulled off her reading glasses and tossed them on her desk.

In the short time she'd spent with him, Max had exhibited a tenderness she'd never experienced in her three years with Jared. Oh, Jared had been a considerate man and lover and they'd shared some good times, but there'd never been casual, intimate touching and whispered endearments between them. No soulful gazing into one another's eyes. They'd had a decent enough sex life...at least up until the last year of their marriage when things had begun to fade for reasons she didn't then understand. But, even at the best of times, there'd been nothing in their physical encounters to lift them from nice sex to true lovemaking.

Damn. Why hadn't she realized that before now?

Simple answer, really. She hadn't had much to compare it with. Before she met Jared, she could count her lifetime of boyfriends on one hand, and she'd only been physical with a couple of those, if you considered inexperienced grasping and groping physical. She'd always been the "smart girl" in school, which had pretty much left her out of the running when it came to the popular guys. And when she'd bemoaned her braces, lack of breasts, awkward body, and lanky hair, her mother had assured her that she was merely a late bloomer. The sad part was that when her mother had said "late" she'd had no idea just how late it would be. Andee had been in her mid-twenties before her

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body had finally come into its own. And by then she was busy working toward her doctorate degree and hadn't had a lot of opportunity to find romance.

So when Jared had shone his light upon her—*her* in the midst of all his doting fans on campus—she'd been so shocked and flattered, she'd thought everything he did was wonderful.

Jared had been like the golden sun god of Williams University. With his blond good looks and cheerful personality, everyone on campus—men and women alike—had adored him. There'd always been long waiting lists for his anthropology classes, and all the faculty members wanted him on their committees. Andee was a little ashamed to admit she'd been one of them, admiring him from afar, wondering what it would be like to have him pay attention to her.

And then one night, he had. They'd been at the faculty Christmas party, had ended up at the same table during dinner, had enjoyed a few glasses of wine, and a stimulating conversation about the social structure in Medieval Europe. He'd walked her to her car afterward, and she'd been completely taken aback when he told her he'd never realized what an interesting person she was and asked her out the next weekend. And the next. They'd gotten married a few months later.

Of course, that hadn't stopped the women on campus from drooling over him. There'd been many times Andee had felt the green monster of jealousy stir in her. It was hard watching women make themselves silly over her husband. Harder than she'd ever imagined it might be. Still, while he was always friendly and had a ready ear to listen to anyone, Jared had never had a playboy reputation, even before they were married. As far as she knew, he'd never been anything but professional with the female students and the women he worked with.

That was what had made it hard to believe he'd been seeing Kate for so long. Andee had been in total shock the day he'd come to her and, in his direct way, had told her that he'd never meant to hurt her,

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that he'd never had anything but respect for her—not love, *respect*, which was still a bitter pill to swallow—but that he and Kate had had a past before he'd married Andee, and they had decided to try to make a go of it again. As Andee's heart cracked in two, he'd asked her for a divorce.

The next morning, in a tragic twist of fate, while Andee had been teaching History of Women From Ancient Times to the Enlightenment, Jared and Kate had been killed in a car accident on their way back to the university after dropping off Jared's divorce papers at the courthouse.

Andee sighed and dropped her head onto her folded arms on the desktop.

The days and weeks that followed the accident had been the worst of her life. There were times when she'd thought she wouldn't get through it all—the funerals, the questions, the speculation and shock that had reverberated through the campus.

But now, for the first time since Jared's death, she wondered if maybe she was finally ready to move on.

Which led her directly back to thoughts of Max. Did she dare go back to the theater tonight? The conservative Andee, who'd built walls as thick and high as those of Jericho to protect herself, warned that it wasn't a good idea. That last night had been...a fluke, or some sort of momentary brain schism, or perhaps even the effects of the current full moon.

But her body still tingled from Max's touch, his taste still lingered on her lips—at least in her imagination it did—and she couldn't get his soulful voice of her mind. Nor could she forget those moments when he appeared to be as lonely and troubled as she herself was.

So while it may have been a short encounter, in a surreal setting, there had been an honesty about it that continued to resonate within her.

Still, she didn't know if she'd go to the performance tonight or not.

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Last night had been like something out of a dream—the kind young girls have about the rock or movie stars they have a crush on. The stuff of fantasy.

Was it better to leave it at that, and savor the memory without getting entangled in something that might sour later? Or should she leap off the cliff into the churning river of emotion and raw desire, and take a chance that she might float into a land of paradise rather than being dashed to pieces on the rocks?

\*       \*       \*

At exactly seven-thirty, Andee once again found herself sinking into a front row seat at the Sommerville Playhouse. The girl at the ticket desk hadn't asked any awkward questions when Andee arrived to claim the ticket, and had politely pushed away the credit card she'd tried to pay for it with, saying it had already been taken care of.

With shaking hands, she'd grasped the blue ticket strip, and made her way on wobbly legs, her pulse fluttering in nervous anticipation, into the auditorium. When the pounding overture began and the curtain rose, she had a moment of panic because she couldn't breathe. But then realized it was because she'd been holding her breath.

From the moment Max took the stage, the rest of the world blanked out. It was as if he, alone, stood in the spotlight of her mind, and everything else around him faded into the shadows.

She felt his gaze on her more than once, and thought she saw a smile twitch on his lips at one point. But he was too accomplished an actor to let it be more than a fleeting expression. No one else had probably noticed it at all. She got the feeling it had been meant for her alone.

Every move he made on stage seemed to accentuate the lean planes of his tall body. His very confidence and grace was exciting, and when he looked at her, his eyes sparkling, small earthquakes seemed to rock her from the inside out.



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By the time intermission rolled around, Andee felt like a too-tightly strung violin string. One more pluck and she might snap. As the lights came up, she looked down and was embarrassed to discover her nipples stood at tingling attention through her light-blue cotton blouse. With her face flaming, she tugged her leather jacket around her shoulders, and hunched down in her seat.

This was crazy. Nice, respectable college professors didn't behave like this. Not to mention the fact she was too old to be reacting this way...wasn't she?

But almost before she could get that thought completely finished, an imaginary vision of Max kneeling in front of her, slipping her buttons free, peeling back her blouse, and closing his hot, sweet mouth over one of her distended, rosy peaks nearly brought her out of her chair. A soft moan escaped her before she realized what she was doing. She jerked upright in the seat and glanced around, hoping she hadn't been heard.

Her heart practically leapt out of her throat when she came gaze to gaze with the college-aged usher, who stood in the aisle not three feet from her. Good God, he could have been one of her students. Had he heard her?

He merely smiled—benignly, so if he had heard, he wasn't letting on—and handed her a folded piece of note paper.

"For me?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, ma'am."

Andee opened the note and scanned the few words. Her pulse leapt. *Will you come backstage? M.*

She glanced up at the usher, still standing next to her. "Right now?" she asked, her voice breathless.

"Yes, ma'am. If you'd like to go, I can show you the way. But Mr. James said not to pressure you."

Once again, he didn't demand. He asked, and made it clear both to

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the usher and to her that the ball was in her court. Her heart now pounding as furiously as the opening beats of the *Phantom* overture, she said, “Yes, I’d like to go.”

“Right this way then.”

She followed the young man out the auditorium door, through another door marked “Staff Only,” and down a couple of winding halls.

“You can get backstage more easily by going up the stage steps in the theater, but we don’t like other patrons to see that while a show’s in progress. So we have to go around,” the usher told her.

She nodded, more concerned with trying to keep her heart from racing so fast she didn’t pass out than how far their path was.

He led her up a short flight of stairs, through yet another door, and she found herself amidst the scenery, baffles, and lighting backstage.

“Go right through there.” The young man pointed down a narrow corridor between a side curtain and an enormous metal structure before giving her a wave and disappearing back the way they’d come.

Andee took a deep breath, hiked her handbag up on her shoulder and headed in the direction the usher had indicated. A few people milled about, but appeared too busy with wiring and changing sets to notice her as she walked by.

She entered a darkened area, where thick velvet curtains draped on either side of her, cocooning her. Suddenly, a warm hand closed around her upper arm, and she found herself being tugged into an alcove.

“You came backstage.” Max’s low, seductive voice swirled around her like rich, dark chocolate, and heaven help her, she wanted nothing more than to drown in it.

“Yes. Did you think I might not?” She was a bit breathless and lightheaded at being so close to him again.

He settled her against the back side of a curtain-covered baffle screen and twined his fingers through hers. He was still in full Phantom costume, including the mask. But there was enough light in the

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shadowy corner where they stood that, for the first time, she could make out some details. Like the soft, brown stubble of a newly growing beard. And the vivid green of his eyes. The intensity in them caused her heart to skip several beats.

"I honestly didn't know." His voice was gruff-soft. "I was afraid I'd scared you off last night."

"You didn't."

"Andee...I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

His scent surrounded her, and the heat of his hard body seeped through her clothes and into the deepest core of her. "I haven't stopped thinking about you either," she admitted.

"In a good way, I hope." His voice grew even huskier and he leaned closer.

"Yes. In a good way." Her nipples tingled in excitement, and a pull low in her womb reminded her what it felt like to be a woman.

His breath caressed her face a mere second before their mouths sought each other out. This time, her natural conservative nature seemed to have dashed into hiding, and she matched his exploration with a hungry passion of her own. Max's arms slid around her waist and drew her closer. Her breasts pressed against the muscular breadth of his chest through the ruffled white shirt he wore, and her belly inadvertently brushed against the rigid length of his erection.

Good God! Had she done that to him? The thought that she had, that he desired her as much as she did him, was a shock to her.

Driven by the same surprising sensuality that had come upon her last night, she stood on tiptoe and rubbed against Max's hard cock more purposefully. When he responded with a low groan in his throat, she practically cried in joy. His hand on her lower back pressed her closer still, and he gently ground his need against the part of her that wanted it most.

Once again he tasted of butterscotch, and everything about him was

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warm. His mouth, his body, his masculine scent, even his hair, which her fingers had burrowed into at the nape of his neck, seemed to exude a seductive heat.

He sucked her lower lip one last time. Shivers of pleasure rippled through her as she clung to him.

"The curtain's going up in just a couple of minutes. Will you wait for me? Here, backstage?"

"Yes."

He tipped her face up and gazed down at her. A slow smile curved his lips, and it was a singular thing of beauty. It sent her heart racing even faster.

He arranged the voluminous black cape he wore so it hid the hard display at his groin, then his hand curled around hers and he led her to a velvety armchair just inside the side stage curtain.

A big, lion-looking, bearded blond man stood nearby. He waved at Max and smiled at Andee. "Two minutes," he told Max.

The *entr'acte* music was just beginning as Max settled her into the chair. "You should be able to see most of the stage from here." He traced his fingertips along her cheek, then kissed her lightly but lingeringly. "I'll come get you when it's over," he said, and he was gone.

The blond man smiled at her again and approached. "Kevin Jorgensen." He offered his hand. "Director and producer."

"Andrea Matthews."

"You should have a pretty good view from here. We save this seat for our VIPs." His eyes twinkled behind his wire-rimmed glasses, leaving her to wonder what he thought of hers and Max's kissing scene here before Max had departed. "Would you like a bottle of water? Cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine."

"Your first time backstage at a performance?"

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“Is it that obvious?” she asked, feeling a flush creep up her cheeks.

Kevin chuckled. He had a nice laugh. Friendly. Unpretentious. “Only a little, but don’t sweat it. We were all new to it at one time or another. I’ve got to run, but make yourself comfortable.”

Then he, too, was gone. Moments later, the curtain went up and the performance continued. Andee curled her legs underneath her in the chair, and gave herself up to the performance.

\* \* \*

After the final act and the curtain call, through which Andee stood and applauded nearly as hard as she had last night, cast members and the *corps de ballet* began to filter backstage. Some didn’t pay her any attention, intent on getting to their dressing rooms and perhaps getting home to families. Others smiled, while one or two stared outright before offering her a polite nod and disappearing.

She didn’t see Kevin again, nor did she see the woman who played Christine. She had figured out from her program that Kevin wasn’t just the director and producer, he was also the owner. And the actress who played Christine was his wife. They’d both been on Broadway, but had moved to Illinois to start the Sommerville Playhouse and raise a family.

According to the program, Max had known the two of them for years and had worked with them before. That and a brief list of stage credits was all Max’s bio had to offer in the program. Andee was surprised. As talented and powerful an actor as he was, she would have thought he’d have a list of awards and productions a mile long.

Just as she was beginning to get antsy, wondering if Max had forgotten her, he appeared, still in full costume. He smiled, but didn’t say a word—didn’t have to, his hot gaze, even behind the mask, said it all, and fired a matching urgency in her. He wound his fingers intimately through hers and led her back through the maze, even deeper into it than she’d been before. She felt like Christine being led by the Phantom into his underground lair beneath the opera house. Except

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instead of the fear Christine had felt, Andee trembled from aroused excitement.

They stopped in front of an unmarked door. Max held it open for her, but before she could even get a look around at the candle-lit room they'd entered, he'd shut and locked the door behind them, and had her pressed up against it, his hands planted on either side of her head, devouring her with a scorching kiss.

Her arms twined about his neck of their own will, and one of her legs curled around his hips. His turgid cock, encased in tight black pants, rocked sensuously against her needy cave. The seam of her jeans dug into her, along with his hard bulge, causing friction in exactly the right spot. She was on the edge of a climax within seconds. "Max!" she cried...too aroused to be able to stop, yet embarrassed beyond belief at her instant response to him.

"It's okay." He seemed to understand her dilemma. "If it feels good, let it happen. Does it feel good?" The sandpapery tone of his voice both soothed and enflamed her.

"Yes."

"Then enjoy it." One big hand curved behind her to cup her bottom, tilt her hips a bit farther forward, and press her even more snugly against his hard length. "You find your paradise whenever you're ready, and I'll be right here to catch you when you go over the edge."

The low, throaty litany of Max's voice in her ear, the feel of his erection rocking ever more intently against her, and the heat of his body searing into every inch of hers, fanned the flames that spread within her. She gave in to the sensations, giving up her control for now.

"That's it," he encouraged. "Let go."

Soft, gasping moans escaped her, and she clung to his shoulders, her fingers digging into the solid flesh.

His cock seemed to grow even harder still against her and she had a vague sensation of his arms tensing around her, of his measured

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breathing, as if he were fighting for control of his own desire. And that only heightened her arousal.

"Andee!" he half-groaned, half-whispered a minute later. "Sweetheart, if you keep this up I'm going to lose it, too."

At his ragged words, time suddenly froze and the world seemed to balance on the point of a fine beam of light...and then, in a violent explosion of color and brilliance, paradise seized her. Max held her close as her body writhed in release.

When the last tremor faded, he kissed her with a tenderness that nearly brought tears to her eyes.

"I feel like I've been given an amazing gift I don't deserve," he whispered, his arms tightening around her.

She got the distinct impression he was talking about her, not her little scene moments ago. Tendrils of emotion twined around her heart like satin ribbons.

"Now I have to confess something," she murmured, still holding tightly to him, her face against his neck. She felt drained, still a little embarrassed, yet replete in a way she'd never thought possible.

"What's that?" Max held her away from him a few inches and gazed intently at her.

"I've *never* behaved this way before. I just don't do things like this—the kiss last night and then again tonight, and now this. But when I get around you, the whole world goes topsy turvy. Everything I thought I knew...about myself, about my life, everything...it's suddenly upside down and inside out."

"I know exactly how you feel." The honesty that radiated from those few, deep, quietly spoken words was like a live thing...strong, unwavering, without doubt.

His mouth against hers, offering, taking, melding, only confirmed it. Time slowed and the whole world revolved around the press of their bodies, arching and eager, and the kiss that went on and on.

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“Let me get out of this costume so I can really see you and feel you. I want to know everything about you. I don’t even know your last name.”

“It’s Matthews,” she breathed. “And I’m not terribly exciting or interesting to know, I’m afraid.”

His soft chuckle rumbled against her ear. “Says the woman who in two short nights has filled my dim existence with unimaginable light and joy.”

The heat of embarrassed pleasure crept up her cheeks.

“Damn, you’re beautiful. Both inside and out.” He pressed another light kiss to her lips, but Andee was too moved and too speechless to respond. No one had ever before told her she was beautiful. Not even Jared. To him she’d been “interesting” or “sweet,” but never beautiful. And he’d certainly never used words like “unimaginable light and joy” in reference to her.

“Now that I’ve found you, I don’t want to leave you for even a second,” he murmured. “Give me fifteen minutes to get this stuff off, and then I want to know everything.” His smile caused her stomach to do somersaults.

When she nodded, he added, “Make yourself at home. I’ll be right back.” Another kiss, more lingering this time, with promises of things to come. Then he disappeared into what she assumed was a bathroom.

Shaken to the core, Andee continued to lean against the door for several seconds. Good Lord, how had this happened? How had she come to find herself in this fantasy?

When she glanced around, she discovered Max’s dressing room was almost more like a small studio apartment. Were all of the dressing rooms like this, or was his special because he had the lead role?

A miniature kitchenette, which was really just a corner of the room, had a compact refrigerator, coffee pot, and a small cabinet that she assumed contained cups or glasses. An overflowing bookshelf stood



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against one wall, and a large, paned window next to the bookshelf sported a cushioned window seat. Next to the bathroom door stood a metal, rolling rack of costumes—duplicates of the various pieces the Phantom wore during a performance. A squashy, comfortable-looking leather sofa sat against one wall, a low wood coffee table in front of it. A bag of butterscotch candies lay open on the table and she smiled. *The Phantom's secret sweet tooth.*

Instead of the reading lamp next to the sofa, or the overhead electric lights, the room was lit by a handful of candles burning on the bookshelf and the coffee table. Scented, she noticed—patchouli or some other earthy, woody aroma. The dim light the candles gave off flickered in seductive orange and yellow patterns on the walls and the ceiling. Max had obviously come by here directly after the performance to light them.

*This is what he was doing those few minutes I was waiting!*

Another quiver of need hit her, leaving her trembling and weak-kneed. Who was this man? She wanted to know him as much as he seemed to want to know her. Everything about him so far was...well...perfect. But she knew better than to believe it could stay that way. No one was perfect. Everyone had quirks and bad habits. The question was, would she still be as bowled over by him when she started discovering them as she was now? Deep in her heart she had a feeling she would, and she didn't know whether that thrilled her or terrified her.

Was she ready to get involved so soon?

*Soon?* It had been a year-and-a-half. Wasn't the fact that, in two brief nights, Max had not only knocked down her carefully guarded walls but had also touched her heart and excited her body indicative that she was ready?

She crossed the room, filled with restless energy, and opened the small refrigerator. It was filled with bottles of water and soda. She

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chose water, and as she sipped it, she pushed aside the drape with one hand to peer out the window. The moon was still full tonight and when it peeked out from behind scudding clouds, it cast an ethereal glow across the land, bathing everything in pale grays and feathery whites. Max's dressing room was one floor above ground level, and the window looked out over the back of the property with a lovely view of fall-dappled trees in a meadow. The ever-present cornfields stretched off behind that.

The scene was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at it. Andee's chest tightened, and she realized the moonlit landscape wasn't the only beautiful thing that caused an ache in her. She was falling hard for Max. She might as well admit it to herself. Harder and faster than she'd ever fallen in her life. And it scared the hell out of her. She didn't even know this man. Not really. Though something at a soul-deep level within her resonated a familiarity, and a powerful emotional and physical connection with him, the practical and still-hurting-from-Jared's-betrayal side of her wanted to know facts.

She didn't think she could stand it if this was suddenly all ripped away. What would she do if he came out of that bathroom and said, "Thanks for coming by, but now you have to go because I need to get home to my wife"? Or if a day or two or ten down the road he told her he didn't think she was anything special anymore and it was fun while it lasted, but goodbye?

Panic seized her chest, nearly cutting off her air. She couldn't do this. Couldn't care again.

It was too soon.

*Max!* her heart cried. *I want to know you, but it's too soon and I'm too scared.*

## CHAPTER 3

Max rid himself of the Phantom costume and make-up in record time, took a quick shower, and pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

He felt like a teenager getting ready for his first date, for God's sake.

That thought made him grin. But when he glanced at himself in the steamy mirror and saw the face that had graced hundreds of magazine covers and movie screens, his smile faded. How was he going to handle this? Was he going to continue to keep Andee in the dark—literally—so she wouldn't recognize him? Or was he going to come clean and tell her the truth?

No choice. He was going to tell her the truth. Had to. He wouldn't be able to live with himself otherwise. This thing between them was too strong and—he didn't kid himself—too important to play games with. They barely knew each other, yet he felt her already burrowed into his heart. Felt as if in some ways he'd known her forever. He wasn't sure

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where all this would lead, but he was damn certain it could lead *somewhere* if they but gave it a chance. And every moment he spent with her, he was more and more convinced he wanted that chance.

Still...it was complicated. He felt in his gut that he could trust her. He didn't believe she'd out him to the press if he asked her not to. But there was another matter. She was nervous about this relationship, cautious, and God knew she had good reason to be. Again, she didn't know him except for the short time she'd spent with him or what she'd read in the program—which said very little for obvious reasons. He sensed she'd been hurt in the past. That would explain her skittishness, and also her sadness when he'd found her sitting alone in the dark last night. And because he didn't yet know what demons she struggled against, he didn't know how fragile she might be.

Would finding out who he really was scare her off? He had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach it might. Especially if she'd read even a small portion of what the tabloids had printed about him over the past months, damn the paparazzi.

But even if, for some reason, she didn't bolt immediately and she accepted him for now, eventually the press would find him, and she'd end up suffering through the inevitable crap. Was he willing to put her through that? Everything in him shouted, “No!”

Max's chest clenched and he closed his eyes. This was no goddamned way to live. He was damned if he did, and damned if he didn't. He loved acting, yes. But he wanted more than that—a family, a real home, a life outside of Hollywood. He was sick of having his life laid out for public consumption. He wanted to know the people he cared about wouldn't have to worry that everything that happened to them was going to be plastered all over the tabloids.

He'd watched Jada suffer through it, with every little twist and turn of her six-month battle with cancer played out in the media. She'd hated it, been embarrassed by it, but even at her sickest, she'd always

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tried to humor him because she hadn't wanted him to feel bad. He'd appreciated her attempts to make light of it, but the bottom line was that if he weren't a frigging "star," she never would have been exposed to that humiliation.

And now, here he was, in the heartland of America, where people were genuine, where life moved at a slow, comfortable pace, where he'd rediscovered his love for the stage, and where most unexpectedly, he'd found a treasure of all treasures in a soft-spoken, intelligent, vibrant woman who made him feel truly alive for the first time in years. It was everything he'd longed for, dreamed of, and he didn't want to lose any of it. Especially not the woman who waited for him on the other side of that door.

Yet even here there was no true safe haven. The heavy cloud of the media hung over him, always threatening to steal away what little happiness he could find.

He was so damned tired of it all.

Still undecided about how he should broach the subject with her, but aching with loneliness to have been away from Andee even this long, Max shut off the bathroom light and opened the door. He'd play it by ear and it would work itself out. He had to believe that. Right now he just needed to be with her.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer candle light after being in the bright bathroom. But when they did, for some reason the first thing he noticed was that Andee's leather jacket and purse, which she'd dropped just inside the door when they came in, were no longer there.

*Oh, shit. No.* A knot formed in his stomach. He'd taken too long and she'd bolted again, like she had last night.

But then he saw her standing by the window, the drape held back with one hand, bathed in moonlight that glistened off her honeyed hair. Her back was toward him, her shoulders hunched. She wore her jacket,

## MASKS

and her purse sat on the window seat.

*Not bolted. Yet.*

The sight of her filled him with relief, but did nothing to ease the ache in his gut. “Andee?” he asked softly, taking cautious steps toward her.

“I...I was going to leave. But I couldn’t do it without saying goodbye to you.” Her quiet voice trembled as she continued to gaze outward, not turning to look at him. “I didn’t think running out on you two nights in a row would be a very nice thing to do.”

Max’s chest ached at the pain he heard in her voice. He moved up behind her, slid his arms around her waist, and drew her back against him. She leaned into his embrace without fighting.

“I want to help, sweetheart, but I won’t know how until you tell me who hurt you and what’s scaring you.”

“How did you know?” she whispered. She let go the curtain, closing off the view to the moonlit night.

Max pressed a kiss against her fragrant hair. “From the moment I first saw you, I felt your loneliness and your pain. I suspected it was a ‘someone’ who had caused it. Do you want to talk about it?”

There was a long pause. So long Max began to worry that she’d closed him out completely.

But then she sighed heavily. “It’s not pretty. It would just bore you.”

“Andee, nothing you could possibly tell me would bore me. And everyone has pain of some sort in their past. We wouldn’t be human if we didn’t. When I told you earlier that I wanted to know everything about you, I meant everything. Real life isn’t always pretty or light. And there’s nothing you can tell me that will make me feel any differently about you.”

He felt a silent tremor course through her. “I keep waiting for you to screw up and you just don’t,” she whispered.

## *MASKS*

“I’m not following you here...”

Her response was a teary laugh. “Never mind.”

She sucked in a deep breath. After several quiet moments, she spoke again, her voice so soft Max found himself holding his breath to better hear her. “I was married for three years. He was one of those people everyone loved—good-natured, easy-going, popular. It was hard sometimes to share him because he was so popular, but I always thought we had a comfortable marriage. Then one day, I had just gotten home from work. The tulips had begun to bloom along the edge of the patio at our house and I was puttering in the flowerbed. He came outside and said we needed to talk.”

She swallowed hard, lost in her memories. “He told me he’d been seeing someone else. Someone he’d had a relationship with before he and I were ever married. They...” The words caught on a sob.

Max turned her toward him and nestled her head against his chest. “Shhh...it’s okay.”

“He and this woman, they’d had a child together. Apparently he didn’t know about it until the year before when she’d finally told him. He’d never mentioned it to me until that day. He said he’d wanted to get to know the little boy, so for the past year, he’d been spending all his free time with them.”

Max swore softly, suspecting what had happened from there.

“I have to hand it to them. They were discreet. We were all colleagues—we worked together—but the two of them were in the same department, so it was a simple matter of them having “meetings” or conferences to attend and such. They agreed no one should know they’d had this child together because, he said, they didn’t want to hurt me, and they didn’t want to create a scandal where we work. You see, everyone believed the boy was her ex-husband’s child.

“So for a year, he saw the boy privately, and during that time, he and the boy’s mother grew close again. They decided they owed it to

## MASKS

their son to be a real family. But..." The feel of her soft body wracked in sorrow nearly broke Max's heart. "But the next morning, he and his lover were going somewhere together and there was an accident. A pile-up on the highway. They both died."

Max's chest jolted. *Oh, shit.* He held Andee close, kissing her temple and rocking her. Long heldback sorrow flowed off her in waves, and he wondered if she'd never really talked to anyone about this before. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. So very sorry."

The quiet tears she shed tore him up inside, and he wondered how any man, child or not, could have pushed her aside for someone else. This beautiful, gentle, kind-hearted woman deserved so much better. And she'd taken a double hit...losing her husband to another woman, then losing him to death. No wonder she was running scared.

"How long ago did this happen?"

"A year-and-a-half ago." She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with her fingertips. "You'd think I'd be a little more in control of myself after all this time, wouldn't you?"

Max stroked her hair and wiped a tear from her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "No. That's a lot of hurt all at once. And losing someone you love isn't quick to get over. I know that from experience." A twinge of pain from Jada's death shot through him.

"The scandal they'd wanted to avoid hit full force," she said. "Except the only person left to clean up the mess was me. I wanted to hate Jared—that was his name—and Kate. I really did." She sniffed and brushed at her eyes again. "And it wasn't just their betrayal. It was more selfish than that. I wanted to hate them because they had what I'd always wanted...a family. It had been a point of contention between Jared and me because I was already over thirty, so I guess you could say I felt my biological clock ticking. But he'd always told me he wasn't ready. Said he wasn't even sure if he wanted kids."

"Still...in the end, how can you hate people who were ripped away



## ***MASKS***

when they still had so much living to do? And who left behind a young child who would never know his parents? When I get to feeling resentful and sorry for myself, I try to remember how that boy must feel, being raised by his grandmother with no mommy and daddy. Sometimes life's really shitty, you know?"

"Yeah, I do know. I know exactly." Max tilted her face up and gazed into her damp eyes. "But then sometimes, when we least expect it, when we feel like we're about as low as we can get, we also find good things. Things that remind us how to live again. The sunrise. Flowers blooming in the spring. The moonlight reflecting off a lake."

Her breath caught, then she said, "And friends."

"Definitely friends. Both old ones...and new ones." He took her hands and placed them on either side of his face. "Touch me," he said, keeping his voice low and encouraging.

In the flickering candlelight, he could see questions in her gaze, but her hands slowly moved over his face, stroking the softening stubble of his beard, tracing his forehead and eyebrows, lingering with a feather-touch on his lips.

"What do you feel?"

Her teeth nibbled at her lower lip as her hands continued to learn his features. He closed his eyes as an unexpected wave of longing surged through him. Even the most innocent of her touches did this to him. When he opened his eyes, she was watching him. Her tears had dried, and a flicker of understanding lit her face.

"I feel a kindred spirit," she whispered.

"What else?"

"Strength. Compassion." Her fingers slid over his lips again. "Gentleness."

He was riveted by her silken voice and touch. "What else?"

"Passion. Incredible passion. You're passionate about everything you love, everything that's important to you. And you're not a man to

## *MASKS*

back down if you believe in something.”

Everything else but Andee ceased to exist in that moment for Max. In the muted candlelight, her expression relaxed and open, she appeared more alive, more confident, than he’d ever seen her, and he knew once and for all that he was lost to her.

He captured one of her hands and pressed a kiss to the palm. “I’m not perfect by any means, Andee. I have faults and baggage just like everyone does. But I would never intentionally hurt you. I know we haven’t known each other long, but based on what you do know of me, I hope you can find it in your heart to believe that.”

“I do believe,” she whispered. “That’s why I couldn’t leave earlier.”

A sweet, hot ache filled Max’s chest. Never had he wanted to earn someone’s trust as much as he did hers. “It’s all happened fast, hasn’t it? This thing between us.”

She nodded. “That’s part of what frightens me.”

“Then let’s slow it down if you want. Let’s make time to know one another better.”

“Yes. That’s what my head says, too. But...”

“But...?”

“But the rest of me—the part of me that’s not behaving like it normally does—doesn’t want to slow down this fast and furious ride. It wants to find out where this journey will take us.”

He stared at her in wonder. After going through so much and suffering so much hurt, she was still open to exploring all the possibilities between them.

His body tight with need and hope, he slid a hand up beneath the back of her shirt and found bare skin. He traced the contours of her spine, and felt his heart swell when she trembled in eager response. “Why don’t we do both?”

“Both?” she asked, breathlessly, her gaze locked with his.

“Let’s get to know each other better. You ask me a question, then

## MASKS

I'll ask you one." He continued teasing circles against the warm skin of her lower back.

"Any question?"

"Anything, I'll tell you anything about myself you want to know."  
*Even the tough stuff.*

"And then what?"

"And then we'll see where this journey takes us." He covered her mouth with his own, and slowly, gently, pulled her closer until her breasts, straining against the front of her blouse, teased his chest.

Her arms snaked around his waist without hesitation.

He kissed her until she shivered and moaned. When his mouth slid downward, moving over the delicate skin of her neck, pausing to nip at her earlobe, she spoke his name in a hoarse whisper. "Max?"

"What, sweetheart?"

"Have you ever been married?"

"No," he murmured against her ear. "I came close once, but it didn't work out. I found out the hard way that she was more enamored of my job than of me."

"She was a twit," came the impassioned response.

Max smiled at her fierceness. He turned her so her back was toward him once again, her bottom settled against his thighs, then he curved his arms around her and captured her breasts in his hands. His thumbs rubbed her straining nipples through her shirt, coaxing them to even harder peaks. Her throaty cry, and the way she let her head fall back against his chest, assured him he wasn't overstepping his bounds.

"My turn," he said, dropping a nibbling kiss just under her ear. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a—" She sighed when he began to roll and squeeze her nipples between his fingers.

He smiled. "Yes...?"

"I...I'm a teacher. A college professor." Her voice had grown gritty

## ***MASKS***

with desire.

“A professor? At Williams U?”

“Yes.”

He began unbuttoning her blouse, and as each button slipped free, he'd punctuate it by kissing her ear. He was rewarded each time with a soft moan. “Does that mean I should call you Professor Matthews? Or maybe Dr. Matthews?”

“Ei-either,” she gasped, and then shook her head as if she were trying to clear it. “I mean my students call me either. You...you...”

He had her blouse open now and had begun stroking her nipples again, this time through her satin bra.

“I?”

She didn't bother to answer. She rose to her tiptoes and ground her hips back against him so her bottom was tightly pressed to his groin.

Max eased her blouse off. A moment later, he found the clasp on the back of her bra, released it, and a raw ache tightened his balls when the scrap of satin fell forward, sliding down her arms, and her full breasts fell free into his palms. Jesus. She was beautiful. He cupped the silken flesh in his hands, and enjoyed the feel of her rosy, hard nipples between his fingers. Enjoyed even more the way she writhed at his touch.

“You okay?” he murmured, not wanting to scare her off again, wanting her to be sure.

“Yes, oh, God, yes. Don't stop. And talk to me, Max. Please. I love the sound of your voice.”

“Then tell me, my beautiful professor, what is it that you teach? What are you passionate about?” While one hand continued its manipulation at her breast, his other hand slid down over her abdomen and began working at the button and zipper of her jeans.

“History,” she managed to gasp out.

“Time period?”

## MASKS

“Eu-European. Medieval and R-Renaissance.”

Max smiled at her stuttered responses.

“And you had planned to work tonight instead of coming here because...?”

“Because I was a fool,” she cried. “Because I was scared of what you made me feel last night.”

Max’s chest tightened at her answer. He’d been teasing her, but her honesty touched his heart. “And tonight? How do you feel tonight?”

“Like I don’t ever want to leave. Like I want to feel every inch of you on me and in me and around me forever.”

*Jesus.* All interest in teasing her slipped away and was replaced by a deep-down urgency.

The zipper on her jeans sliced down with a metallic whisper, and without further ado, he slid her pants and her bikini underwear down over her hips, her thighs, her shapely calves, then groaned in frustration when they caught on her boots. She pushed his hands out of the way, unzipped the black leather, heeled offenders, and kicked them off. At last her jeans slipped free and he tossed them aside. He drew her back against him once more, her back to his chest, and continued teasing a nipple with one hand. With the other, he slid a finger through her curls and into her slick, hot crease, tracing the folds from one end to the other, ending with a light stroke against her swollen clit.

She jerked and cried out, but didn’t pull away. Instead, she whispered his name and asked for more.

Max turned her toward him, dropped to his knees in front of her, and nudged her legs apart. With his fingers, he spread open her damp folds and blew gently on her hooded nub. Once more she cried out and he was afraid he might have gone too far this time.

But instead of pushing him away, her fingers burrowed into his hair and pulled him closer. He smiled as he traced her pliant petals with the tip of his tongue, savoring her taste, and loving the way she vibrated

## MASKS

when he got close to her little pleasure bud. Although he could tell from her increasingly desperate moans that she didn't want his attention *around* her nub but rather *on* it, he knew taking it slow would only make her pleasure greater in the end. And more than anything, he wanted this to be exceptional for her.

When her frustration reached a feverish pitch, he sat back and slipped a finger, then two into her wet, sleek cunt. He pumped them in and out a few times, before curling them up toward her pubic bone to tickle her G-spot.

Her hips jerked against him. "Max!"

He looked up at her, stroked her again, pushing lightly against the spongy wall, and watched as her back arched, her head fell back, and her breasts thrust forward. With his free hand, he lightly pinched one of her nipples, and the low groan that emanated from her filled him with a satisfied joy. "Does it feel good?"

She nodded, eyes closed, head still tilted back, little panting breaths escaping her parted lips.

"Say it. Let me hear you say it, Andee."

"Yes...it feels good. All of it. It's...it's been so long, Max."

"It has been for me, too, sweetheart."

"Really?"

"Really." He dragged in a deep breath. Hell, he couldn't even remember the last time he'd been with a woman. He'd quit playing Hollywood games years ago, and that hadn't left a lot of options.

With his fingers still working steadily inside her, he let his tongue delve into her sweet honey again. He found the swollen bud of her clit and alternated between tonguing her and suckling the little bead she'd so desperately wanted him to notice.

When her thighs trembled and her pussy began to clench, instead of taking her over the edge, he stood and lowered his mouth to hers once more, giving her a chance to taste herself, letting his tongue pick up

## *MASKS*

here where it had left off below, dancing and thrusting with hers in a sensuous rhythm. Her hands clutched his shoulders and her hips wiggled against his groin, pressing her mound hard to his rigid and almost painful cock, bringing him dangerously close to losing it himself.

He reached down and grasped the hem of his T-shirt, but never stopped kissing her. Understanding what he was doing, she took a handful of it, too, and between them, they worked it up his chest, him pulling and her pushing, and broke the kiss only long enough for him to jerk it over his head. Then their lips and tongues clashed once more. Her fingers began working at the snap of his jeans before the shirt even hit the floor, and he helped her ease the zipper down over his erection.

When his cock sprang free from its confinement, she never hesitated, and took him almost reverently in hand. As their mouths continued to move against one another, she stroked him with a light touch, seeming to understand that any harder in his current condition would hurt. He cupped her bottom, flexing his fingers against the soft flesh, and reveled in the sensation of her stroking him, of the sensitive skin on his dick sliding easily back and forth in her hand, of the occasional pressure of her thumb smoothing drops of pre-come across its head.

Their lips parted for air, and the first words out of her mouth as he nuzzled her neck were, "I want to feel you inside me."

"You will, baby. I promise." He shoved his jeans down his thighs and off, and before tossing them aside, fumbled in the pocket for the protection he'd put there earlier. After her fast and hard orgasm when they first entered the room, he hadn't wanted to be unprepared if fate led them down this path.

His hands were shaking so hard he could barely hold onto the foil package. When he finally got his straining rod sheathed, he almost shouted with relief. He turned her so her back was toward him once

## *MASKS*

more, then gently pushed her forward so her elbows rested on the cushioned window seat and the curves of her shapely rear jutted into the air.

“Please. Now,” she cried, completely uninhibited.

She was so damned electrifying, with her normally genteel voice begging, and her beautiful body eager for him. He had to drag in a couple of deep breaths to keep from ending this prematurely. He settled the tip of his penis right at the entrance of her slit. “Is this what you want?” he rasped.

“Yes!” she cried and, taking charge, thrust her hips back against him, enveloping him deep inside her hot, clenching passage.

They both moaned, and their bodies shook at the forceful union.

It took all Max’s willpower to keep from spilling himself right there and then. But he wanted this to last. He held her hips and stroked into her with slow precision over and over until his balls felt like they might burst. But each time he got close to coming, he’d slow down or change rhythm. And that held off her orgasm, too.

He pulled out, turned Andee around to face him, and sat on the window seat, resheathing himself in her heat at the same time. “I could stay inside you for the rest of my life and never get tired of it.”

Now sitting astride him, her legs on either side of his, he saw her breath catch as they stared at one another for a long moment. Neither of them moved.

Then a slow smile curved her beautiful lips, catching him off guard with the trust and open desire it conveyed. “You like being inside me?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What’s it feel like? Describe it to me.”

“Tight. Hot as hell...in a wonderful way.”

“What else?” she asked, teasing her tongue along his lower lip.

Max groaned. For some reason her questions were making him even hotter and harder. “Wet...clinging...”



## ***MASKS***

She raised up ever so slowly—painfully slowly—until only the tip of him remained inside her, and smiled again when another raspy groan escaped him. Then she stroked down on him with equal patience, her steaming passage swallowing his aching cock inch by slow inch into its depths. Her gaze never left his as she rose slowly upward again, this time hovering with his throbbing tip tucked just inside her hot tunnel, and adding a kiss to the mix.

She took her time, sucking his lower lip, darting her tongue in and out of his mouth, teasing his tongue into responding and when it did, luring it deeper. The muscles in her vagina squeezed and released the head of his penis, where she still held only it prisoner, and between that and the erotic dance her mouth was doing against his, Max thought he'd go insane with a need more powerful than any he'd ever felt. It took all his self control not to grab her hips and pound into her until they both screamed.

Instead, he decided two could play her game of seduction. He eased a hand between them and pressed his middle and forefinger directly, without any warning, against her swollen clit. The action caught her by surprise, and her body bucked against him. His cock slid a tiny bit more inside her welcoming heat.

She continued to tongue his mouth with sensual abandon, but her legs trembled on either side of his, and the contractions around his dick came faster and with more intensity. It seemed her game was taking its toll on her, too. He smiled and pressed her nub again.

When her body jerked this time, he took advantage of it, and probed his rod harder—pushing until he was deeply seated inside her. She undulated against him, the press of her bottom rubbing against his thighs, and quiet moans coming from low in her throat.

Her soft walls squeezed his cock without mercy, and he felt his balls tighten and begin to burn. He grasped her hips, holding her still for a moment, while he forced his libido back into submission yet

## ***MASKS***

another time. But he wasn't going to be able to last much longer. Her desperate moans and her quivering body told him she wasn't either.

Back in marginal control, he pumped up into her a several times, and she responded in kind, meeting him thrust for thrust, grinding her mound hard against him, sucking him deeper and deeper into the swirling heat of imminent eruption. But he wanted her to go first. Wanted to see her face, and hear her cries before he found his own release.

In a swift movement, he took the hard little bud of her clit between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed. Her reaction was immediate and violent. She pulled her mouth away from his with a gasp, and arched her back. "OhmyGodMax!"

"You like that, sweetheart?" Without relenting, Max continued to squeeze, tighter, tighter, tighter...

Her vaginal walls contracted with sudden and fierce intensity around Max's cock, squeezing him over and over until he was nearly out of his mind and he shook as hard as she did. But somehow, by the grace of God and a hell of a lot of determination, he held off his own release once more, wanting only to watch her, feel her, as she flew into a million beautiful pieces around him.

Never, if he lived to be an old, old man, would he forget this moment. The vision of her in the muted candlelight, her hair ruffled, her lips swollen from his kisses, and her curvaceous, warm body in the throes of passion, was imprinted indelibly on his brain. And he knew with full certainty that this one time would never be enough. He wanted this woman forever.

## CHAPTER 4

When the trembling in her body had slowed to gentle aftershocks, Max slid Andee's arms around his neck, lifted her, still impaled on his length, and carried her to the couch. She was so limp from the orgasm she'd just had that it was all she could do to hang onto him. But she knew he'd never let her fall.

Cradling her head in one hand, and holding her bottom in his other, he laid her on the couch, and reclined between her legs. His face was lost in shadow, but she knew his passionate gaze was still on her. She could feel his cock deep inside her, throbbing and hot, and suspected he'd just been through agony holding off his own release in order for her to get there first.

That generosity wasn't lost on her. He was, without doubt, the most magnificent, giving man she'd ever known.

Drawing him closer, thrilling at the feel of his light dusting of chest hair against the sensitive skin of her breasts, loving everything about

## ***MASKS***

being near him, she whispered in his ear, “No more holding back. Come for me, Max.”

His back and shoulders tensed into tight knots under her hands.

She smiled and lifted her hips so he had a better angle at her. Her hands slid down the firm length of his back, settled on his taut buttocks, and snugged him tighter. He penetrated her so deeply the head of his long shaft butted against her cervix, causing a pleasure/pain twinge inside her. “Now,” she said, allowing her breath to caress his ear. “Ride me hard. I want to feel you explode inside me.”

“Jesus!” It was more a guttural groan than a word. His arms flexing on either side of her head, he began to move. Slowly at first, sliding in and out of her so each down stroke purposefully rubbed against her sensitized clit. Within moments, Andee found her own body tingling with a heat that surprised her. After the climax she’d just had, she hadn’t thought she could be aroused again so soon. But all the same, her sheath clenched around the satin steel that was Max’s penis, a steady tensing began in her muscles, and she quickly found herself hovering on the edge of another orgasm.

Max altered his pace and moved faster, his thrusts coming harder, bumping against her womb so she almost cried out at the sweet agony. She held his ass and locked her heels around his calves, urging him on. The friction of his chest grated against her nipples until they burned. His lips found the hollow between her neck and shoulder, and he alternately nipped with his teeth, and suckled her there, leaving her moaning and thrashing beneath him.

His cock seemed to lengthen and grow even harder inside her, his body tensed, and his breath came in ragged gasps against her neck. “God, I need you. I’ve never needed anyone like this, Andee.” He slid a hand between them and lightly stroked her super-sensitized nub. Any lighter and she wouldn’t have felt it, any harder and it would have been too much stimulation on her already over-worked pleasure point, but

## ***MASKS***

his pressure, like everything else about him, was just right. The orgasm exploded through her like a raging fire. At the same time, Max shook with his own release, pounding hard into her, each stroke shooting a new wave of flames deep into her core.

Drained, muscles trembling, Max rested his head against her neck. She stroked the damp strands of his hair, savoring the feel of his hard body on top of hers, and his semi-erect shaft still inside her holding them together as one.

“I’ve never needed anyone like this either,” she whispered.

Max lifted his head and gazed down at her. “Then I guess we’re stuck with one another, aren’t we?”

He said it with such tenderness her heart nearly burst in her chest. His lips pressed lightly against hers, then brushed the tip of her nose and each of her eyelids, before returning to another lingering exploration of her mouth.

She’d never realized kissing could be so...intimate.

Finally, Max slid out of her, rolled to his side, and snuggled her against him so she faced him. He caressed her cheek and she turned her head to press her lips to his palm.

She caught the glint of his white teeth in the candlelight, and the slow curve of his smile. “You know, of course, that neither of us is probably going to be able to walk in the morning.”

Laughter bubbled freely from her, and she realized it was the first time since Jared’s death that she’d felt so relaxed and at peace.

“Damn, I love hearing you laugh.” His voice was husky with a slight catch to it, and much to her shock, just the sound of it sent another miniature jolt of desire through her. Would she ever be around this man and not constantly crave his touch?

“I love that you’ve given me a reason to do it,” she murmured.

“I want to give you a reason to do it every day. You’re an amazing woman, Andrea Matthews.”

## *MASKS*

“No, I’m not. I told you, I’m not really very interesting at all. I go to work, teach my classes, grade papers, sleep. I hate to exercise, I like old movies, I make a mean bowl of popcorn and decent margaritas, but otherwise, I’m not much of a cook.” She shrugged. “That pretty much covers my life.”

Max’s deep chuckle filled her with warmth. “Well, you see, that’s where I can help. I happen to like to cook.”

“You cook?”

“Yep. I learned because I raised my younger sister, and after a few weeks of sandwiches and canned soup, I started feeling guilty about her not getting all her green leafies and such. So I scrounged up an old cookbook and started trying things. I discovered I wasn’t half bad at it, and at least fifty percent of what I made was actually edible.”

“Okay, you get bonus points for that.” She smiled. “Anything else you’d like to share?”

“Yeah. I hate to work out, too, so I don’t. I’d much rather go for a walk, or be on the back of a horse, or even muck out stalls than lift weights and spend hours a week on a VersaClimber. I don’t teach, so I don’t have any papers to grade, but it feels like I spend my life memorizing every written word known to mankind. It becomes so much of an obsession, I once found myself memorizing the back of a shampoo bottle in the shower.”

At Andee’s soft laugh, he grinned. “It’s true. I bet you don’t know anyone else who can tell you, word for word, what kind of chemical cocktail they’re sudsing up in their hair every morning.”

“Have you always been an actor?”

Max arranged her more snugly against him. “No. I didn’t get into it seriously until after college. I’d planned to be an attorney. Even went to one year of law school after I got my degree, but figured out real fast that sitting around looking up old cases and spending my life arguing with people wasn’t going to do it for me. I’d been in a few plays in

## MASKS

college and loved it—that's when I met Kevin and Joann—but it was purely a sideline at that point in my life. About the time I was making the decision not to continue in law school, they had an open casting call in Columbus, Ohio, near where my sister and I lived. I went to it mostly for fun, but ended up getting a small part, and after that, things just kind of took off."

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and she felt his mood grow serious. "Andee...there's something..."

Her heart fluttering, she stared at him. *Oh, no.* Was this the part where he sent her on her way? "What?" she asked, barely able to push out the word, hating herself for letting this doubt eat at her when she knew in her heart Max wasn't like that.

Instead of answering, he kissed her. He seemed to be in no rush. His tongue danced slowly and sensuously with hers, and his teeth nipped at her lower lip. He cupped her head and deepened the kiss, and she couldn't have stopped her response if she'd tried. Her leg draped over his hip, and her fingers found, then memorized, every ridge and corded muscled on his shoulders and back.

Finally, he held her against him, skin to skin, heart to heart. "I told you I'd never intentionally hurt you, and I meant it. Please don't ever doubt that this is for real, Andee. No matter what ever happens, don't ever doubt that what's going on between us is anything but real."

"I'm sorry—"

He pressed a gentle finger against her lips. "No sorrys allowed. I understand." Then he grinned. "Have I told you yet about a certain other skill I have?"

A smile curved Andee's lips. "Um...you mean besides the one where you do that pinching thing to certain intimate places that makes me out of my mind?"

Max teased a couple of fingers between her curls and tweaked her clit gently. "You mean this?"

## *MASKS*

“Yes!” she gasped, her body instantly flooding with sensation. “Where did you learn that?”

“About thirty minutes ago...with you,” he said, doing it again, even more gently, yet it somehow had even greater impact than the first one.

“Jesus, Max, I...unnnh! I...I don’t know if...”

“If you can come again?” he supplied for her, now putting other fingers to work down there, probing her, stretching her, and toying with her little bead until sweat broke out on her forehead. “Yeah, sweetheart, I think you can. I think you will.”

Andee turned onto her back, spread her legs, and opened herself more fully for him. Then she closed her eyes and gave into the sensations this incredible man seemed determined to gift her with.

The sweet heat of his mouth closed over one of her nipples, which only heightened the seductive waves of pleasure that had begun to build deep within her.

She was so wet between her legs that Max’s fingers moved like butter against her, sliding back and forth, tracing every curve and hollow of her swollen nether lips, slipping inside her clenching depths, then back out again to do a slow figure eight around her clit.

She felt him rise up on the couch and move down so he was between her parted thighs. Felt a second hand join the first, felt the new fingers slip in and out of her tunnel until they were slick with her juices, then move lower, into an area where she’d never been touched.

Andee’s heart pounded, and a new anticipation built in her, causing her whole body to quake. Oh, God. This was insane. Insane in a pulse-throbbing, forbidden kind of way.

As one set of fingers continued to play in and around her usual passage, another finger slid over her perineum and brushed against a place that every part of her was suddenly focused on. But it was just a brush...a teasing one at that, and it was gone before she wanted it to be. And then it was back...and gone.



## ***MASKS***

Andee cried out and wiggled her bottom lower on the couch, pressing it more firmly against Max's hands, trying to make him understand. His soft, sexy chuckle nearly made her crazy, but still he didn't give her what she suddenly craved beyond belief. In fact, it was if he'd forgotten that second hand had been about to do something new and daring to her. Her whole body tingled, her toes curled, her hands clutched at the pliant leather of the couch as the frustration continued to build in her.

Max's hand at her folds became more insistent. He drove his thumb into her vagina and pressed his palm to her mound, encouraging her to grind herself against it. But still she wanted more. Still the sensations she'd had a hint at eluded her.

"Max!" It was a sob. She didn't care. Colors flashed behind her eyes. Her body thrummed with unfulfilled need.

And then that other slick finger was back, doing the brush and evade thing again. More evading than brushing. "Damn it, Max," she cried. "Please. Please! Just do it! I want you to. I need you to!"

Two fingers, then three plunged into her pussy now, while his thumb had become the aggressor on her clit. She sobbed, and begged, and swore, her body aching, thrashing, demanding. Waves pounded through her, bringing her closer and closer to climax, yet she still felt cheated. Still she wanted more.

And then it was there, right where she wanted it...a gentle, slippery pressure against her tight ring, pressing...pressing...and sliding into place like hot lava.

The raw power of having both places fondled at once roared through her, and the orgasm hit her with the force of a tidal wave...carrying her, crashing her into the raging sea of pleasure, then picking her up and throbbing through her to do it all again. The world ceased to exist as the endless waves pounded on, building, ebbing, building again, until at last, exhausted, and utterly sated, she collapsed.

## MASKS

Max's arms were there, enfolding her in their strength, drawing her against him, until she felt the thudding of his heart in her own body. His soft, gritty voice whispered tender words in her ear, and it was the last that did her in. She pressed her face into his shoulder and cried. Not out of fear or sadness or upset, but rather out of sheer, overwhelming joy at feeling so alive again.

When she'd sniffled her last, she dragged a hand over eyes and pulled away from him enough to look into his face. They lay side by side on the sofa. The warm candlelight from the coffee table didn't provide much illumination, but she could see him well enough to recognize the penetrating, emotional gaze with which he watched her.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice gruff with tenderness.

She smiled and nodded. With her hands, she traced the curves and angles of his face much as she had earlier in the night, rubbing her thumbs through the soft scruff of his growing beard, feathering her fingertips over his lips.

"Do you have any other special skills I need to know about?"

His low laughter sent a jolt of warmth directly to her heart, as she was learning it always did. "I have a confession to make."

"Uh-oh. What is it?"

"What just happened wasn't the other skill I meant."

"Well then, where and when did you learn how to do *this* particular thing."

His fingertips smoothed along her temple, and she saw his lips curve in a smile. "About ten minutes ago...with you. I'd never met anyone I felt close enough to do something like that with. Until now."

A lump filled Andee's throat and her chest felt tight and full. "I...I've never...I'd never even imagined..." Darn it, she couldn't get the words to come out right.

"I know, babe. This is all new and powerful for me, too."

"How old are you, Max?"

## *MASKS*

“Is it going to scare you off if I tell you?”

“Not unless you tell me you’re only eighteen,” she said with a smile.

He snorted. “I’m not sure I even remember what it was like being eighteen, it was so damned long ago.” He laced his fingers loosely through hers. “I’ll be forty in December.”

“Yet you’ve never been married?”

“No. When I was younger, there wasn’t time. My parents died when I was eighteen and my sister was eight. We didn’t have any close relatives, and the state wanted to put Jada into foster care. I wasn’t about to let them take her away from me, so I fought them and got full guardianship of her.

“My twenties were pretty much a blur of college, working, and doing my damndest to raise a young girl and do it right. By the time she was older and in college, I was already thirty and fully immersed in acting, and, unfortunately, it’s not a life that’s conducive to finding and keeping real relationships.”

“In what way?”

“While some people would argue that having a relationship with someone else in the biz is easiest—because both people understand the lifestyle—that never appealed to me. Far too many actors have a problem with commitment. They leap from relationship to relationship like it’s no more important than buying a new coat. Get tired of the old one, throw it out and get a new one the next day. Not everyone is that way—it’s not fair to stereotype, I suppose—but it’s tough to find the real deal.”

Max squeezed her hand and sighed. “The thing about this life, Andee, is that it’s also tough to maintain a solid relationship with someone who’s not in the biz. The hours can be weird, the traveling hard, and sometimes, depending on how well-known one is, the press can make life a living hell. Living in the spotlight isn’t easy to deal

## ***MASKS***

with for either person, and takes a lot of trust and a lot of love and respect on both people's parts."

Small tendrils of worry curled through her belly. Was he trying to warn her? She was certain he was. But was he trying to warn her off?

As usual, he seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. He cupped her face in his hands. "Just because it doesn't work for some people, doesn't mean it can't work for others. And right now, I'm one hundred percent believing in possibilities I'd never dreamed of only a few days ago. Not to mention the fact I have no plans to go anywhere anytime soon."

His smile and strong arms did wonders for reassuring her confidence and laying that niggling little worry to rest. And when his long legs wrapped around hers and she felt his cock growing hard once more against her hip, felt her body quiver in response, the last of her concerns faded away. At least for now.

They rocked against each other, touching and caressing, exploring, with less urgency than their lovemaking earlier.

Finally, Max raised up on an elbow and gazed down at her, a half-smile on his face. "We have a decision to make."

"What's that?"

"See my jeans over there on the floor?"

She peered over his shoulder at the lump of denim near the window seat. "Yes."

"The one and only remaining condom I have is in them."

Andee stifled a smile. "Okay...and?"

"Well, the way we've been going, I'm thinking we have to decide when and where to use it."

"What are our choices?" She reclined back on the couch and tried to act serious, but all she really felt the urge to do was giggle like a school girl.

He glanced at his watch. "It's two in the morning."

## MASKS

Andee's brows shot up. "Is it really?"

"Mm-hmm. Time flies...as they say." Max's grin was pure mischief, and it was a side of him she hadn't seen before. She loved it. "So the way I see it, we can get dressed, stop at the store to get more, and go to either my place or yours and have a nice comfortable bed to lie in as we slake our lust."

"An excellent option," she said in her best professor voice.

Max grinned. "Or we can stay here on this so-so couch and enjoy the hell out of this one lone condom we have right now."

"Hmmm..."

"I have to warn you, though, that my house is about thirty minutes from here, so by the time we stop at the store and get there, we'd have to control ourselves for...well...a long time."

Andee slid her arms around Max's waist and drew circles with her fingertips on the hot skin of his sculpted buttocks. "Since control doesn't seem to be something I'm capable of tonight, and since my house isn't much closer than yours, I vote for staying where we are and enjoying the hell out of the lone condom." She gave him a steamy grin. "We can always get more tomorrow."

"Oh, you can count on it," he rumbled, as his mouth came down on hers, and his hot hands moved over her to do what they did best.

\* \* \*

Much later, Andee woke up from a light doze, and smiled when she realized the hard heat beneath her cheek was Max's chest.

He shifted, and one of his hands stroked along her bare back, causing her to shiver in joy.

She raised up on her elbow. "I don't want to, but I should probably get home and try to catch a few hours of sleep."

Max's hand immediately moved to cup her head and pull her close so he could kiss her. His heat surrounded her and all she really wanted to do was curl back up next to him and stay forever. "You have plans

## ***MASKS***

today?”

“Yeah, unfortunately. It’s parents’ weekend at the university and I have to make an appearance at a faculty/parent reception this afternoon and then at a history department football tailgate in the evening and attend the game afterward. It’s one of those ‘voluntary’ but really mandatory things the faculty members are expected to do each year.” She toyed with the soft wave of dark hair that had fallen onto Max’s forehead. “You want to come with me? To the tailgate and game?”

His smile sent rippling waves of contentment through her. “I’d love to. But duty calls for me, too. There’s a show tonight.”

“Oh, shoot, that’s right. Wednesday through Sunday nights, right?”

“Mm-hmm.” But...” Her rolled over and sat up, taking her with him so she was snuggled in his lap. “What time does your stuff get over?”

“I should probably be out of there by ten. Why...do you have a plan?”

“Always.” He grinned. “The performance is over around ten. Do you want to meet me here afterward?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation, her body already tingling in anticipation.

He chuckled and kissed her again. Then he swatted her lightly on her bare rump. “Then let’s get you home to bed so you’re not falling over into the punch bowl at your reception this afternoon.”

They slipped into their clothes in companionable silence and, while Andee sat on the couch to pull on her socks and boots, Max sat on the coffee table and played with her unfettered breasts through her blouse. She hadn’t bothered to put her bra back on, a fact he seemed to be enjoying. She grinned and let him have his fun. She’d never felt this comfortable with any man. Not even Jared, in spite of their three years together.

Max walked her to her car in the parking lot, held her door, and waited until she was buckled up. “Wait here for a second, babe. I’m

## *MASKS*

going to follow you home so I know you make it safely.”

Andee looked across the parking lot and saw a dark-colored SUV sitting next to the building. “You don’t have to do that, Max.” Though her stomach fluttered at the thought of him wanting to keep her safe. No one had ever been so attentive or concerned about her before.

He kissed her gently. “Yes, I do. It’s four-thirty in the morning and I don’t want anything happening to you.”

She gave in gracefully, and watched as he jogged across the parking lot and got into his vehicle.

All the way home, Andee watched his headlights right behind her, and tried to figure out how her life had gone from what it was two days ago to this in such a short period of time. She kept waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop because things like this simply didn’t happen to the Andrea Matthews she’d always known. Of course, that was just it...she didn’t feel like the Andee Matthews she’d always known. This was some new manifestation of Andee. One filled with surprising passion and emotion. Had those traits always been there, lurking beneath the surface, waiting to come out, and it had just taken the final magic ingredient to make it happen?

She turned into the driveway of her modest two-story that sat on a treed lot at the end of a cul-de-sac, and parked. It was the house she’d bought and moved into after Jared’s death—she hadn’t been able to stand the thought of staying where they’d lived together—but she hadn’t lived in this one long enough to really get attached to it. It was a cute place, but she hadn’t found the energy yet to make it home.

Max pulled in behind her and got out of his Tahoe at the same time she emerged from her car. She hadn’t thought to leave the porch light on, but the small lamp that sat on the table in the foyer burned all the time and its yellow light glowed through the window next to the door.

Max walked her up her porch steps, took her key from her, opened the door, then handed it back. He tugged her into his arms and she went

## ***MASKS***

willingly.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked, knowing she probably had blatant hope and that ever-present desire shining in her eyes.

“You have no idea how much I want to come in.” He lowered his lips to her neck for a brief nuzzle. Then he stood up straight and stroked her cheek. “But if I do that, I can pretty much guarantee neither of us is going to get any sleep. Even with no more condoms, you’re too damned tempting, and I can still think of far too many other ways to play.” His tone was gritty with desire.

Little shooting stabs of answering need coursed through Andee’s veins. “I suppose you’re right,” she said, wanting him with desperation even now, but trying to keep at least a tiny bit of her logical mind functioning. She had to fight the urge to cling to him and rub herself shamelessly against him. “Do you think it’ll always be like this between us, Max?”

“I don’t know, babe. But I have a feeling it very well might be.” His mouth dropped onto hers, hard and hot and demanding, and she gave herself up to it, to him.

Finally, he drew away. “Do you have a piece of paper and something to write with?”

“Sure.” The light from the lamp just inside shone through the door, giving enough illumination to see what she was doing. She dug in her purse and pulled out a piece of notepaper and a pen and handed them to him.

He leaned over, scribbled something on the paper held against his leg, and handed it to her. “My home phone number. I quit carrying a cell a few months ago, but if you need me...or want me...I should be there until later this afternoon.”

She wrote on the bottom half of the paper, ripped it off and gave it to him. “My number. In case...well, you need me or want me.”

“I always want you and need you.” He smiled, then turned her so



## MASKS

she faced the house and snuggled her back briefly against his chest. He lavished one last nibble against her neck, just under her ear. “Go to bed, sweetheart. Before all my good intentions go to hell and you end up AWOL at your affairs later today.” He gave her a little push toward the door.

“Promises, promises.” She grinned at him over her shoulder as she entered the house.

The light from inside just happened to catch him at the right angle, and for the first time, she got a completely clear view of him without the Phantom costume. Dark hair curled at his collar and fell in tousled waves against his ears and forehead. Fine lines etched his forehead and bracketed his eyes. *Oh, and his eyes...* those vivid green eyes gazed at her with an emotional intensity that turned her heart upside down. He had a strong chin, and lean, sculpted cheeks, which were covered with the newly growing, ultra-sexy shadow of the beard she’d felt earlier in the night.

A quiver of longing—and a twinge of familiarity—skittered through her. As if she’d looked at him a hundred times before. Was his presence already so ingrained in her, body and soul, that she couldn’t imagine a time when she hadn’t known him?

When he smiled at her suddenly, his face lit up from within. “Sweet dreams. I’ll see you later tonight.” He turned, bounded gracefully down her porch steps, and drove off into the early morning darkness.

## CHAPTER 5

The ringing telephone forced Andee to roll over and pull her head out from under the covers. Late morning sunlight slipped through the blinds, making her squint. She grabbed the cordless off the nightstand. "Hello?"

"I miss you already," came the mesmerizing, low voice that sent instant shivers of longing through her.

She smiled, leaned back into her pillow and closed her eyes again. "I miss you, too."

"Did I wake you?"

"No. I've been awake a few minutes, trying to convince myself I need to get up and get in the shower, but so far I haven't managed it."

"What are you wearing right now?"

Heat sizzled in Andee's veins. "Nothing but my down comforter. I have to tell you...I've never gone to bed nude in my life, but this morning I did. What does that mean?"

## *MASKS*

Max's deep, sensuous chuckle curled her toes. "That you wished I'd come inside with you instead of minding my gentlemanly manners and leaving you to get your beauty sleep. Did you get any sleep, babe?"

"Yes. It wasn't very long, but it was probably the best I've slept in months. What about you?"

"Same thing. Although, I must confess to having dreams of a beautiful, blue-eyed, blond nymph."

"Hmm...and what was she doing to you?"

"How do you know I wasn't doing something to her?"

Andee grinned. "Were you?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. But if you want to know more, you'll have to wait until tonight."

"Is that another promise?"

"You bet."

"So I'm not at a disadvantage here, where are you and what are you wearing?"

"I'm lying in bed, wearing blue boxers, wishing I wasn't here alone."

"Would you like me to tell you what I'd be doing if I was there?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "I'd be kneeling between your legs, getting those damned boxers out of my way, so I could see you and touch you."

"Oh, yeah?"

Max's voice had a breathless hitch in it and she knew she'd just turned him on. That realization gave her a sense of erotic power she'd never known she possessed.

"Touch yourself, Max," she said, lowering her voice to a seductive murmur. "I want you to touch yourself and pretend I'm there with you. I want you to imagine I'm licking your cock."

"Anything for you, sweetheart," came the throaty response.

The excitement of doing this...of having phone sex with him and

## MASKS

being in control, kept her talking, saying things she'd never have said just two days ago.

"You have a beautiful cock. Have I told you that? It's long and thick, but not too thick. Just enough to stretch me and fill me full without being too much. And the head of it is so soft and pulsing with that perfect slit at the end. Do you know how sexy it is when those little beads of come well up there and glisten in the light? If I were there, I'd screw your slit with my tongue, so I could lap up every tiny drop."

"Damn, Andee..." The words were a ragged groan that made her pulse leap, and her womanly parts quiver in excitement. "You're killing me. Please, I want to know you're touching yourself, too."

"Okay." She slid her hands down her body, cupping her breasts and flicking her nipples lightly, then easing over the smooth skin of her tummy, and finally letting her fingers play in her curls.

"Spread your legs, babe." She did as he asked, her tunnel already wet and contracting. "Tell me what you're doing."

"I'm skimming my middle finger over and around my clit," she whispered, feeling suddenly shy. It was one thing to tell him her fantasies for him to listen to, but another to have to describe her own actions to him.

"What else? Are you wet?"

"Yes, very."

"Close your eyes," he said. "Imagine I'm tasting your sweet, dripping pussy like you're tasting my cock. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she breathed, every nerve ending in her body twitching and tingling at this new turn of events.

"I want you to come with me, Andee. I want to know that when I lose it here, and I'm going to damned soon, that you're right there with me."

"I will be," she promised. "Tell me, Max. Would you like me to suck only the head of your cock? Or would rather I take the whole

## ***MASKS***

thing in my mouth, inch by inch, sliding you slowly into the wet heat until you're pressed against the back of my throat? Or maybe you like both. Maybe you like it deep, with my tongue sliding up and down your length, and then you like me to pull out until only your thick head is in my mouth and I suck it?"

A whispered groan was her only answer.

Her fingers flicked over her button faster. Her muscles began to tense. She was already getting close, but she managed to continue talking.

"I'm guessing you like it deep, don't you? You like to feel your shaft buried to the hilt in my mouth, and you like it when I suck you and let my tongue stroke you. That's good, Max, because I like it, too. I love it."

"I'm going to come soon, babe."

"Me, too."

"Keep talking to me."

"I want you to fuck my mouth, Max, like you would if you were inside me. I want you to lose control. I want to feel your hot seed bursting down my throat so I can drink and drink and quench this terrible thirst only you can satisfy." As she said the last words, she heard Max lose it, evidenced by his deep, muffled groan. Her body shuddered in an answering climax and a soft cry escaped her.

When she'd stilled and could breathe again, she opened her eyes. "Are you there?"

"I'm here. And wishing more and more every second that I was there instead."

She smiled. "Me, too."

"Andee, tonight, when you meet me at the theater, you could bring some things and stay with me the rest of the weekend. If you wanted to."

Her breath caught. "I...I'll think about it."

## **MASKS**

“Fair enough. So what time does your reception start?”

“Two o’clock.” She glanced at the clock and watched the digital display change from 11:21 to 11:22. “And the tailgate’s supposed to be at six with the game at seven. What are you going to do this afternoon?”

“I promised Kevin I’d go by and help them. He and Jo own a farm and there’s always work to be done. Then I’ll leave around five to go to the theater and get into make-up and costume.”

“Sounds like you’re going to be having more fun than I am,” she said, and meant it honestly. “While I’ll be listening to old Professor Balmendash giving his usual exegesis about the rise and fall of Roman civilization to a dozen parents who are drifting off from boredom, you’ll probably have your shirt off and be working hard and sweating.”

“And this is a good thing?” he asked with a laugh.

“Well, it would be for me. I’d much rather watch you sweat with your shirt off, than paste a fake smile on my face all day for a bunch of faculty members and parents.”

His laughter filled her with unexplained joy.

“Do you know how crazy I am about you?” he asked.

“You are?”

“God, yes. Insanely crazy about you. And I’ll be missing you every second until I’m with you again.”

“Me, too. I have a feeling it’s going to be a very long day.”

“Here’s a twist on an old acting trick you can try...”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“You’ve heard how when you’re up in front of an audience, to beat a case of the nerves you just imagine everyone in the audience in their underwear?”

“Yes.”

“Well, today and this evening, whenever the waiting gets to be too much, just imagine I’m there with you in my underwear.”

## *MASKS*

Laughter bubbled from her. "I'd rather imagine you without your underwear."

"Well, you could do that, certainly," he said in a sexy growl. "But I can't be held responsible for the look on Professor Balmenwhatever's face when you start to quiver and make those little moaning noises you do when you're excited, sweetheart."

A warm flush spread up Andee's cheeks, but she continued to smile. "You're so bad."

"Only for you. And I get the distinct impression you love it."

"I do. Two days ago I wouldn't have been able to admit that, but I do. Hey, you never did tell me last night what your other skill is."

He chuckled. "I'll show you tonight."

"Another promise?"

"They're adding up aren't they?"

"Yes, they are. But I'm going to hold you to each and every one."

"Mmmm...and what will you do if I'm a bad boy and break one."

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of some sort of punishment."

"Is that a promise?"

"Max!" She rolled her eyes, laughing. Then she sighed. "I suppose I'd better get out of this bed and get my butt in gear."

"Yeah, me, too. Have a good day, Andee. I'll be thinking about you."

"I'll be thinking about you, too. And, Max?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll bring some things tonight so I can stay over."

She could hear the soft huff of breath as he smiled. "I'm counting the hours, sweetheart."

\* \* \*

The faculty/parent reception was held in the ballroom of Carver Hall, the oldest building on campus. It had once been an elegant mansion in its heyday in the early nineteen hundreds, but had been

## MASKS

purchased by the university twenty years before and converted into a general purpose meeting and entertainment center for the campus.

Andee hadn't been at the reception more than a half hour when Judy came flitting through the crowd, grabbed her by the arm, and pulled her into an empty meeting room off the main ballroom.

"Andee, I've been worried sick! I didn't get a chance to come by and see you yesterday to ask if you enjoyed *Phantom*, so I tried to call you last night. Numerous times, until it was late. There was no answer. And you're always home."

"I was out last night."

"Out?" Judy's dark eyes studied her, then widened suddenly. "Out, out?"

Andee laughed, and propped her hip against the folding table that sat along the wall. "Explain the phrase 'out, out' to me, please? Otherwise I have no idea how to respond to that question."

Judy grinned, her good-natured personality overcoming her worry. "That's a technical term I'll have you know. Do you mean 'out' as in, 'I was at the mall on a shopping spree and I lost track of time'? Or do you mean 'out' as in, 'I was out with a man last night'?"

"Well, neither of those is *exactly* correct."

Judy groaned in exasperation. "Why is it always pulling teeth to get info out of you? Talk to me!"

Andee sighed and gave up. There was no point in trying to be elusive with Judy. It just wasn't in her friend's nature to let things lie. And besides, there was something to be said for sharing a little bit about Max. It made their relationship seem more real. "I was at *Phantom of the Opera* last night."

"But the tickets I gave you were for Thursday night. Last night was Friday."

"I know. I was there Thursday and Friday."

"Two nights in a row?"



## MASKS

“Yes.”

“Because...? Oh, my God. You met someone, didn’t you? Tell me!”

Dull heat crept up Andee’s cheeks, but she smiled. “Yeah, I met someone. Someone in the show.”

Judy’s broad smile filled her face. “This is good. This is very good. So what happened? You met him Thursday night, then went back on Friday to see him again? But wait...how’d you get a ticket for Friday? The show’s been sold out for weeks.”

“He left a ticket at the box office for me last night. He’s friends with the owner and I guess they always keep a few empty seats for guests.”

Judy pulled a metal chair out from under the table and sat in it. She was dressed in one of her usual flowing skirts and a matching blouse. She crossed her legs and bounced an ever present Birkenstock on her toe. “Sooo...he’s someone in the show? Who?”

“It’s the actor who plays the Phantom.”

“No! Andee! I’ve heard he’s amazing on the stage. Like, seriously high-caliber amazing. How in the world did you meet him?”

“He is amazing.” A slow smile spread over her face. *In more ways than one.* “And I met him by accident. After the show I left the auditorium, but it was so crowded in the lobby I got kind of claustrophobic, so I went back in the auditorium to wait out the crowd. As he was leaving he saw me and we talked.”

“And he asked you if you’d come back last night?”

Andee nodded. “So I went again last night and at intermission he invited me backstage to watch the rest of the performance.”

“And then...?”

“And then *what*?”

“And then I take it things went well, because I tried calling you one final time around midnight last night and there was still no answer.”

## *MASKS*

Judy's knowing grin sent another flush of heat up Andee's face.

"Andee, hon, for heaven's sake, you're thirty-four years old, you've been married. There's no reason to be embarrassed. I'm thrilled you've met someone, and even more thrilled you have that satisfied glow about you. It looks good on you."

Andee slid her hip farther onto the table, so she could sit instead of lean. "Jude, I need some advice. And a reality check."

"Okay."

"This man, his name is Max, he's...like no one I've ever met. He makes me feel things I've never felt before."

"What kind of things?" Judy's leg stopped bouncing and she leaned forward, her forehead creased with interest.

"When I'm around him, and now when I even just think about him, I'm not the same person I was before. I feel different. More alive. Freer, if that doesn't sound too ridiculous."

"No, not ridiculous. It sounds to me as if this Max has already done you a world of good."

"I'm afraid I might not be thinking straight. I'm afraid it's happening too fast. I'm afraid it's too soon."

"Too soon after Jared?"

"Yes."

"Andee, Jared's been gone for a long time. You're a vibrant, beautiful woman and you've spent the last eighteen months beating yourself up over something that was never your fault."

"He was my husband. He may have been in love with someone else, but I still cared about him. And I missed him...miss him still."

Judy rose, put an arm around Andee's shoulders, and sat next to her. "I know that, hon. I'm not trying to make light of Jared's death or your pain. But my point here is that no matter how low we get, no matter how deeply we grieve over our losses, there always comes a time when we have to get back up and move on with our lives. How long that

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takes is different for everyone. But in this case, I think the fact you were open to meeting your Max, and that he makes you feel so deeply, is a clear sign it's not too soon. If you truly weren't ready, he wouldn't be having this effect on you."

"You don't understand, Judy. This isn't just a...fling. I...I think I'm falling in love with him. And while on one hand it's exhilarating, on the other hand, I'm scared. It's only been two days. I need you to tell me this is nuts, that I can't fall in love with someone that fast."

Judy laughed softly. "I'm the wrong person to ask that of. Have I ever told you how Russ and I met and ended up together?"

"No."

"I was at the Art Institute of Chicago working on my MFA. Some girlfriends talked me into going to a club with them one night. It wasn't my scene at all. I tried to beg off, but they dragged me along. So while they were off dancing, I was at the table hating every minute of the whole ordeal. I glanced over and saw this guy two tables from mine. He looked as abandoned by his friends as I'd been by mine. I had never, ever been the aggressive type with guys. But he was gorgeous in a dark-headed, mussed hair, science geek kind of way, and after I sat there and watched him for a while, I realized he was watching me back.

"We stood at the same time. I figured I'd just had rotten timing and he was leaving or hitting the john. Turned out he was coming to talk to me just like I was going to talk to him. We had a laugh over it. He asked me if I wanted to get out of there, which of course I did."

Judy smiled. "We went for a walk along the lakefront, talked until the sun rose the next morning. The next night we started sleeping together. Two days after that we moved in with one another, and a month later we got married. That was sixteen years and two kids ago, and neither of us has ever regretted a single moment of our time together, or the speed with which it happened."

Andee studied her friend in a new light. Judy, in spite of her free-

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spirited, artistic ways, had always seemed so grounded. And if there was such a thing as a pillar of strength, Russ Risso was it. Andee had never met anyone more down to earth than logical, tech-head Russ. She would never have imagined either of them to be the type to have a whirlwind relationship.

“So you see,” Judy continued, “if you’re asking me to convince you there’s no such thing as love at first sight, or that people can’t really know one another quickly, I’m not your girl. Based on my experience, those things are more than possible. As different as our backgrounds and careers are, Russ and I knew it was right almost from the very start.”

“But how did you know?”

“We just *knew*.” Judy sighed and shook her head. “That’s not what you want to hear. You want specifics, but I can’t give them to you because sometimes things just happen. I can only tell you that you have to follow your heart. You have to look down deep inside yourself and determine if what you’re feeling is the real deal, or if it’s based on passing lust or infatuation instead of some deeper connection.”

“It’s complicated though, Judy. Max is...well, I’m pretty sure *he’s* more complicated than he lets on. And he told me outright last night that it’s hard for non-actors to have relationships with actors because people who aren’t in the business have a hard time dealing with the hours, the stress, the media.”

“Sweetie, all relationships take work. Lots of jobs have stressful hours. And he’s a stage actor, so I don’t see how you’d have to worry too much about the media. Besides, when two people truly care about one another, there are no obstacles that can’t be conquered when faced together.”

“You sound like John Lennon...*All You Need Is Love*.”

“John was a damned brilliant man.” Judy grinned, but then sobered just as quickly. “Listen, hon, the world could stand to have more love

## ***MASKS***

and less strife. Is it really so tough to put aside all the crappy logic stuff and just allow yourself to feel?"

Andee gnawed her lip. From reading between the lines in their conversations last night, she suspected if she and Max really wanted this relationship to work they were going to have to deal with some difficult moments eventually.

Still...did all that really matter in the grand scheme of things? Was it possible to say to hell with all that "crappy logic stuff" as Judy called it and just believe it could work?

"Are you seeing him again?" Judy broke into her thoughts.

"Tonight. After the show. He asked me to stay with him the rest of the weekend."

"Are you going to?"

Andee sucked in a deep breath and felt confidence and a renewed sense of peace settle over her. She smiled at Judy. "Yes. As a matter of fact I am."

Judy nodded calmly and stood. Then she turned her back on Andee, pumped a fist in the air, and whispered, "Yes!"

Andee couldn't help but laugh.

## CHAPTER 6

When Andee turned into the parking lot at the Sommerville Playhouse around ten-thirty, only a couple of cars remained. She spotted Max's Tahoe and pulled in next to it.

He was waiting for her, already out of costume and looking completely delicious in jeans, hiking boots, and a fleece pullover jacket. She'd barely opened her car door before he was there, tugging her up into his arms, and kissing her.

She'd been a little jittery on the way over here, with sweaty palms and a thudding pulse, but the moment she was in his arms, all that disappeared and a different kind of tingling anticipation overtook her.

"I missed you today," he said, his voice a rich, rumbling breath against her ear.

"I missed you, too. I thought about you all day."

"In or out of my underwear?"

She leaned back to see a sexy grin curving his face in the glow of

## *MASKS*

the parking lot light fifty yards away. “Both,” she said, laughing.

He took a step away from her, holding her hands, and gazed at her, head to foot. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?”

Andee looked down at her jeans, white button-up shirt, camel-colored wool blazer, and boots, wondering what it was he found so beautiful. She thought she looked like a college professor who’d just been to a football game on a crisp fall evening. Hardly the stuff fantasies were made of. But when she looked back up at him and saw the heated longing in his gaze mixed with the tender smile on his face, suddenly she felt like anything was possible. “You make me feel that way,” she murmured.

“You don’t need anyone to make you feel it, sweetheart. You just are.” He brought one of her hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

The light flick of his tongue against her skin caused a little shiver of pleasure to speed through her veins.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “Would you like to leave your car here and ride with me, or would you rather follow me?”

Andee glanced around the parking lot. “Will it be safe to leave my car here, you think?”

“I think so. Kevin has a private security company that patrols the lot several times a night. And he and Jo left one of their cars here tonight and rode home together.” He motioned toward a white sedan a few parking spaces away from them.

“Then I want to ride with you. I’ve been away from you all day. I don’t want to spend even a few more minutes apart.”

He swept her into a hug and nuzzled her neck. “I was hoping you’d say that.” He smiled, grabbed her leather tote she handed him, and ushered her into the passenger seat of his SUV. Andee remote-locked her car just before Max shut the door.

When they were on the highway heading out of Sommerville, Max

## *MASKS*

squeezed her hand. "How was your day, babe?"

His endearments always gave her a little jolt to the heart. "It was okay. The faculty members were all on their best behavior, and even Professor Balmendash managed to restrain himself and not totally bore the parents to tears. How was your day?"

"Not bad. I didn't get too sweaty with my shirt off, so you didn't miss much." He shot her a teasing grin.

"And how was the show tonight?"

"Lonely without you there, but I survived. Although I did get a lecture from Joann tonight."

"About what?"

"Seems when I was supposed to be lost in my love for Christine, instead I was, and I quote Jo here, 'daydreaming about a certain blue-eyed blond.'"

"And does Joann always know specifically what you're daydreaming about?" Andee asked, but a pleased, albeit rather embarrassed, smile turned up her lips.

"Only when I've spent the entire afternoon at their house telling them how wonderful you are, and to quote Jo again, 'mooning' over you." He glanced at her again, and gave her another one of those sexy smiles.

"Oh, Lord." Andee hid her face behind a hand...but that silly smile was still in place. She couldn't seem to lose it. "Why do I have a feeling I'll never live up to this reputation you've apparently been building for me?" Then a thought hit her. "What do your friends think of us...of how short a time we've known each other?"

Max squeezed her hand. "Kevin and Jo have watched me flounder my way through my entire adult life, and for the first time ever, I get the distinct impression they think I'm doing something very right with my personal life."

"My friend Judy seems to think the same thing about me."



## MASKS

“Hmm...sounds as if we’re being ganged up on. But in a good way. Hey, I did some shopping before I went to the theater this evening.”

“Oh?”

“Mm-hmm.” He reached into the back seat, grabbed a plastic bag, and set it in her lap.

Andee felt a laugh coming on before she ever even got the bag open. She was certain what it contained. *Yep*. Even the same brand.

“Um...I did some shopping today, too.” She dug in her tote and waved her purchase in the air for him to see.

He cracked up, his deep, sexy chuckle causing her femine core to twitch, and the brief look he gave her before he had to turn his attention back to the road was so steamy she thought she might melt right there on the spot.

“So that gives us twenty-four all together. Think that’ll last us?”

“The way we’ve been? A day or two.” He was still grinning. His hand snaked over and stroked her thigh, then crept slowly into the crevice between her legs.

Andee tucked both boxes of condoms into her tote, and spread her legs, giving him better access. He took the hint. His long fingers teased over the seam in her jeans.

“Will you touch your breasts for me?” His voice was gravelly as he asked.

A jolt of need shot through Andee at his request. Without hesitation, she began to work free the buttons of her blouse. It was dark on the rural highway. No one would see. And there was a heightened sense of excitement to bare herself in the car. She’d never done anything like that before.

When Max glanced at her, she heard his sharp intake of breath. Apparently he’d thought she’d touch herself through her shirt, so it gave her an added thrill to know she’d surprised him.

When her shirt fell open, she undid the clasp on her bra, which on

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tonight's lace model—put on today especially with Max in mind—happened to be between her breasts.

The warm air that blew out of the vents on the dash tickled her bare skin, and she turned slightly toward Max, giving him a better view when he dared a look from the road. Then she slid her hands under her breasts and cupped them, lifting them, and pressing them together.

The Tahoe jerked slightly, and Andee grinned, knowing he'd just looked. The fingers of his right hand between her legs slowed, then resumed their gentle touching.

She rubbed her thumbs over her nipples, which were already hard as pebbles, then squeezed them between her fingers. It felt wonderful. She bit back a moan, and let her head fall against the seat. She never would have believed touching herself could be such a turn on, but with Max sitting right there, less than a foot away from her, knowing he was sneaking looks at her every chance he got, she grew hotter by the second.

"Don't wreck," she told him, keeping her voice light in spite of the fact she was dead serious.

"I won't." His voice sounded a little breathless. The knuckles of his left hand were tight on the steering wheel. Oh, yeah, he was horny in a big way right now.

"How long until we get there?" she asked.

"Too damned long," he growled. "About ten more minutes."

*Long enough*, she decided. She leaned toward him and burrowed under his jacket to find the snap of his jeans. Max groaned softly and sat up straighter so she had easier access.

With a quiet pop, then a hiss, the snap and zipper released. He was hard as granite and his dick immediately surged upward, pressing against the cotton of the boxer briefs he wore tonight. Andee didn't take time to fondle him through the fabric. Instead, she found his fly and eased his shaft through it until it jutted proud and eager, free from

## ***MASKS***

bondage. God, he did have a beautiful dick. Even in the dark she could see and feel it pulsing. She wrapped a hand around it and, leaning over the console, slid her tongue over the crown.

Max hissed something that sounded like “Fuck!” and she grinned.

“You didn’t think I was just teasing you on the phone this morning, did you?” she asked. “I’ve been thinking about your cock all day. Wanting to taste it, to feel it in my mouth.”

Max’s legs trembled and he groaned again.

“I’m going to taste it, Max. I’m going to take it in my mouth now. But you have to drive safely, you hear me? If you can’t, then pull over.”

“I promise,” he said in a guttural whisper, putting both hands on the wheel.

She smiled, feeling amazingly safe and confident in his ability to keep it together.

At long last, she closed her mouth over the head of his swollen shaft. Already she tasted the salty essence of his excitement, and she sucked leisurely, wanting to lap up every drop of it. Then she applied her tongue to the rest of his length, licking it languorously from tip to root. His coarse curls tickled her face as she stroked her tongue around the base, and he smelled incredible—clean and spiced-soapy, but tangy with sexual musk as well.

Just as slowly, she licked her way back up to the satiny, helmeted head. Another round of droplets had appeared, and had, in fact, begun to trickle down the side. She lapped them up with eager delight, realizing how much she truly got off on his taste. Her own body, which had already been pinging with arousal, quivered in excitement.

Max’s breathing had grown decidedly uneven, and she could feel his pulse throbbing in his penis. Wanting to push him to the limit of his endurance, she took him fully into her mouth at last, letting his length slide slowly into the depths, feeling its throbbing heat fill her mouth

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until the tip butted against her throat.

His response—half groan, half growl—echoed through the car. One hand came off the steering wheel to settle on the back of her head, but then quickly returned as he remembered where they were and his promise to her.

Andee didn't move, just held still and got used to the sensation of having him so deeply in her mouth. The instinctive gag reaction from having something so large in her throat faded almost immediately, and in its place grew a new urge. One to pleasure him like he'd never been pleased.

She slid his shaft out partially and suckled, then slid him back in to the root. The rhythm quickly became natural as she bathed him with her tongue, then took him deep, then bathed and sucked again, making sure to give equal measure to the full length and the swollen, throbbing head.

The Tahoe suddenly slid to a stop and Max put it in park. His hands entwined in her hair and he thrust deeply into her mouth. "Oh...Jesus...babe...."

Andee smiled around his thick length, and when he thrust again, stabbing deeply, she didn't fight the sensation, just relaxed her throat and took him as far in as she could. His hands on her head shook, as did his legs, and that gave her a sense of satisfaction like nothing else could. She loved that he was losing control.

His thrusts became urgent, almost desperate.

Suddenly, he lifted her head off him, and squeezed his eyes closed, fighting for control. Before she could question his change of heart, he'd thrown open his door and gotten out of the Tahoe. Moments later, her door was opened and he was pulling her against him, lifting her out of the car.

"Max?" she squeaked.

"Grab one of those boxes," he ordered, nodding toward her tote

## ***MASKS***

where she'd stowed the condoms. She did, and then he was carrying her, taking long, powerful strides across a dark lawn and up onto a side porch of a modern-style farmhouse. He managed to get his keys in his hand somehow and jabbed at the lock, then he was using his foot to open the door and shut it behind them after they'd entered.

The house was dark, except for a dim light that burned just to their left. He moved toward it, and Andee realized it was the kitchen. They'd entered through a mud room that connected to the kitchen.

Max righted her and let her slide slowly down his body, her bare breasts rubbing against the fuzzy fleece of his jacket until she stood on her feet. His mouth closed over hers at the same time his hands were pushing at her blazer and shirt. Finally, they and her bra were gone. He jerked his jacket and T-shirt up over his head, tossed them aside, and dragged Andee against him. The feel of his hard, warm chest against her sensitive breasts sent a surge of raw desire through her. Almost insane with need, she shoved at his jeans and briefs until they were wadded around his thighs, while he was busy doing the same to her.

The rest of their shoes and clothes came off in a tangle, amidst much cursing, kissing, and fondling. When they were free at last, Max lifted Andee so her swollen folds pressed against his steely, throbbing length. She wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him. In two strides, he lay her down on something hard and cool. The kitchen table. Standing between her legs, he swore as he ripped one of the condoms free from the box, got the package open, and covered himself. Then, still standing, with her lying on the table, he drove into her.

"I can't get enough of you, Andee. I swear to God, if I live to be a hundred, I'll never be able to get enough of you." Holding her hips, he pulled out and drove home again.

Andee cried out at the glory of it. Her flesh quivered around him, and she grasped the edges of the wood table with both hands to hang on as he thrust again. And again. The hot, urgent rhythm built to a frenzy.

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Their bodies were slick with sweat. Each time Max's shaft pounded into her, it grated on her tingling button, and soon she was sobbing, on the edge of climax.

Max's movements grew more forceful, more concentrated. He was getting close. She was close. *Oh, God, so close!* And then with a strangled cry, she felt her body close in on itself in a powerful contraction. Max thrust once more, twice, then tensed as his own climax hit. They continued to ride the waves, him pumping into her, her clenching, until they were both nearly limp with exhaustion.

Still struggling for air, she gazed up at him. "Wow."

"Wow," he echoed, looking extremely sated and a bit sheepish all at the same time.

He lifted her once more, this time with infinite gentleness, and carried her upstairs into one of the bedrooms. He pulled back the covers and laid her in the depths of a large, downy bed. He lay on his side next to her and stroked her hair. Moonlight poured in the window, limning him in a silver glow.

Andee grinned. "The kitchen table, huh?"

His smile mirrored the look she'd seen downstairs...sexy as all get out, but a little apologetic, too, like he'd been a naughty boy and felt bad about it, but still wouldn't have changed what he'd done. "I wanted to be inside you so bad I couldn't stand it. But by the time we got to the house, I was afraid I wasn't going to make it upstairs. The table was..."

"Handy?" she supplied.

"You didn't seem to mind. In fact, I haven't noticed you complaining about any of our accommodations, so to speak."

"Hmm...let me think about this. In twenty-four hours, we've had sex standing, sitting, lying on a couch, on the phone, in the car, and on the kitchen table. That might be some kind of record, Max. In your line of work they'd probably give us an award for Most Creativity in a Physical Encounter."

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He chuckled. "And what would they call it in your line of work?"

"They wouldn't call it anything. Everyone on campus would simply collapse dead from shock to find out that conservative Dr. Matthews had become a sex-starved hussy."

One of Max's big, hot hands roamed over her naked torso, but as always with a tenderness that filled her with warmth from head to toe. "Dr. Matthews isn't a hussy at all," he said, his tone gravelly. "She was obviously just waiting for the right man to come along so she could bloom into what she was always meant to be."

"And what's that?"

"The beautiful, sensuous woman I'm in love with."

Andee's breath deserted her. She could feel her heart thudding inside her as if it were encased in thick, liquid heat.

He cradled her close, his big warm body wrapped around hers like a heavy, comforting blanket of protection. "I feel like you've opened a door that I'd forgotten even existed."

Moisture pooled in her eyes at his words. She hadn't been sure a door like this existed either. While her relationship with Jared had been okay, it had never held the closeness and passion she shared with Max. Even when they were first dating, she'd never thought about Jared night and day, never ached to be back in his arms when she was away from him. She'd never been able to laugh and tease with him, or feel the deep-seated companionable silence even when they weren't talking or touching like she could with Max.

Judy had told her today that she needed to look in her heart to discover whether this was infatuation or the real deal. It *was* real. From the moment she'd set eyes on Max there'd been first and foremost an emotional connection with him. The amazing physical union they shared had been built from that, taking their relationship to a level she'd never known could exist.

Max held her away from him and his intense gaze settled on her

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face. “Andee, sweetheart, we need to talk.”

“*We need to talk.*” The same words she’d heard from Jared eighteen months ago. Her stomach knotted at Max’s serious expression and her happiness of moments before scurried into hiding. “About what?”

“Things between us have gotten real serious, real fast.” He sat up next to her and ran a hand through his hair. It was a gesture she hadn’t ever seen him use, and it hinted at his own turbulent emotions. That sent another frisson of fear through her.

A look of panic must have crossed her face because he quickly shook his head and his gaze grew tender once more. “Serious and fast in a wonderful way. Not a bad way.” He laced his fingers through hers and brought her hand to his lips for a brief kiss. “I just need to tell you some things before...well, before you find out some other way. You’re too important to me to risk keeping any secrets.”

*Secrets?* Oh, God, what did *that* mean?

“I don’t understand.”

He sighed. “Everything I’ve told you about myself is true. But there are a few details you don’t know. At least you haven’t hinted that you know.”

“Hinted?” She stared at him, trying to delve into his mind by sheer will to see what secrets he’d held back. Her first thought, based on past experience, was that he had someone else. Just because he’d never been married didn’t mean he might not have a woman somewhere. Or—

“Damn it.” He shook his head and jabbed his fingers through his hair once more. “I don’t know how to say this except to just say it.”

But before he could, a quick flash of several events and conversations over the past two days came back to Andee and a little niggling *thing* began in her head...something she desperately needed to remember. “Is this something about who you are?” she asked, suddenly thoughtful.

He froze. His hand, which had been falling back into his lap



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stopped in midair. “What do you know?”

“I...I’m not sure,” she admitted, squinting at him to see him better in the moonlight. “It’s just that this morning, right before you left my house, the light hit you at a certain angle and there was a split second where I felt like I’d seen you before, like you were someone familiar. I chalked it up to the fact that after two nights spent with you, you *were* familiar. Except now that memory just popped into my head again. Plus...” She frowned as she recalled her conversation with Judy this afternoon.

“Plus...?” he prodded. He sounded uncertain.

“Today a friend said something about stage actors not usually having to worry too much about the media. But last night you seemed considerably worried about the media. And...just now it occurred to me that I’ve never really seen you in the light for an extended period of time—except for on the stage when you’re in costume.”

She sat up next to him and wrapped her arms protectively around her raised knees. One thing had suddenly become clear to her: “You’re not just a stage actor, are you?”

“No,” came the soft, deep response.

Andee’s pulse grew erratic. “You’re someone famous.” It was a statement, not a question. Then, “Oh, God, please tell me your name really is Max at least?”

“Of course it is.” He drew her into his embrace. “I told you, everything I’ve said has been the truth. I swear it.”

“Then who?” But as she said the words, an image began to form in her mind...of an actor who’d appeared in too many movies to count, most of them blockbusters. An actor who was both ruggedly gorgeous and brilliant, who’d been on the A-list in Hollywood for fifteen or twenty years, since he’d made his acting debut as a secondary character in a huge hit and had instantly skyrocketed to fame, transitioning from unknown to star almost overnight. An actor who was known for his

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sparkling-eyed good looks and his easy smile, but who fiercely guarded his privacy and consequently was slayed by the media at every possible turn for not being more open and receptive to “the public.”

*Oh, my God. How could I not have realized...?*

“I’m Max—”

“McKendrick,” Andee finished for him, barely able to breathe.

Max held her away from him and gazed into her eyes. “Yes. Andee, please don’t think I’ve lead you astray intentionally. I admit I’ve been trying to stay under the radar here in Sommerville, trying to keep the press off my back, but from the moment I knew there was something special between us, I fully intended to tell you the truth. I was going to last night, but then I spooked you.”

She remembered the moment last night when he’d looked at her very much the way he was now, like he had something serious to tell her, and she’d panicked. Instead of finishing what he’d been about to say, he’d kissed her and told her that no matter what ever happened, everything between them was real.

*Real.* That word again. But... She dropped her head onto her knees. *Max McKendrick?* Here. With her. And they’d just spent the past two nights... *Oh, Lord.*

“Andee...” He tried to take her in his arms again, but she held up a hand to keep him from touching her.

“Please, just give me some time, okay? This...this is a lot to soak up.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” His voice was quiet.

She couldn’t think with him here. And she desperately need to think...or feel...or something. Her heart and stomach churned in confusion. “I need to be by myself for a while.”

“I understand.”

He might, but his voice hinted that he was hurting from her rejection. He stroked her hair one more time and rose off the bed. She

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heard him pacing around the room, then finally heard his quiet footfalls on the creaking hardwood stairs as he left her to her peace.

Andee lay back in the bed and clutched the covers. Her chest felt achy and overly full. Tears welled in her eyes, yet at the same time a dry laugh bubbled from her throat.

*Max McKendrick.* How could life possibly get any more ironic than this?

She'd been married to Williams University's Mr. Popularity for three years, had tried hard to ignore and/or deal with all the women on campus constantly drooling over him, and had done her darnedest to have faith in him and their relationship. Ultimately, she'd discovered her faith had been misplaced, and the trust she'd had in him had been thrown back in her face.

Max made Jared's small town popularity a joke. With Jared she'd had to worry about three thousand people on campus wanting a piece of him, but with Max it was more like three million. Or thirty million. Or more. All over the world.

So what was she to Max? His dalliance while he was hiding from the press? The thought sent a piercing pain through her heart, even while a little voice deep inside her told her to calm down and not jump to conclusions. She'd never felt like Max was playing games or that he was any less serious about the events of the past forty-eight hours than she was.

But still... *Oh, God.* What she felt for Max was real. Very real. But by virtue of this new revelation, this thing between them had suddenly become bigger and scarier than anything she'd been prepared for.

Max McKendrick, movie star, was so far out of her league it was almost ridiculous. He should never have found her interesting in the first place. But somehow he had. And every time she insisted to him that she wasn't anything special, he came right back, telling her she was. Showing her and making her feel like she was.

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Did she dare believe he meant it?

But how could someone like him, who could have, quite literally, anyone he wanted, a man who lived and worked amidst some of the most beautiful women in the world, find *her* appealing? Although she knew in her logical mind that she was moderately attractive, intelligent, sociable, and generally a nice person, to this day she still struggled with the feeling she'd always be that awkward girl from junior high and high school. When she'd been with Jared she'd wondered what he saw in her, and worried that one day he'd realize there wasn't anything special about her. In the end, he'd confirmed her fears and proven she didn't have what it took to keep him interested.

And now there was Max, who'd starred in movies with too many gorgeous women to count, for God's sake. Why wasn't he with someone like that?

Max's comment of last night came back to her. *"While some people would argue that having a relationship with someone else in the biz is easiest—because both people understand the lifestyle—that never appealed to me. Far too many actors have a problem with commitment. They leap from relationship to relationship like it's no more important than buying a new coat."*

She also remembered him saying he'd almost gotten married once, but he'd found out the woman was more enthralled with his career than him.

Was it possible he truly didn't play the bed-hopping games so many actors in Hollywood purportedly did?

A sudden memory came to her of the press this past spring verbally battering Max because he refused to let them interview him about a supposed torrid affair he'd had with a young starlet he'd recently been in a movie with. He never gave interviews about his personal life, he was *that* fiercely protective of his privacy. He and the young actress had vehemently denied the relationship via their agents, though, and

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Max had been spending all his time with his dying sister—something the media was also aware of because they always seemed to be reporting about that as well.

Yet certain members of the press swore and bedamned the affair had happened, and then, at his sister's funeral, had accused him of physically hurting the young star in question. They claimed they had the pictures to prove it, and the next day had run photos of the bruised and battered young woman. Since the actress was barely out of her teens, they'd made the whole thing sound sordid and dirty, made Max out to be a bastard of the first order.

The idea that he might have been humping around with and potentially hurting a beautiful, sexy young woman, especially when his sister—whom he clearly adored—was so ill, didn't at all fit the man Andee had gotten to know over the past few days. But the reporters wouldn't let it go. Andee remembered thinking at the time how awful they were being to him. How horrible it must be not to even have the privacy to grieve in peace for someone you loved. But it seemed that the harder he tried to hold the media at bay on any issue, the harder they pushed him and the more aggressive they became.

*"...and sometimes, depending on how well-known one is, the press can make life a living hell."*

The pain in Max's voice when he'd said that had been all too real. As it had been when she'd asked him if he didn't think it was silly for her to still be such an emotional wreck over a year after Jared's death and he'd told her no, he knew from experience how hard it was to get over the death of someone you loved.

The reality of Max's life rolled over Andee like a tanker truck, and she finally began to understand. Here was a man who'd dared to buck the Hollywood system by trying to maintain his privacy, by upholding his own personal morals in spite of the lifestyle around him, by raising a much younger sister during the years when most other young men

## ***MASKS***

would have been running hot and fast with every beautiful woman in sight. A man who, in spite of the ugly pounding he took from the media, had stayed at his sister's side through her long illness, and who, at her funeral, when the reporter tossed out the thing about him abusing the starlet, had finally lost it and planted a fist in the face of a particularly obnoxious paparazzi.

While the press had pulverized him for doing such an unspeakable thing, Andee had silently cheered him, and suspected most of the rest of America had as well. Some things were sacred—a family member's death being one of the highest. The tabloid reporters had violated that, and Max, the passionate defender, hadn't let them get away with it.

Good God. No wonder he'd escaped and was hiding out. What kind of a life was it to have to deal with such things?

Suddenly, she realized why he was here, with her.

And she'd never loved him more than she did at that moment.

*Oh, Max.*

## CHAPTER 7

Max tossed another small log on the fire, and jabbed the poker into the already red coals under the grate, spreading them for maximum heat efficiency.

Finally, realizing there was no other busy work to keep him occupied and keep his mind off the churning in his stomach and the ungodly pain in his chest, he sat on the oversized leather ottoman that rested between the couch and the fireplace and stared into the flames.

When he'd left Andee upstairs, he'd slipped into the kitchen and pulled on his jeans, had folded the rest of their clothes, then, feeling completely lost, had automatically moved into the living room to start a fire against the chill of the autumn night. Anything to keep from thinking about what was going through Andee's head and her sudden rejection of him when she found out who he really was.

"Damn it!" He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

For the first few years he'd been in the acting business, when he'd

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gone from stressed-out law student to movie star, he'd enjoyed the freedom for the first time of not having to worry about money. And California itself had been exciting for Jada and him in the beginning. The ocean, the warm weather, so much to do and see, especially for a couple of kids—and he had been a kid then still in so many ways—from a small Ohio farming community.

But within a few years, the fast pace and hectic schedule of Hollywood life had begun to weigh on him. To his surprise, he'd found himself missing the simpler things, like grooming the horses he'd been around all his life, taking walks down country lanes, gazing at the stars, seeing the same people at the grocery store and the library week after week. He'd missed small town life.

When he'd mentioned moving out of the L.A. area to Jada—after all, some actors managed to live outside of Hollywood and make it work—she'd revolted. She was in high school by then and had made friends, was comfortable and firmly entrenched. She'd taken to city life far more easily than he had, and had no desire to give it up. When she'd threatened to stay regardless of his decision, he'd backed off. There'd been nothing more important to him than keeping them together as a family. He'd fought for them to stay together when their parents had died and he'd be damned if he'd take a chance on losing her now. So he'd resigned himself to staying put in order to be with her, and dealing with a lifestyle he was slowly beginning to resent.

As they'd gotten older, even after Jada was in college at UCLA, and then later working in the fashion industry, the need to remain close to her—both emotionally and geographically—had been the driving force keeping him in southern California. But now, after all this time, he no longer had that tie to bind him. He had a shot at what he'd longed for—a real life outside of the movie business, with a woman who not only made him feel more alive than he had in years, but who also, up to this point, had accepted him as Max the man rather than Max the movie



## *MASKS*

star.

Life had a damned bitter sense of humor, teasing him with what he'd dreamed of, then turning around and slapping him in the face with the reality he might not be able to have what he wanted anyway because his goddamned "star" status would always rear its ugly head.

When Andee started thinking it through and realized that, no matter how unwilling on his part, his Max McKendrick, Movie Star personae was the object of millions of women's fantasies, not to mention at the core of too many tabloid fictions to count, she'd run. And he couldn't blame her. She was still hurting to the bone from her husband's actions. Her husband had been a popular man on campus, she'd said, and she'd admitted that had been hard for her. In the end, the asshole had betrayed his vows to love, cherish, and be faithful, which would probably forever make Andee fearful of how much she could trust any man. As much as Max wanted her to believe in him, to trust him, simply by virtue of who he was and all the damned baggage that came with him, he wasn't sure she ever could.

Not to mention that the moment the press got wind of where he was—and he knew it was just a matter of time before they did—the shit wouldn't just hit the fan, it would be slung for miles. All the old stories of affairs and the newer thing about his temper, would be dredged up yet again. Andee's trust and faith would be constantly challenged because of it. No matter what he really did, the press would always give it their own spin. And when their version was constantly being broadcast all over creation, God knows it could influence even the most dedicated and faithful.

A shudder ripped through him and his eyes burned. He didn't know how to fix this mess. He buried his face in his hands and massaged his temples, which were suddenly throbbing.

He felt her presence behind him even before he heard her. The light touch of her hand on his bare back sent a jolt of electricity through him,

## MASKS

and also caused the knot in his gut to wrench with a vengeance. Was she coming to tell him goodbye?

"I'm so sorry about your sister," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. The ottoman sank behind him as she sat.

That wasn't at all what he'd been expecting to hear, and the mention of Jada only made the burning in his eyes worse. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I know from everything you said last night how much you loved her. You miss her terribly, don't you?"

It was all he could do to drag in a deep breath to keep the lump in his throat from choking him, and he didn't dare turn to face her. He was afraid one look in her beautiful, expressive eyes would do him in. "It's like a big empty hole in my gut. I still can't believe I'll never again hear the sound of her laughter or her smart-aleck, teasing voice."

"I read about her illness and passing in the spread they did in *People*."

Max laughed bitterly. "Yeah, you and everyone else in the world."

He felt her recoil slightly behind him, and instantly regretted his outburst. "I'm sorry. The media's a touchy subject." And to be fair, *People* had done a nice job eulogizing Jada and using her early-in-life cancer as a teaching tool to make young women aware they were at risk, too.

"I know. It's okay. For what it's worth, I thought those tabloid reporters were absolutely horrible to you last spring. I didn't even know you back then, but I was angry on your behalf. And when you leveled the guy at the funeral in June, I cheered you on."

That brought a grudging smile to Max's lips, but only for a moment.

"I shouldn't have lost my temper, shouldn't have touched the guy—first time I'd ever done anything like that. I just couldn't take their lies another second...not there, with Jada cold in the ground a few yards

## MASKS

away. But it only gave them more fodder for their stories. Then instead of just being a dirty, old bastard who'd supposedly screwed an innocent young woman half his age, I was also branded as having a 'violent temper,' which only helped their case. Hell, I'm surprised the reporter and the paper only filed suit against me. They could, by all rights, have had me arrested."

He rubbed his temples and sighed. "I didn't do it, Andee. I never slept with Sarah and I sure as hell never touched her out of anger or anything else."

"I know." Her hand gentled over his back. "Max, you're human. We all have our limitations, and those jerks had long since pushed you over yours. I don't think there's a person in America who believed the crap they spewed about you hurting the girl, or who blamed you for belting that guy. He got exactly what he deserved, making stuff like that up when you'd just lost your sister. Assholes like that don't care about people. All they care about is the story."

"You'd be surprised what people will believe, Andee. If they read it in the paper, see the pictures, then it must be true."

"No, I'm not surprised at what people believe. I know...I had to deal with them when Jared and Kate died. Sommerville may be a small town, but we have our own fair share of bloodthirsty newshounds even here." She laughed quietly, and this time she was the one who sounded bitter. "One reporter was convinced I'd caused Jared and Kate's accident?"

"What?" Max turned and stared at her over his shoulder. She'd found one of his button-up flannel shirts to put on and had it tucked over her drawn up knees where she sat behind him on the ottoman. She looked beautiful...and vulnerable. It made his heart clench.

"Yes. He tried his damndest to work the jilted, angry wife angle. Of course, there was no evidence—it was a pile-up on the highway in the fog. Several cars were involved, and the police report indicated

## MASKS

there'd been no mechanical problem with Jared's car. It was a simple matter of bad visibility, and five cars following each other too closely. So the whole thing was ludicrous. But still, this reporter, for reasons unknown to me, kept up his poisonous talk for months afterward. Even people who had known me for years got to the point where they avoided me because they weren't sure who to believe."

"Jesus, sweetheart." He was offended on her behalf—how could *anyone* think this gentle woman could ever hurt a soul? He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms. But he wasn't sure where they stood right now, and her rejection of his physical touch upstairs still reverberated in him.

"My point here is that people like that horrible reporter who harassed you at your sister's funeral cause nothing but pain and humiliation. They don't deserve even a second of your time spent in remorse for how you responded to their outrageous behavior."

Max sighed. "I know. But it's not just my response that eats at me, Andee. It's the whole situation and the never-ending stories about who I supposedly am that get to me. And the fact I can't even take a damned piss without the papers and TV stations reporting it to the masses."

He scrubbed his face with a hand and closed his eyes. "I'm so sick of the lies, the backstabbing, the lack of respect. I've done my damndest to be open and accessible to the press when it comes to promoting movies. And all I've ever wanted in return was the right to then keep my private life to myself. But it doesn't work like that. I just..." A burning pain in his chest caused him to suck in a deep breath. The next breath made it hurt even more. "I just want a real life again. I want a family. Maybe a farm. I want to go to McDonald's or go shopping at the damned Wal-Mart if the urge hits, without having someone report on what I've bought and make foul comments about it.

"Do you know what it's like to go buy a crowbar and find out in the paper the next day that the cashier ratted you out and the press has

## *MASKS*

decided your purchase was related to your ‘violent temper, and God knows what he’s going to do with it’? No, assholes! I bought the crowbar to get my frigging kitchen window unstuck from the last earthquake we had, okay?”

A sob built in his chest, and though he tried to hold it back, he could no more control it than he could the months of agony that suddenly pounded through him. He buried his face in his hands and gave in to the surge, letting it flow unchecked. He’d been holding it in so long he didn’t think he could stop the burst dam now even if he tried.

He felt Andee rise to her knees behind him and then her arms were around him, her face nestled in the hollow between his neck and shoulder.

The gentle compassion in her touch only seemed to open his wounds wider. It had been so long since he’d allowed himself to lean on anyone. When she turned him more fully toward her, he let himself sink into her giving arms and the comfort they offered.

She held him without saying a word, but her silence wasn’t in any way cool. Rather it was rich with understanding and acceptance. It was a warm, tranquil meadow where the sun always shone, the air was redolent, and the grass soft. It invited him to pour out the churning dark-liquid chaos of his soul and fill those newly cleansed corners with peace.

Eventually—though he didn’t know how long it took—the storm inside him passed.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, dragging a hand over his eyes. “Jesus, I didn’t mean to lose it. I just—”

“Shhh.” Andee held his face between her hands and seemed to soak him up with her blue gaze. Her fingers caressed his forehead, his eyebrows, his cheeks, the line of his nose, his lips, in the same tactile “seeing” he’d encouraged her to try last night. And then she kissed him. It was a slow, tender exploration that made him think of that peaceful

## ***MASKS***

meadow once again and how he'd willing give up everything just to lie in it and hold all the beauty and serenity wrapped around him forever.

She stood and held out her hand. Max grasped it and rose to his feet. She led him through the house, up the stairs and back into his bedroom.

Still without saying a word, she unzipped his jeans and eased them down over his hips and thighs...he hadn't bothered with underwear earlier. In spite of his drained emotional state and the tender comfort of these last few minutes, his cock was already hardening in eager response to her. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told her he didn't think he could ever get enough of her.

Andee motioned him to lie on the bed. She unwrapped a condom, though he had no idea where it had come from. Last he remembered, the box they'd brought in from his truck was downstairs. With infinite gentleness, her fingers like butterflies against his skin, she rolled it down over his length. When she stood up straight again, she began unbuttoning his shirt she wore. In the moonlight, her breasts were the purest white alabaster, though he knew them to be exquisitely soft and nothing at all resembling stone. Her waist curved into the hourglass of her hips, which flowed seamlessly into her legs. My God, she was beautiful.

She smiled, then climbed onto the bed and straddled his hips. In one smooth motion, she sheathed him deep inside her silken heat, and Max thought that he'd never felt anything so welcoming.

"Sometimes," she said softly, gazing directly into his eyes, "when we think we're at the lowest point in our lives, when we think nothing can ever been okay again, we discover the most unexpected surprises. The sunrise, flowers blooming, moonlight on a lake..."

Max's heart stirred at his words of last night coming back to him. "Friends," he said, his voice still gritty from his purge downstairs.

"Friends," she agreed. "And lovers. I love you, Max."

## ***MASKS***

He hugged her tight against him. "I love you, too, Andee. This thing between us is just... Jesus. I don't want to lose you. But you have to know...being with me...it wouldn't be easy. The press can be merciless, and eventually they're going to find me here, find out about us, and then you'll be pulled into the damned whirlwind, too." His eyes squeezed closed and his stomach cramped at the thought of Andee being subjected to the daily onslaught like Jada had been. "God, baby, I don't want to put you through that."

She raised up so she could look at him. "The things worth having in life seldom come without trials, Max."

"I know. But no one should have to live like this. I'm used to it. I hate it, but I'm used to it. You, on the other hand, should never have to live your life under a microscope. That's one of the things I love the best about you...that you're so real, so unaffected by the cynicism that pervades every part of the culture I've spent the past seventeen years in. I couldn't live with myself if I brought that damned plague to your doorstep."

Andee shifted slightly on him so his shaft settled even deeper inside her, and Max, in spite of his turmoil, had to bite back a groan of pleasure at simply being in her. Never in his life had he been with anyone he could carry on a heartfelt conversation with while making love. Sex had always been just that...sex. With Andee it took on a whole new perspective. True intimacy, he was discovering, wasn't just about the fondling and resultant orgasm. Talking, touching, being inside her, loving her, were as tightly intertwined as the threads of an ancient tapestry.

She smiled. "My friend Judy subscribes to the John Lennon philosophy of life."

Max raised an eyebrow in question.

"All you need is love. Sounds corny, I know. But she insists if two people love one another they can weather any storm." She shifted

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again, this time leaning forward slightly so her damp, crisp curls rubbed against his, and her full breasts nearly touched his chest.

Unable to stop himself, he filled his hands with her bounty, which still glowed white from the moon. “Aren’t you scared, sweetheart?”

That caught her. She drew in a long, slow breath.

“Yes,” she finally said.

He saw a brief glimmer of fear in her eyes before she hid it.

“I...I don’t know exactly what the future might bring, Max. I’ve watched you be constantly torn apart by the press. I’ve seen so many Hollywood relationships come and go, and I’m not going to lie—the thought of sharing you with millions of adoring fans terrifies me. I also know you’re not going to be content to be on stage here at the playhouse forever. You’re too damned good at what you do, and underneath your frustration with the Hollywood lifestyle, you love acting, love making movies. It shows in everything you do. It’s why your movies are always huge blockbusters and why you win awards.

“So I know eventually you’re going to need to travel or go wherever you have to go to make movies. While I, on the other hand, am going to be here, teaching and doing all my usual, unexciting things.”

“Andee—”

She placed a finger over his lips. “This isn’t easy for me to get out, isn’t easy for me to admit, so, please, let me finish.”

When he nodded, she continued. “It’s a lot to think about. So yes, I’m scared. But when I weigh the options—walking away right now before I might be hurt, or staying with you and experiencing what might very well be the single best thing that will ever happen to me—every time, the thought of being away from you leaves me empty inside. Underneath all those realities I just described is this powerful desire to, for once in my life, quit analyzing and simply believe in the possibilities.”



## MASKS

He captured her face in his hands. "I'm scared, too. I can think of a hundred reasons why I wouldn't ever want to expose you to the crap that goes along with sharing life with a movie star. But like you said, the alternative—a life without you—is not something I want to accept. I can't imagine life without you now. I wish..."

"You wish what?" she prodded, her voice soft.

Max rubbed his eyes. "I wish I could turn back the clock and go back to being plain old Max McKendrick, small town farm boy from Ohio."

She smiled.

"What?"

"Did you know I'm a small town farm girl from Indiana?"

An unexpected smile crept out of the churning chaos in his heart. "Tell me."

"My dad's the large animal vet in the little town where I grew up. But my parents also have a farm...horses, a few head of cattle, goats, chickens. I grew up mucking out those stalls you're so fond of, plus gathering eggs, cleaning the chicken coop, picking beans, weeding the garden, you name it."

With her elegant beauty it was hard to picture her cleaning out stalls. Yet he'd always sensed her down-to-earth nature, so he couldn't really say he was shocked. She was one of those amazing women who could do anything, who'd handle a career, family, chores, and love with graceful aplomb.

"Are you surprised?" she asked.

"No. What was it you said last night...we're kindred spirits?"

"Mm-hmm. Bet you didn't think that would mean we both had the scent of horse manure in our blood, though, did you?" She flashed him a quick, saucy grin.

He grasped her hips and encouraged her to move on him. "No, I thought it had more to do with your riding skills," he rumbled, his body

## *MASKS*

tingling to life in a whole new way.

Her throaty laugh only made his hunger soar even more. “You’re so bad.”

“I know, but it’s not my fault. You make me this way. Ride me, baby.” The last was a groan because she’d already begun doing just that, and the feel of her clenching around him was beginning to steal coherent thought.

Andee’s eyes had closed. Her fingernails scratched lightly at his nipples and that, combined with the soft, little moans escaping her parted lips each time he slid more deeply into her, heightened his arousal to a surprising ache. Yet, as always with her, what excited and satisfied him the most was watching her enjoyment.

He slid his thumb over her slick nub and smiled as she quivered and moaned. Damn, he’d never known anyone so responsive. Every moment spent with her was a new revelation.

He grasped one of her hands and brought her fingers to her folds, encouraging her to feel the way her body stretched to accommodate him, to feel their flesh merged. “Do you feel how good we are together? How well we fit?”

“Yes,” she said, the word a sigh.

“Touch yourself, sweetheart.”

She did, without hesitation, her fingers slipping over and around her slit. “Keep talking to me, Max,” she said, her eyes still squeezed closed. “I love it when you talk to me.”

She was a wonder. Her uninhibited willingness to speak her needs during intimacy was almost as much a turn-on as anything else. “You like when I talk to you?”

“Yes. Your voice...it’s so sexy and warm, like whiskey on a cold winter’s night. I could get drunk on it.”

Max’s cock surged to new proportions and his heart swelled. “I could get drunk just watching you,” he told her. “Jesus, you’re

## ***MASKS***

beautiful.” He caressed her breasts again, plumping them in his hands, thumbing her nipples. “Do you touch yourself when you’re alone, babe? At home?”

“Sometimes. But...” Her voice was little more than a gasp.

“But?”

“But it doesn’t feel as good as this.”

“Is it because, while you’re touching yourself right now, you can also feel me inside you?” He held her hips and probed more firmly up into her.

“Y-yes.”

“You like feeling my cock deep inside your pussy while you finger yourself, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You know what else you like, Andee?”

“Wh-what?” Her head had fallen back again.

“You like knowing I’m watching you. It turns you on that I’m seeing you. It was the same in the car earlier tonight, when you were touching your breasts. You loved it that you were exposed and that I was getting harder by the second seeing you. Just like you’re getting more and more excited right now because I’m talking to you and watching you.”

A sobbing whimper escaped her and her fingers moved faster on herself.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Feel good. You’re sexy as hell when you make those little noises.” So sexy he was having a hard time keeping himself in check. His dick throbbed and his balls had begun the tell-tale burn that signaled he wasn’t going to last much longer.

Their bodies moved in sync, straining against one another, rocking hard. Max held her hips and pumped into her.

“Everything about you turns me inside out, Andee. You feel so good.” It was getting harder to talk as more and more of his existence

## ***MASKS***

was sucked into the hard-spinning vortex of imminent release. “Come for me, baby. Come with me.”

They lost it at the same moment. He thrust hard up into her, shuddering as his seed spurted hot and fast from him, and she cried out his name as the tight heat of her cunt clenched down like a vise on his cock, squeezing over and over, until he couldn’t breathe....couldn’t move. And still her body continued to quiver and throb around him.

“Oh, God, Max...I...I just can’t stop,” she cried. “When I’m with you I just...” One last shudder wracked her body and she collapsed onto his chest.

Max wrapped his arms around her soft warmth and knew that somehow he’d managed to defy all the odds of the universe and find the other half of his soul.

He rolled onto his side so they lay facing one another and gazed steadily into her eyes. “We’re going to make this work, Andee. We’ll find a way to make it work.”

Her tremulous smile filled him with hope.

## CHAPTER 8

A feather-light brush against her cheek woke Andee. Without opening her eyes, she burrowed deeper into the heat enveloping her and sighed in contentment. It was a moment before she realized the pleasant aromatic mélange wooing her back to the waking world was spicy and uniquely male, and the warm cocoon she was swaddled in had more to do with rippling masculine flesh than blankets. The feather on her cheek that had now moved to tease through the strands of hair framing her face was gentle and slightly calloused.

She blinked open her eyes, knowing what she'd find, yet still craving the reassurance that this was real and she hadn't fallen into Alice's rabbit hole while she slept and was maybe still wandering there in Wonderland.

"Morning, beautiful." Max's low purr and sexy half-smile had nothing to do with Cheshire Cats and everything to do with the warm tingle low in her belly and the mushy state of her heart.

## *MASKS*

“Hi,” she murmured, savoring the sight of him in the early morning sunlight pouring in through the half-open curtains on the window.

Last night she’d wondered how she could ever not have recognized him. Yet, when she really looked at him this morning, she couldn’t be too hard on herself. Max on the silver screen was larger than life and so much a star that he seemed untouchable—polished, sophisticated, more fantasy than reality. But in person, he was down-to-earth and ruggedly handsome with his newly growing beard, his devil-may-care, tousled, dark hair, and the first tiny flecks of gray showing at his temples. His soft voice and modest nature were more boy-next-door than superstar. Oh...and the way he looked at her with those intense emerald eyes made her want to crawl inside him and stay forever. “How long have you been awake?”

“Long enough to see you’re even more beautiful in daylight than you are by candle and firelight.”

She felt another swell of love for him. “Do you always say the right things?”

That got a full-fledged smile out of him. “God, no. I could never be that lucky.” Then his voice lowered and his fingers stroked her cheek again. “But I always tell the truth.”

The silky heat of his lips caressed hers, and when they slowly worked their way lower, onto her neck and her bare shoulder, and his teeth nibbled her skin, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to wrap her arms around his waist, and drape one of her bare legs over the flesh of his hip. His sleek, growing shaft pressed against her thigh, but he didn’t seem to be in a hurry to do anything about it just yet. Instead, in the rose-colored glow of early morning sunlight, he seemed determined to reexamine and relearn every inch of her with his mouth and his hands.

Eventually, he rolled her onto her back, slid the covers off her, and gazed down at her. The love and utter contentment shining in his gaze

## *MASKS*

made Andee feel, for the first time in her thirty-four years, like she was truly cherished.

"I want to wake up and look at you like this every morning for the rest of my life," he said softly.

"Is that a promise?"

"Do you want it to be one?" he asked, his voice deep and tinged with that gravelly emotion that caused velvet flutters in her chest.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then consider yourself promised. But you need to know..." He leaned down, brushed her lips with a kiss, and she felt herself falling, falling, falling into the verdant wonderland of his gaze. "I don't make promises lightly. I always keep them."

"Love me, Max," she whispered, wanting to hold onto this moment, wanting to hold him inside her, have him filling her body with as much love as he'd already filled her heart.

"I do, Andee. I will." The words were barely above a whisper, yet vibrated with the resonance of a cathedral organ. "But first...I owe you something."

"You do?"

"Mm-hmm. Another promise I need to keep." His slow smile sent a tidal wave of love and need through her. "Roll over, sweetheart. Onto your stomach."

Andee gaze up at him for a moment, her heart tripping, wondering what he was up to. When he twirled his finger in the air indicating her to do what he asked, she did, although somehow, with her back to him and unable to see the expression on his face, she suddenly felt shy about being so exposed in all her nude glory.

"Make yourself comfortable."

She felt the bed shift as he rose off it, then heard soft noises in the bathroom. He was back before she could get too anxious. She peered at him over her shoulder.

## *MASKS*

“No peeking.” His grin smoldered with both passion and a teasing glint. “Close your eyes and relax. I promise, you’ll like this.”

“I like everything you do,” she murmured as she closed her eyes and allowed her head to settle into the soft comfort of the pillow.

The bed sank next to her and with a gentle motion, Max brushed her hair off her neck. She suddenly got a whiff of something clean and lightly spicy—a masculine fragrance, but not overpowering.

“Sorry, babe, but all I have handy at the moment is my guy lotion. In a few minutes you won’t care, though.”

Her entire body tingled in anticipation...and then, his hands were on her. Warm. Slick with the lotion that smelled like him. Kneading her shoulders and neck with a firm but evocative motion that sent her into an instant state of blissful relaxation while, ironically, at the same time shooting her sexual nerve endings into high gear.

“Oh, my God,” she mumbled into the pillow as his masterful hands continued to prod and stroke, moving up her spine, back down, then digging into the muscles of her lower back.

“Feel good?” His tone sent an instant rush of heat to her core and she felt herself spreading her legs a smidgen in silent hope he might move lower.

“Yes,” she managed to gasp.

He chuckled and continued to work the muscles in her back until she wasn’t sure if she’d ever be able to get up from this bed again, she was so limp.

Finally, his big, warm hands moved lower, onto her bottom, and he took his time there, kneading her muscles, while managing to get in an occasional, teasing stroke down the cleft between her cheeks and nearly to her steaming slit. She moaned and twitched and he did it again. But before she reached the point of no return, he moved lower still, taking his time on the backs of her thighs, giving every inch of each of them the same attention he’d paid to the rest of her. Then her calves, even



## *MASKS*

her feet.

She wasn't sure how much time passed while she lay there in that hazy state of boneless, relaxed sensuality, but he didn't seem to be in any rush for it to end. And God knows, she didn't want it to either.

When his hands smoothed to a stop, and his fingertips lingered once more between her thighs, she groaned.

Gently, he turned her onto her back so she was looking up at him.

She blinked, still feeling half-drugged. "I don't think I can move."

Max chuckled and stroked a hand over her belly, the calloused scrape of the pads of his fingers leaving a trail of fire on her skin. "I told you I had another skill you'd like."

"Where did you learn that? And don't even tell me you just learned it a few minutes ago with me, because you knew exactly what you were doing."

"Okay, I'll confess. I went to college and the first year of law school on scholarship, but it was always a struggle to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. So I spent four years working for a massage therapist. She'd been a friend of my mom's—she was like an aunt to us. At first I just helped out in her office, but then she started teaching me the techniques, paid for me to spend a couple of evenings a week earning hours so I could get my credentials. Ultimately, she started letting me help with her clients." He shrugged. "It was good money."

Andee stared up at him. "Let me get this straight. You're a famous actor, you cook, and you do massage? I'm really starting to feel intimidated."

Max grinned and kissed her. "Says the woman who has a Ph.D. Just a minor accolade, that."

Andee grinned back, but felt a pleased flush creep up her cheeks.

Max moved between her legs. He pressed a kiss to her belly. "Beautiful." A kiss to her right breast. "Brilliant." A kiss to her left

## MASKS

breast. “Sexy. Baby, you intimidate the hell out of *me*.” The last was said in a throaty whisper. “Have I told you yet this morning how much I love you?”

She shook her head, her gaze locked with his.

“I do. I’m insanely in love with you.”

Then he filled her, his velvet rock of a shaft stroking into her eager body in very much the same way he’d spoken...gently, but with a powerful emotional undercurrent that made her realize she’d never, until this moment, known what love truly was. Never known how the real thing not only affected your heart, but reverberated through every aspect of your being, making colors brighter, joy more deeply felt, thought more astute.

Their lovemaking in the daylight, with no more shadows to hide in, no fear unexposed, had a new, poignant honesty to it. The soft sighs of their bodies sliding against one another, of their breathless murmurs of sex and love, swirled around them. Their fingers twined together, binding them in more ways than just physical, and Max’s gaze never left hers, even as they both succumbed to the passion burning within.

\* \* \*

When Andee awoke next it was to the scent of coffee brewing and something else too succulent for words. Her stomach grumbled in response.

The clock next to the bed showed it was ten-thirty. She slid out of bed, pulled Max’s shirt back on and was still buttoning it when she went downstairs. His light, spicy scent clung to her skin from the massage he’d given her earlier and it gave her a quick rush of love and a tingle of that ever-present need.

Max was in the kitchen, wearing jeans and nothing else, his back to her, a dishtowel thrown over his shoulder. The muscles in his arms and back flexed and rippled as he expertly flipped an omelet at the stove. He hummed softly as he worked.

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When he turned and saw her, the smile that curved his sensuous lips nearly knocked her off her feet. “Was it the coffee, the eggs, or me that woke you?”

Andee slid onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar. “All three. I was lonely without you up there, but then I smelled food.” She grinned at him.

He was already pouring coffee into an earthenware mug. He kissed her as he handed it to her. “Hungry, babe?”

“Starving.”

The ham and cheese omelet was melt-in-her-mouth to die for. Max sat on the stool next to hers and dug into his own food. “I take it my cooking meets with your approval?” he said between mouthfuls, his eyes twinkling.

“Did I tell you earlier you get bonus points for cooking?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I lied.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Pardon me?”

“Forget the bonus points. You get an A+. In all areas.”

He slid a big, warm hand up her bare thigh until his fingertips nearly brushed the damp heat between her thighs—nearly, but not quite. “All areas?”

“All areas,” she assured him.

His soft, sandpapery chuckle and his teasing hand on her leg had her twitching on her stool. He nuzzled her neck with a gentle kiss and she tilted her head to give him better access, in awe, once again, of how at ease they were together. As if they’d been sitting down to breakfast with one another all their lives.

“This is a great kitchen,” she said when she’d finished the last bite of her eggs. And it was. It looked like it had been recently remodeled, with its wide granite countertops, shiny hardwood floor, huge sink and oven, and gourmet island. Even a basic cook like her could appreciate

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its sumptuous offerings. Last night she hadn't seen any of it. Well, except her backside against the big oak table next to the bay window. Another blush spread up her cheeks...she could feel it.

Max's low chuckle told her he'd followed her gaze and knew exactly what she'd just been thinking. "Definitely a great table. Want to see the rest of the house?"

"Sure."

The house and two hundred acres of land, Max told her, had recently been purchased by his friends Kevin and Joann. Not because they needed it—it actually abutted their existing property—but because their neighbors had been faced with a family emergency and needed to move back east somewhere in a hurry to take care of ailing parents. Kevin and Joann had bought them out. Max was living here at the moment, but his friends weren't necessarily planning to keep the place. According to Max, they already had their hands full with their own hundred and fifty acres.

For a farmhouse that had been built nearly twenty years ago, it was surprisingly large and modern, with five bedrooms upstairs, including the large master where they'd slept last night, an office downstairs, with a dining room, family room, and large living room. An enormous deck wrapped around back of the house, windswept with golden leaves on this chilly October day, but offering a fabulous space for lounging in the summer. The huge backyard was lined with apple trees, and even had a swing hanging from a branch, as if the previous owners had gone off and left it. A large barn stood two hundred yards from the house—empty and unused now, but it had clearly housed livestock in the past.

"This reminds me a little of my parents' place," Andee said, suddenly nostalgic about her growing-up years. She and Max had showered and dressed in jeans and sweaters and now stood out on the deck, leaning against the railing. She breathed in the sweet scent of drying grass and the damp tang of rain that would probably develop

## *MASKS*

from the cold front that was supposed to move through by evening. “I miss living on a farm.”

“Do you?” Max’s gaze seemed to probe all the way into her, but she wasn’t sure what he was looking for.

“Yeah. It’s funny...but I didn’t realize it until just now. When I go home to my folks’ on vacation, it’s like I never left. But actually missing it like this is strange.”

Max turned her so her back was against his chest and his arms were around her waist. They both looked out over the backyard and the land beyond. “If you lived here, tell me what you’d do to the place.” His breath was a warm, coffee-scented caress against her cheek.

She leaned her head back against his shoulder and gazed around. “Well, I’d probably put a garden in over there.” She pointed to an open sunny spot just beyond the apple trees. “Nothing too huge, just big enough to have veggies for dinner all summer, and maybe have some extras to can for the winter. And I’d put a picnic table there—” She motioned to a grassy spot under the biggest apple tree. “Then—and don’t you dare laugh—I’d probably get one of those big chainsaw-carved bear sculptures to put on the front porch.”

Max’s chest shook behind her.

“I told you not to laugh,” she accused, smiling.

“A chainsaw-carved bear?” The words were a husky rumble, more laughter than speech.

“I think they’re great. There’s something homey and comforting about them.”

“What else? Would you do anything to the inside of the house?”

“No, it’s practically perfect the way it is. Whoever ends up owning this place is going to be really lucky.”

“You know what I’d do if this was mine?”

“What?”

“See that big open area on the deck right next to the kitchen and

## MASKS

dining room?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’d take out that part of the deck and build a sunroom right there. Put in an indoor hot tub, with access from the dining room and then with steps up to the master bedroom.”

“Oooh, a hot tub. Very nice. Good to soak in after a long day mucking out your horse stalls.” She elbowed him in the ribs and smiled.

“Yeah, especially since I’m almost over the hill, with that dreaded four-oh creeping up on me. Pretty soon I’ll have an aching back and I’ll barely be getting around.”

Now Andee laughed. “Poor, old man. Like you’re barely getting around today after all the activity you’ve had the past forty-eight hours?”

She turned, slid her arms around his waist, and laid her head on his chest. “This time spent with you...it’s almost too idyllic, isn’t it? It almost seems like a dream.”

Max pressed a kiss to the top of her head and held her close. “It’s not just a dream, babe. It’s real. And I plan to enjoy every moment of it...” His voice tapered off

*While it lasts*, she thought, saying the words in her mind that he hadn’t gotten out.

As the day progressed and they talked more, went for a long walk hand-in-hand, read the paper curled up on the couch together, they both avoided the subject of the future, she noted.

She knew they both wanted this relationship to work, but it was complex. She could barely stand to think about the reality that one day he’d leave, return to Hollywood, or would travel the world to make movies, while she’d be here in Sommerville, living her quiet little life. She couldn’t fathom moving to California—that seemed like another universe to her after living in the quiet Midwest all her life—and he

## MASKS

hadn't hinted he wanted her to. In fact, he seemed to like the fact she was here, and he didn't seem to want his relationship with her to mix with his Hollywood existence. Yet she knew the likelihood of him staying here forever or even indefinitely was slim.

He was Max McKendrick. Adored by fans around the world. Committed to his career. Talented beyond measure. With that came certain responsibilities. And Max was, above all things, honorable and responsible. While he might be lying low right now because of the press, ultimately, he'd go forth and continue to fill the world with his particular brand of light. And she wasn't sure where, if at all, she, quiet and conservative Andrea Matthews, could fit into that picture.

So, for now, they seemed to have made an unspoken pact with one another that they'd take this one day at a time, enjoy the moments they had, and hope for the best.

\* \* \*

Around three, the phone rang. Max tossed aside the book he'd been reading and went into the kitchen to answer it.

Andee lay on the plum-colored leather sofa grading a student paper.

When she'd been prowling through her tote earlier, looking for something, Max had spied the folder of student papers still in it from when she'd worked on them during her office hours on Friday. She'd confessed—rather shamefacedly—that she'd promised her students she'd have them back by class on Tuesday, but that she wasn't even close to having them done because she'd much rather be spending time with him.

He'd grinned and pointed out that if she worked on them here, she *would* be spending time with him. So, in a state of peaceful domesticity, she'd dug into her neglected work, and he'd dug into a sea-faring adventure novel.

She'd discovered earlier, during their tour of the house, that he was an avid reader. The bookshelves in the bedroom and the office were

## MASKS

overflowing, and he'd confessed they were all his books, not ones left behind by the previous occupants. In fact, while none of the spare bedrooms or the dining room were currently furnished, the contents of the master bedroom, the living room, the kitchen and the office were all his. Bought online and delivered after he'd come here to Illinois a few months ago. "I had to have enough in the house to feel like it was at least something of a home," he'd told her.

"We're going to have company in a little while," he said now, returning to the couch and putting her sock-clad feet back on his lap, giving the arch of one foot a quick rub against his half-erect shaft.

A little tingle coursed through Andee at the action. She pulled off her reading glasses and set them and the student paper on the floor. "We are?"

"Yeah. Kevin, Joann, and the girls are stopping by on their way into town. They drop the girls off at Joann's mom's before they go into the theater on show nights."

*That's right. Sunday night.* Max would have to leave around five to go to the theater for make-up and costume.

"Is it okay for me to be here?"

Max's soft laugh curled around her heart. "Andee, I told you, I made an ass of myself talking about you to them yesterday. They know I'm crazy in love with you. In fact, my guess is that's the real reason they're stopping by. Jo said she had some canned goods and groceries to drop off, but hell, she just brought stuff over a couple of days ago. She mother-hens me, but even she's not that bad."

"Oh, jeez." Andee felt her face scrunch up. "What am I supposed to say to them? Your best friends you've know for years and in a few days I've just kind of..."

Max's hand slithered up under her sweater until he clasped one of her bare breasts in his palm. "Taken the spot in my life as the most important person in my existence? Filled my world with love and joy?"



## MASKS

He slid between her legs and moved over her, until his mouth hovered inches from hers. "Made me insane with desire?"

Every cell in Andee's body zinged to life. Her nipples puckered against his fingers, her pussy grew wet and tingly, and that deep-down pull low in her womb began to ache.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "How do you always make me feel this way?" Her arms went around his neck, and her hips instinctively lifted off the couch, her mons searching for the hard length that belonged against it.

"You want me, babe." His voice rippled around her, making her hotter.

"Yes. But, Max...you said your friends...we can't do this now."

"That only makes it more exciting, sweetheart. Knowing we might get caught." His lips caressed her throat, and his now hard cock, straining against the zipper of his jeans, scraped the vee between her legs.

Andee whimpered. "Max...are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure." He rolled her nipples between his firm, insistent fingers. "And you're going to love it, my darling who likes to be watched and likes to play naughty games with her mouth on my dick on a public highway."

A bolt of raw electricity shot straight from her nipples to her pussy at his words. Lord, when the man talked to her like this she'd do just about anything.

He lifted her and laid her on her back on the leather ottoman that matched the sofa. Then he knelt on the floor between her legs and pulled off her jeans and yellow bikini panties. Her blue vee-neck sweater joined the pile on the floor, leaving her completely exposed, spread open, and at his mercy. The sensation was heightened by the fact he was still dressed.

His eyes smoldered with passion. Two fingers plunged deep into

## *MASKS*

her, his palm dragging across her swollen bead, while the fingers of his other hand returned to take charge of one of her pebbled, aching nipples.

"The window's right there, babe." He nodded toward the huge picture window behind him, which showed a view of the cloud-scudded, pale-blue October sky. "Anyone who comes up that driveway can see you lying here, your legs spread for me, can see what I'm doing to you." His fingers speared in and out of her. "And you like it, don't you?"

"I...Max!"

"Tell me the truth, Andee. No secrets between us. You like the excitement of knowing we might be seen, don't you?"

"Yes," she gasped. "But I never used to be this way. I...I don't understand."

"You don't understand that you're a beautiful, sensuous woman with just as much right to find pleasure and passion with your body as you do with your mind?"

"I don't know..."

"I do." His fingers continued to work her, stretching, probing, sliding like satin one second, then pounding into her hard the next.

"I think this is the real Andrea Matthews. An amazing woman with a wide range of passions. I think no one's ever really understood that about you. Maybe you've never understood it about yourself. But I see it every moment I'm with you. There's a fire burning inside you, babe. A fire that drives you not only to be intelligent, and compassionate, and giving, but also deeply sensual. And that complete package is one of the reasons I love you so much." His voice seemed to catch for a moment.

"There's nothing surface about you. Everything you do, everything you say, everything you feel, comes from deep inside you. Not many people are brave enough to live that way."

## MASKS

"I'm not brave," she protested.

"Oh, sweetheart, you *are*. Look at you right now."

He lifted her hips and draped her legs over his shoulders. His hot breath flickered over her throbbing folds for a moment, then she felt his tongue set off exploring. Felt the warm, slick heat of it memorizing every fold, every hollow, then delve inside her, lapping up the wet cream she knew she'd already produced.

The scrape of his whiskers against her sensitive flesh both stung and felt good. And the sight of his dark head between her pale thighs was an even bigger turn-on. When he used his fingers to spread open her nether lips and hold them apart, better exposing the tiny, sensitive nub of her clit to his ministrations, a mini, almost-climax shuddered through her.

He drew back a few inches and simply gazed at her wide-opened pussy. "Damn, you're beautiful. Even down here."

Heat spread up her cheeks and through her body at the same time. She writhed in his hands, suddenly embarrassed at his up-close scrutiny. But he held her in place, not letting her escape, and continued to study her until she cried out. "Max, they'll be coming soon. Please...touch me some more," she whimpered.

"Tell me what you want."

"Touch me."

"Tell me *exactly* what you want, Andee."

"I...I like it when your mouth is on me. I like it when your tongue...moves on me."

"On you where?"

"Here!" She pressed his face back in toward her wet, quivering flesh.

She heard the smile in Max's voice. "You want me to eat you out, baby? Is that what you want?"

"Yes!"

## *MASKS*

“You want me to do it right here in front of God and everyone, knowing someone might drive up?”

“Yes, damn it!”

The soft rush of breath from his chuckle tickled her clit, and she almost had an orgasm on the spot. But the liquid heat that coursed through her when his tongue began to move on her once more came from a much deeper well of pleasure, and her existence became focused on it and it alone.

Max’s fingers moved back to her opening while his mouth continued to suckle her, and when they stretched her open and pushed inside this time, she felt fuller than before. As if he’d inserted more than two fingers this time. And, oh, Lord, what they were doing to her...

Like a wave of molten lava, and just as sudden, climax washed over her, burying her, pushing her down, down, down under its weight, letting her bob back to the surface for a moment and catch her breath, then pushing her down, down again.

With waves still tossing her in their swell, Max rolled her over onto her knees, her bottom toward the window, dragged his jeans down around his thighs, and buried himself to the hilt inside her still-clenching core. She cried out and thrust back against him. His answering groan, and the feel of his hard steel inside her, brought on another round of shuddering contractions. It wasn’t even a separate orgasm...just one amazing, continuous one that didn’t want to stop.

As her body writhed, he began to move, pulling nearly out of her, then pumping deep, pulling nearly out, pumping deep. The tip of his cock bumped against her womb, sending little, shocky vibrations through Andee’s body. Max’s hand on her hip held her steady as he fucked her deep and hard, while his other hand snaked around to flutter light strokes against her still quivering pussy.

“I love you, Max,” she cried, as another pounding wave hit her, hit

## ***MASKS***

him as well.

He clutched her to him as his cock throbbed inside her, and his hot seed burst within her.

With a smooth motion, he withdrew from her and turned her over, so she once again lay on her back. As Max looked down at her, she had a glimpse into the churning window of his soul. And what she saw filled her chest so full she could barely breathe. There was a vulnerability in him that pulled at her heartstrings.

“I love you, Andee,” he said quietly, his voice choked. “And I’m not going to lose you, damn it.” He pulled her up into his arms. “I’m not going to lose you.”

## CHAPTER 9

The memory they were about to have company crept back into their realm of existence, and they quickly dressed and pulled themselves together.

Max was quiet. Quieter than she'd ever seen him.

"You okay?" she asked, stroking a hand down his cheek.

He pressed a kiss to her palm and the love in his green gaze made her weak-kneed. "Yeah, I'm okay," he whispered.

She wasn't convinced, and she hated that she didn't know exactly what was weighing on him. But there wasn't time to dwell on it.

They'd barely gotten their clothes straight and tidied up the living room when a green minivan pulled up in the driveway and spilled out the lionish blond man with glasses Andee had met at the theater, the tall, trim woman who played Christine in *Phantom*, but who now was dressed in jeans, sweatshirt, and sneakers, with her dark hair pulled back in a braid that hung halfway down her back, and two curly-headed

## ***MASKS***

moppets who looked like tiny Shirley Temples.

The blond man immediately started toward the barn. It looked like he was carrying a roll of wire. The little girls and the woman headed for the house.

Max squeezed Andee's hand and gave her a reassuring smile, then opened the front door in time to capture the two speeding girls, one in each arm, and lift them.

"Uncle Max! We drew you pitchers!" one of them cried. "But we're not telling. You hafta guess."

"So close your eyes," the other little girl added.

Max obediently closed his eyes. "Hmm...let me think. Did you draw me a picture of...a dinosaur?"

"Wrong!" the first one said.

"A purple dog?"

"Nope!" they both squealed.

"A dancing hippopotamus?"

Both girls giggled. "Uncle Max! Hippos don't dance!"

"Hmm...I give up."

"I drew you a pitcher of a horsey!" the first moppet shouted.

"And I drew a fairy princess!" said the other.

"No!" Max gave them a mock look of surprise and winked at Andee over their heads, sending another surge of love through her. He was wonderful with these two little girls.

"I would never have guessed that!"

"Yes you would've," giggled the more talkative of the two. "Leslie always makes princesses! And I always make horsies. That's our favrits."

Max set the girls down. "Well, let's see them."

They pounded over to their mom, who was just crossing the front porch, her arms full of grocery bags and a box. She set down the bags and handed the girls some papers with crayon coloring on them.

## *MASKS*

“Here they are, Uncle Max! Now let’s go hang ’em on your special wall in your office.”

Max grinned at the two women. “Andee, Joann. Joann, Andee,” he said by way of introduction. “I’ll be back.” Then, giving in to the two children tugging at him, he let them lead him through the living room and into the office, where Andee had seen other crayon pictures with the names “Libby” and “Leslie” scrawled on them hanging on a bulletin board near the desk.

“He’s good with them, isn’t he?” Joann asked.

Andee turned to face her. “Yes, he is. And your girls are adorable.” She held out her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Joann grinned, her straight, white-toothed smile exactly like her daughters’. She bypassed Andee’s hand and gave her a quick hug. “So you’re the light of his universe.”

Andee was a bit taken aback at the warm greeting, and an embarrassed smile curved her face. “Oh, Lord, I don’t even want to know what he’s been saying.”

Joann’s lilting laughter filled the room. “Come help me take this stuff to the kitchen and I’ll tell all.”

Andee, feeling instant camaraderie with this woman, grabbed the box of canning jars from Joann, who picked up the grocery bags once more, and they went to the kitchen.

“Mmm, applesauce. Looks wonderful,” Andee said, peering into the box.

“Yeah, I picked a couple of bushels of apples here last weekend. The trees have been neglected the past few years, but they still produced quite a lot of fruit. I ended up with way too many jars of it. Max rolls his eyes at me always bringing canned goods over, but secretly I think he likes it. I understand his mom was a big gardener.”

“How did he lose his parents?” Andee asked. As much as she and Max had talked and shared the past few days, that’s one subject that



## MASKS

hadn't ever come up.

Joann began putting meat and vegetables in the refrigerator—she must be doing his shopping so he wouldn't have to take a chance on being recognized—while Andee slid the glass jars of applesauce onto a shelf in the well-stocked pantry.

“Car accident. Apparently their farm in eastern Ohio was in the mountains. They were coming home late one night. It was raining, foggy. A truck hit them head-on when they went around a curve.”

“Oh, my God,” Andee whispered, leaning against the counter. Memories of Jared and Kate's fog-induced accident flashed through her mind. To know Max had gone through such a similar loss with his parents was...eerie.

*Kindred spirits, indeed.*

The dark-headed woman washed her hands and wiped them on a dish towel. “He's a good man, Andee. Don't let all the filth the tabloids have said about him convince you otherwise.”

“I didn't buy into the stories even before I met him.”

Joann studied her. “He said you were real. I can see that.”

*Real. That word again.* She pulled a couple of mugs down from the glass-doored cabinet. “Coffee?”

“Love some.” Joann perched on a stool at the breakfast bar. “He's crazy about you, you know?”

Andee smiled. “I'm crazy about him, too. I was even before I knew his true identity.”

Joann laughed softly. “It was Kevin's idea for Max to play the Phantom incognito and Max's idea this past week to grow the beard ‘just to be safe.’ Honestly, I don't know how someone hasn't figured it out yet, though. Max is Max, whether he's on the big screen or hiding behind a costume onstage. Or maybe I'm just too close to the situation. I knew him before he was *famous*. Back when he still put his pants on one leg at a time like all the rest of the men in the world.”

## *MASKS*

Andee heard Max and the little girls come through the house again, then with a wave and a toe-curling smile for her, he led them out the backdoor and headed toward the swing in the back yard. As she watched, Kevin joined them, and he and Max embraced...more like brothers than friends.

"It's good to see him happy again," Joann murmured, watching them through the window.

She turned to face Andee, her forehead creased. "These past few months have been hard for him. Has he opened up to you about it at all?"

"Some." Andee curled her hands around her coffee mug, letting the heat seep into her. "He's really torn."

Joann nodded. "Losing his sister like he did, watching her suffer and fade away all those months and not being able to do a damn thing about it...it nearly paralyzed him. Max has always been so strong, so able to take the world by the tail and come out on top. But with Jada's cancer, he felt his vulnerability for the first time. And then there was all the crap going on with the press at the same time—those lies about Sarah Levine, the young actress."

Joann shook her head in disgust. "Max has always resented the press and avoided them whenever possible, but at his best he would never have let stories like that get out of hand. After being at Jada's side 24/7, though, he just didn't have any energy left to deal with it and the tabloids steamrolled him."

"Do you think they're going to ever give him a break?"

"Not until he confronts the situation head-on. While I know it's been good for his soul to have a little peace, hiding from the press has only fed the fire. No one can tell Max what needs to be done, though. God knows I've tried. But he's being blindly stubborn about it." She sighed. "He's going to have to make the decision himself to deal with them when he's emotionally ready."

## *MASKS*

Joann placed a long-fingered hand atop one of Andee's. "You're good for him, Andee. You're opening his heart again, making him believe life can go on. And maybe..." She smiled, compassion in her violet-colored eyes. "Maybe he's helping you do the same thing."

At Andee's quick intake of breath, Jo squeezed her hand. "Max said you'd lost your husband a couple of years ago and that you're a prof at Williams. It's not a huge town. I remember reading about the accident. I put two and two together."

Andee sank onto the stool next to Joann, a lump the size of Illinois suddenly filling her throat. "I want with all my heart for this work. But I don't know how it's going to," she admitted, feeling the sting of tears in her eyes. "My life is so ordinary. I'm ordinary. And he's just...not."

"He's more ordinary than you might think. Max is so much like the Phantom it's not funny—one person on the outside that the public sees, and another on the inside. The Hollywood persona is a just a mask for the sensitive, passionate man who lives deep inside him. He did the 'star' thing with the mansion and social life for so many years for one reason only—Jada. She loved California. Loved the trendy pace of life, loved being the sister of a famous actor. Max probably would've moved out of Hollywood eons ago and tried to live a more regular life alongside his movie career, except he loved Jada too much to be away from her."

"She was all the family he had."

"Yes, and he wasn't just her brother. He was the only parent she really remembered. He adored her too much to desert her, though once she was grown, she wouldn't have seen his leaving as desertion. She was a charming, intelligent, and independent young woman. She adored him right back and wanted him to be happy. But, by his own choice, his happiness was always intrinsically tied up with hers."

Joann squeezed Andee's hand again. "Give him some time, Andee. In his heart he already knows what he wants. He just hasn't figured out

## MASKS

yet how to go about making it happen. But he will.”

Andee nodded, trying to take comfort that this old friend of Max’s had insight she didn’t.

\* \* \*

The Jorgensens, at Max and Andee’s suggestion, stayed for an early dinner. Max threw some burgers on the grill, Andee made a salad, Joann sliced fresh fruit, and Kevin dug chips and salsa out of the pantry. The four adults worked companionably, joking and talking like they all—including Andee—had been whipping together quick meals as a unit for years. The little girls played underfoot, giggling and squealing.

To Andee, it was heaven. In a different way than time spent alone with Max, and certainly not better. But just as treasured. She felt like family. Like Joann, Kevin, and their daughters had embraced her as an integral part of Max’s and their life without question. After the last lonely eighteen months, where her colleagues tiptoed around her, where her life had revolved around the existence of teaching, grading, and sleeping except for an occasional foray to Judy’s house or out shopping, it was as if yet another window had opened in the universe, letting sunlight flood through her being.

After the last dish had been washed and the Jorgensens had hustled out to their van so they could get the girls to “Grandma’s” before they were due at the theater, the house seemed unnaturally silent.

“Well, I suppose I’d better get my stuff together,” Andee said, suddenly feeling awkward. Max had asked her to stay for the weekend, but it was now Sunday night. He had a performance. She had grading to finish. And her car was still parked at the theater.

Max, who’d been leaning against the door jamb, shut the heavy oak door against the brisk wind that had come up, and pulled her into his embrace. She curled her arms around his waist and rested her cheek on his chest, letting the comforting *thud-thud* of his heart lull her into a

## *MASKS*

semi-relaxed state.

After a minute, he held her away from him and gazed down at her.

“Will you stay?”

Her pulse pittered. “Tonight?”

“Tonight. Tomorrow. For as long as you want?”

When she didn’t respond immediately, his forehead creased. “I’m sorry. I realize you have a house and a life. It’s not fair of me to expect you to stay here.”

“No!” she said quickly, realizing he’d misunderstood her silence as hesitation, when in reality she’d been so moved at the longing in his gaze she hadn’t been able to speak right away. “God knows I’m not emotionally invested in staying at my house. I was just...surprised, I guess. I wasn’t sure where exactly we were going from here.”

A fleeting look of pain slid across his face. “I’m sorry. That’s my fault.”

“No,” she assured him. “It’s no one’s fault. We just hadn’t talked about specifics beyond today.”

His fingers twined through hers and the brief, haunted expression in his eyes faded to be replaced with a swirling warmth. “I know I’m not exactly a dream man because of all the media hell going on, but I want you in my life, Andee. And I’ll take that under any terms you want to lay down. If you want to be here, or you want me to come to your house, or if you don’t want to be together every night, I’ll go along with whatever you feel is best. I just...want to be with you.”

“Oh, Max,” she breathed, pressing a palm to his cheek. All her fears and worry and uncertainty coalesced in that moment, terrifying her for an instant that this was all just too good to be true, but she made the conscious decision to push them away, ignore them, and follow her heart. “Yes. I’d love to stay here with you, tonight, tomorrow, as long as you want me to.”

Max hugged her to him, and she thought she felt his chest

## MASKS

heave...whether in relief or in a quiet sob, she wasn't sure.

"I love you so damned much," he whispered against her hair.

\* \* \*

They agreed she'd ride to the theater with him, get her car and go to her place to collect some clothes and things. Then after the show, he'd come by her house and they'd drive back here to the farm with both their cars.

They passed most of the ride to the playhouse in comfortable silence, holding hands, with Max flashing her an occasional knee-jerk smile.

"Do you teach tomorrow?" he asked.

"No. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons this semester. But I hold office hours on Monday and Friday afternoons. Not much action from the students on those days, though, unless they have a paper due or an upcoming test. So I grade, or read ahead for the next lesson, or do committee work."

"Committee work?"

Andee rolled her eyes. "We have committees for everything. Right now I'm on one to revamp the history major. And next semester, I've already been volunteered by my friend Judy, who's head of the Art Department, to serve on the admissions committee for incoming students next fall." She smiled at him. "The good news is, with an all afternoon schedule, I can go in whenever I'm ready in the mornings."

"Hmm..." Max pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "I'm off the next two nights. So how about if, after you get off work tomorrow, we have a little date night at home."

"I'm intrigued."

"Romantic dinner? Bubble bath? Maybe a few other adventures?"

Electricity zipped through Andee's body. The master bathroom at the farm had a huge, jetted bathtub. Between that, and Max's promise of adventures, she was ready to say to hell with work completely—both

## MASKS

his and hers—and go have this date right now.

His gravelly chuckle only fed the flames. “Now I’ve got you thinking.”

“Now you’ve got me horny, thank you very much. And great timing, since we’re going to be pulling into the theater in approximately one minute.”

“Hold that thought, sweetheart. Haven’t you ever heard the saying, good things come to those who wait?”

“Yes, well why is it that when I’m around you, I’m suddenly the most impatient woman on the planet?”

“Must be love.” He grinned at her, but his gaze was steamy.

“Definitely love.”

They’d just started the turn into the parking lot at the theater when Max slammed on the brakes. “Sonofabitch!”

Andee’s heart pounded at the sudden rise of tension in the car. “What?” She turned to look through her side window, trying to see what he was fixated on in the parking lot. In the not-quite-dark-yet shadows of twilight, it was tough to see much. Plus, most of the lot and the playhouse were obscured by a row of huge old elm trees that stood between the road and the property. But from what she could tell, it looked like there was activity near the building. Several cars, lights, people milling about.

“It’s kind of early for people to be arriving for the show, isn’t it?” she murmured.

“Not *people*,” Max muttered. “It’s the fucking press. Shit!”

The white car Andee recognized as being the one Kevin and Jo had left here last night, whizzed across the parking lot, turned, and stopped in front of them. Joann got out and came to Max’s window, which he powered down.

“They were here when we got here a few minutes ago,” she said. “We don’t know how they found out. Kevin’s trying to keep them

## *MASKS*

distracted for now. What do you want to do?"

Max's hands curled around the steering wheel, his knuckles white. His jaw clenched and released.

He turned to look at Andee, and the chilly mien that had fallen over his features sent a shiver through her. She felt him shutting down on her, closing her out, with a speed that startled her.

"Go with Jo, Andee. She'll get you to your car. I'll drive on in and draw them to the other side of the lot so you can leave."

"Max—"

"Just do what I say. I don't want you involved in this. Go home. Stay away from here." He turned to Joann. "Get her out of here for me. Don't let them catch her."

Jo nodded. "I'll wait for you in the car," she said to Andee, giving her a reassuring smile.

Meanwhile, Max was once more staring across the parking lot. Bitterness and fury pulsed off him in thick waves.

Andee laid a hand on his arm, trying once more to reach him. "Please..."

He turned to her, dragged her head toward him, and kissed her. Hard. "Go with Jo," he said, his voice as edgy as the kiss had been.

"When will I see you?"

"I don't know," he growled. "Just go!"

Andee's stomach twisted at his withdrawal. "Max, please don't shut me out. We knew this was going to happen eventually. It's going to be okay."

"Jesus, Andee!" His face dissolved into a tortured mask. "No, it's not going to be okay. You're not a part of my world, so you don't have a clue what it's like. Now go, before they see you, before they see us together, damn it!" he ordered, his voice harsh. "Go, and just stay away from me!"

Andee rocked back in her seat at the vitriol in his words. She



## MASKS

opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't make anything come out. Instead, unbidden tears welled in her eyes.

She opened the door of the Tahoe and slipped out.

By the time she got into the car with Joann, Max had already pulled around them and was tearing across the parking lot in the opposite direction from where her Volvo was parked.

The moment the press started a stampede toward him, Jo cruised across the lot and pulled up next to Andee's car. "Got your keys ready?" she asked.

Andee nodded, unable to speak for fear she'd break down right here. *You're not a part of my world...just stay away from me.*

Joann squeezed her hand. "He'll get it sorted out."

Andee nodded again, swallowing hard. She darted out of the car, remote-unlocked her door, and was just about to slide behind the wheel when a press straggler caught sight of her and she heard saw a camera flash go off behind her back.

"Hey. Hey! Who's that?"

"Don't know, but I got a picture!"

With shaking hands, Andee slammed her door shut, jabbed her key into the ignition, and started her car. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Joann jump from her car and corner the two men whose attention she'd drawn, turning their backs toward Andee, probably trying to keep them from seeing Andee's license plate number so she couldn't be found later.

Andee sped toward the road. All she wanted was to go home and get far away from here, from the pain that was nearly cutting off the air in her lungs.

She managed to make it all the way into her driveway before the first hot tears slid down her cheeks.

\* \* \*

The evening was interminable, and Andee had never felt so alone.

## MASKS

Max's words and the tone in which he'd said them shredded her heart with the vengeance of a scythe each time she remembered them. She tried to tell herself he'd been upset, tried to make excuses for his behavior because the unexpected arrival of the media had thrown him off kilter. But even knowing that, his words had cut deep, and she couldn't comprehend how, after everything they'd shared, he could have shut her out as coldly as he had.

At ten o'clock, about the time *Phantom* should be getting over, that is if Max had even gone onstage at all tonight, she lay in her bed in the dark, covers to her chin, and flicked on the small bedroom TV as a distraction. An East St. Louis station was on. She didn't really pay attention as the anchors rattled off information about the upcoming election, the most recent crime sprees in the city, and the weather, which was getting colder by the minute, with rain and maybe even a few snow flakes expected by Monday morning.

And then she heard Max's name.

"In entertainment news, Oscar winning star Max McKendrick, who's been missing from the Hollywood scene for the past several months, has turned up. And right here in our own part of the country, nonetheless!" the smiling young anchorwoman was saying.

A picture of Max flashed onto the screen. The clean-shaven, polished, Hollywood Max, dressed in a tux, clutching his best actor Oscar from the year before. Andee's heart clenched at the sight. This Max was a stranger to her, as was the tense, angry man she'd left behind at the theater.

"McKendrick dropped off the radar in late June, after his sister's untimely death from cancer, and a legal suit was filed against him by the *Star Inquisitor* for striking a member of their reporting staff. But the press was tipped off earlier today that McKendrick has been appearing on stage since early October in the small town of Sommerville, Illinois, about seventy miles southeast of St. Louis, playing the starring role in

## MASKS

the *The Phantom of the Opera*. Sources say he's been using the stage name Maxwell James. The star has, following his usual reticent pattern, refused to comment or be interviewed. His agent has not returned phone calls.

"No police charges were filed by the *Star Inquisitor* reporter who was struck by McKendrick in June, but the legal suit is still pending in court."

The male anchor came onscreen then and the story shifted to a human interest piece.

Andee flicked her thumb against the power button on the remote and curled onto her side, misery swallowing her even deeper in its maw.

*"The star has, following his usual reticent pattern, refused to comment or be interviewed."*

Meaning that, after she'd left the parking lot tonight, he hadn't sorted out anything. Jo had said this afternoon that the press wasn't going to back off from him and give him some peace until he confronted them in a direct manner. But clearly he hadn't done that tonight. He'd evaded them once again and nothing was solved.

She fought back another round of tears. Until Max dealt with the press, he'd always be dodging shadows, would always be on edge, and how could they possibly ever have a relationship that way?

Worse still, the way he'd spoken to her tonight had torn a hole in her fragile heart. Yes, she'd known the press was going to find Max eventually, and she'd understood that when they did, it was going to be hard for him. But nothing had prepared her for Max's out-and-out withdrawal from her, or for his feral determination to keep her completely separate from his other life. It was that, more than anything that ripped her in two.

\* \* \*

The phone rang at eleven. Andee's heart pounded as she answered

## MASKS

it.

"Did I wake you?" came the deep voice that turned her inside out.

"No."

"I wanted to be sure you were doing okay, that you got home okay." His earlier fury seemed to have faded and he sounded more like himself...although there was an undercurrent of something else, something distant, in his voice.

"I got home fine."

"You've been crying, sweetheart. I can tell."

"I'm all right."

"No you're not. I'm sorry, Andee. Sorry for what happened tonight with the press showing up."

*But not sorry for ordering me away and shutting me out?* "Do you know how they found you?"

"We're not sure, but I think it was probably the clerk at the drug store last night, where I stopped to buy condoms before I went to the playhouse. He must have recognized me."

"Oh, great. Of all the things to have been buying." She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Where are you now?" *Not here, where you were supposed to be after the show.* Although she'd known in her heart he wouldn't come after what had happened, after the way he'd spoken to her.

"I'm still at the theater. I'll probably stay here tonight. I don't want to take a chance on anyone following me out to the farm, and I sure as hell don't want them near you. Andee..." There was a pause, and the silence over the phone line was like the cold stillness in a graveyard. "I have to go back to California."

The lump in Andee's throat almost choked her.

"There are some things I have to deal with. I can't keep hiding here."

"What about Kevin and Joann and the show?" *What about me?* she

## MASKS

silently cried.

"There's an understudy for the Phantom. He'll take over the roll for as long as necessary."

"When are you leaving?" she whispered.

"In the morning. I've already booked a flight out of St. Louis."

The pain in her chest was so awful she could barely breathe. "So this is goodbye, then?"

"For a while. I'll be back, though."

Andee laughed softly, but it was a sad lament even to her own ears. "Your life is in California. It always has been."

"Andee—"

"And even if you do come back, I...I don't know if I can be here for you."

The silence on the other end of the phone line was a gaping vacuum for several seconds. "What are you saying?" His voice had gone deathly quiet.

"I don't want to be the 'other' woman in your marriage to your career. The one who's always shuttled off into the shadows, kept a secret from the rest of your movie star life. It's too hard, Max. I don't think I can live on the fringes of your life like you seem to want me to."

"My God, is that what you think?"

"What else am I supposed to think after what happened tonight? You told me point blank I wasn't a part of your world. I understand your pain and your fear of the press. I do, Max. You know I do. But while I love you with all my heart, I can't spend my days tiptoeing around, pretending we have any kind of relationship at all, when, at the first sign of your movie star world merging with my sleepy, college-town world, you order me away while you fly across the country and escape." A sob broke her voice. "What kind of existence would that be? For either of us?"

"Damn it, Andee! Do you honestly think I'm that shallow? That I'm

## ***MASKS***

running back to Hollywood so I can go back to being a big movie star and I'll only sneak off here to see you when it's convenient?"

The anger and emotional intensity in his voice broke the last of her defenses. She gave into the tears that had been threatening through the whole conversation. "I don't know, Max," she sobbed. "I don't know anymore."

"Shit. That's it. I'm coming over there. We have to talk."

"I thought you didn't want anyone to follow you, to see you with me?" she mumbled through her tears.

"Then I'll lose them along the way, for fuck's sake. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

He hung up, and Andee lay in the dark clutching the phone.

His pounding on her kitchen door at the back of the house came almost exactly thirty minutes later.

Still in the throes of her crying jag, she wrapped her arms around herself for warmth, and as instinctive emotional protection, and padded down the dark stairs in her pajamas to let him in.

It had begun to rain and he stood on the back stoop, the hood up on his jacket, water pouring off him. She couldn't see his face in the dark.

As soon as she opened the door, he slipped inside, jerked off his wet coat, and dragged her against him, burying her face in the damp wool of his sweater, and tangling his fingers through her hair.

"I told you I wasn't going to lose you, and I meant it, damn it." The words were as gritty and emotional as any she'd ever heard him speak. Then he was lifting her, making his way through the house, climbing the stairs, and finding her bedroom, where the small, beaded-shade night lamp burned on her dresser.

He pulled back her yellow, flannel-covered down comforter with one hand and laid her amidst the yellow-and-blue flowered sheets and pillows of her bed. Then he kicked off his boots and slid in beside her fully clothed. He held her against him once more, absorbing her tears

## *MASKS*

and the shaking of her shoulders into his body, the whole time stroking her hair and whispering sweet words of comfort that somehow only made her cry harder.

When she'd sobbed herself out, or at least had gotten to the point where only an occasional gasp shuddered through her, Max held her away from him. He didn't try to hide his own red eyes.

"Okay, let's get some things straight here," he said. "First and foremost, I'm not going to California to stay. I'm going to resolve some issues I left hanging when I came here over the summer, and to take care of some other things that have come up since. I'll be back."

She swallowed around the lump still lodged in her throat.

"You don't believe me?"

"I...I don't know what to believe right now."

"Have I ever lied to you?" The hurt in his eyes was apparent.

"No," she whispered.

"Then why would I start now? And for God's sake, I never meant to make you feel like you were the other woman to my career. All I wanted to do—all I ever want to do—is just keep you safe from the media bullshit." He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment before he continued.

"I'm sorry I said the things I did tonight, Andee. From the bottom of my heart, I'm sorry. I was upset and they just spewed out. But you don't know what it was like to have the press constantly hanging around the hospital, trying to weasel information out of anyone who'd speak, wanting to report about every little humiliating detail of Jada's illness. You don't know what it's like to have reporters watching every move you make, photographing you doing the most innocent things, but then running the pictures in the paper out of context to make it look like you were doing something else all together."

He jabbed a shaking hand through his hair. "It happens to all of us who live in the public eye. Some people can let it roll off their backs,

## MASKS

but some of us...can't. God knows I've tried. But it's always there, always eating at me. I resent like hell the intrusion in my life and the last thing I want is to see anyone else I love suffer because of it."

"But, Max, you have to know always holding the media at arms' length only makes it worse. If they can't get even a grain of the truth from you—like tonight—then of course they're going to speculate."

"Damn it! Do you think I don't know that? But I resent the fact I have to talk to them at all. What right do they have to expect any feedback from me about personal issues?"

Then he shook his head and pressed a kiss to her forehead. In a gentler voice, he said, "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry. I don't have any right to lash out at you. You're only saying the obvious, and it's not anything I haven't already heard from my agent, Jo and Kevin, even from Jada when she was alive. I know the only way to deal with the media is to make a preemptive strike. And that's what I'm going to do. But, sweetheart, I have to do it on my terms...not theirs. In my environment, not wherever they happen to have me cornered."

He cupped her face and gazed at her with troubled eyes. "I know I haven't handled this well. I know I hurt you tonight, and I promised never to do that on purpose—it wasn't intentional, I swear. I just...I need some time to take care of this stuff. Time to make a plan and figure it all out. And I need to know, for my own peace of mind, that you're here, safe and unscathed, while I'm doing it."

"So you're just going to leave."

"Yes. It's the best thing for now...the only thing. But I'll come back. I don't know when exactly, but I'll be back."

Andee sniffled, wanting very much to trust, but too damned scared to open herself completely again. She did believe Max meant well, did believe he loved her. But she hated the open-endedness of it all. She wanted to have something more to base her trust on than blind faith. Faith hadn't panned out for her when it came to relationships, so she



## *MASKS*

wanted to know how, what, why, where, and when. Except she knew Max wouldn't give her those answers, couldn't, because clearly he didn't know them yet himself.

"Please believe me," he whispered, resting his forehead against hers.

His ragged plea tied her stomach in knots. She slipped her arms around his neck and pressed her face into his shoulder. But she couldn't bring herself to make the promises she knew he wanted to hear.

If, after everything that had happened between them over the past several days, after the incredible closeness they'd shared, he could emotionally abandon her as fast as he had at the theater tonight, what was to keep that from happening again? And again? Heaven help her, she didn't think she could survive another round of that. She'd suffered through Jared's rejection and it had taken her this long to feel like she might be able to let someone in again, might be able to trust again. But in one shattering moment tonight, Max's shut-out and harsh words had hurt even more deeply than Jared telling her of his betrayal. Maybe because what she felt for Max was more powerful than anything she'd ever felt for Jared.

She was discovering the painful reality that the higher one flew, the harder the fall.

Max dragged in a breath, then released it in a raspy sigh. She felt his disappointment well up like a live thing around her.

"I don't mean to hurt you," she whispered. "I just...I..."

"I know, baby. I know this hard for you, and I know why. And God knows I don't mean to hurt you either." He held her, but where they'd always been astoundingly close, now she felt fine cracks rippling through the foundation of their relationship.

Hating this distance between them, wanting to hold onto some part of him for at least a while longer, Andee eased his sweater up his chest and over his head, then set to work on the zipper and snap of his jeans.

## MASKS

It was selfish, perhaps, to want to make love with him when she hadn't been able to promise him she trusted him to come back. But instinct led her on, and he responded as if he were as desperate as she to once more find that emotional and physical connection they'd shared from the moment they'd met.

As her shaking hands freed him of his clothes, his did the same to her. He stripped off her pajamas, seeming to savor every moment, every inch of her skin, with his touch and his gaze.

They came together with an earnestness that tore at her heart, making love as if they both knew this might be the last time for a while. *Or forever?* she silently sobbed in her heart, not wanting to believe that might be possible, but stretched too thin emotionally right now to convince herself otherwise.

When the last shudder had wracked through them, Max rose on his hands and gazed down at her. "I love you, Andrea Matthews," he said in a low vow. "With everything that I am, I love you. Don't ever doubt that."

Andee's breath caught. "I love you, too. I always will."

They said very little after that. They lay in bed holding one another, and whatever turmoil was going on in his head and heart, he kept it to himself. She did the same, just wanting to indulge in being with him for a while longer and not stir up any more pain than already stood between them.

But eventually, reality intruded once again. Neither of them had slept, and around three in the morning, Max sighed. "I'd better go. My plane leaves St. Louis at 7:10 and in this weather it's going to take me a couple of hours to get to the airport from here. Plus I have to hike a few blocks back to my truck. I didn't want to park in front of your house." He sat up and slid out from under the comforter.

Andee started to sit up, too, but Max pressed her back into the pillows with a gentle hand, and tucked her back in. "Stay in bed where

## *MASKS*

it's warm, sweetheart. I'll lock up behind myself on the way out."

Her chest felt like someone was smashing it with a cudgel and those damned hot tears burned behind her eyes again. She lay on her side, watching him as he stepped into his boxer briefs and jeans, loving yet hurting even more at the sight of his lean legs and hips, his cock—semi-erect, but so damned alluring even now—jutting from its dark nest of curls, his flat abdomen, defined chest, and muscular arms that had held her so many times over the past few days. Most of all, loving every plane and angle of his face, which had become so dear so quickly.

She wanted to beg him to stay, beg him to work out his issues here, with her, without deserting her and going two thousand miles away where she couldn't be sure if he'd ever come back. But she knew she couldn't. Knew that he'd made up his mind to leave, just as he'd made up his mind earlier in the evening to send her away at the theater. It wasn't up for discussion. And no amount of pleading was going to change his mind about what he felt he had to do. She'd only end up looking pathetic.

After he'd pulled on his sweater and tied his boots, he crouched beside the bed and stroked her cheek. He looked at her long and hard. "I'll call you."

"I don't know what else is left to say," she whispered, her heart breaking.

His chest rose and fell and the lines around his eyes and mouth deepened in pain. He closed his eyes briefly, but when he opened them, he nodded. "I know actions speak louder than words, so all I'm going to tell you is to watch and see." He kissed her with a lingering tenderness. "I love you, baby." Then he was gone.

Pain welled up from deep inside Andee and she curled into a ball, trying her damndest to fight it off. But it swept through her with a vengeance, leaving her shaking and cold in spite of the covers.

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Nothing, not even losing Jared, had ever hurt like this. *Oh, God.* Had she done the right thing, telling Max he shouldn't call? Telling him she might not be here for him even if he came back?

Throwing off the covers, she grabbed her robe from the foot of the bed, wrapped it around her, and ran for the steps. Begging had its place...when the best thing that had ever happened to you was walking out the door.

"Max, wait!" she cried.

But halfway down the steps she saw that she was too late. He'd already gone, had disappeared out into the cold, wet night, and once more, she was alone.

## CHAPTER 10

She didn't sleep after he'd gone. She tried, but her bed was still warm and rumpled from him being there, and Max's scent lingered on the pillows.

When the first light of dawn slanted through the blinds, she gave up and took a long hot shower, hoping to soak up some sort of strength, or at least drown her sorrow, then dressed and went to work.

It was probably the first time in years she'd been on campus so early in the morning. The day proved to be as cold and wet as the night had been, and did nothing to cheer her mood. In her office, she made a pot of coffee and delved into her students' papers with purpose, using them as a way to lose herself in the facts of ancient days rather than dwelling on the facts of the present. Work. It was now, as it had been when Jared died, her salvation.

*Stay busy. Keep your mind occupied. Don't think. Don't feel.*

Around nine-thirty, a light rap on her door nearly startled her out of

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her chair. For one fleeting moment her heart dared to hope...but she knew better.

"Come in," she called, her voice still a little hoarse from the emotional purge last night.

The door opened and Judy stood in the threshold. "Hey, I—" she started to say, but her eyebrows rose and her words clipped off. She stepped in the rest of the way and shut the door. "Oh, my God, hon. What's happened?" Then her eyes widened. She placed a newspaper on Andee's desk. "Does it have to do with this?"

Andee stared at the newspaper. It was the *Somerville Star*, the front page of the entertainment section. The headline read: *The Phantom Unmasked*. A picture of Max—the same tuxedo picture they'd run on the TV last night—leapt off the page at her.

"Did you know he was Max McKendrick?"

Andee pulled off her reading glasses and squeezed her eyes closed. "Yes. Not at first, but I found out Saturday night."

Judy came around the desk and knelt beside her. She grasped Andee's hand. "Sweetie, what's wrong? Talk to me. I thought I'd come here this morning and find you all aglow after your weekend."

"Oh, Jude..." She buried her face in her hands. "You know that whole John Lennon thing?"

"Yes," Judy said slowly.

"It sucks. Love sucks. I can't do this anymore."

Judy settled herself in the chair next to Andee's desk. "Tell me everything."

So Andee did. Leaving out the more intimate details, but letting everything else that had happened from the moment she'd first met Max on Thursday night spill out of her. It surprised her that she stayed dry-eyed through the whole thing—she figured she'd probably cried a couple of years' worth of tears last night and there was nothing left. But the lack of moisture didn't seem to affect the soul-tearing pain inside

## MASKS

her as she talked.

"I just feel so emotionally wiped, Judy. It hurts to think. It hurts to breathe. I can't... Jesus, I can't do anything, except sit here and stare at these damned student papers and pretend like I'm paying attention to them." She flicked her hand at them on her desk.

Judy smiled. "Like that old Nazareth song, *Love Hurts*."

Andee groaned and dropped her head onto her arms on her desktop. "Oh, God, please, enough already with the songs. Why can't I have a normal friend?"

Judy laughed, but hugged her. "Oh, hon, I'm not trying to make light of all this. I promise. But you have to know...love does hurt sometimes. Do you think Russ and I haven't had our share of pain and agony?"

"No," Andee mumbled, her chest hurting so damned bad she wished she *could* cry again. "You said you guys had love at first sight and you've lived happily ever after."

"We did. We do. But even the best relationships have trials and tribulations. Especially in the early stages when all your senses are heightened and you're super sensitive to everything. I know you feel like your heart is breaking right now. You feel like Max has deserted you, and you're not sure if you've done the right thing by setting up your own boundaries with him. But the bottom line here is that the man is one hundred percent in love with you. And you're completely tits-up in love with him."

"How could you possibly know he's in love with me, Jude?" she asked, looking up. "You've never been around him."

"Honey, after everything you've told me, I think I can say with certainty that the man would probably die for you. You're just too close to the situation right now to see it."

"I don't know how you can be so sure."

Judy picked up the newspaper again and flipped to an inside page.

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She set it back on the desk and pointed to another picture. “Because this is exactly what he was trying to protect you from. He’s been so hurt by the press, this has a fear factor equivalent to your fear of being hurt by another man.”

Andee stared at the grainy picture and her heart stopped momentarily. “Oh, Lord.”

“Yeah, oh, Lord. They only got you from the back and they don’t know who you are. They’re calling you ‘Max McKendrick’s mystery woman.’ But don’t you see? In light of his past confrontation with the tabloids, if they’d actually caught you with him, you wouldn’t be sitting here in your quiet office right now. You’d have reporters beating down your door, following you everywhere, hounding you constantly, trying to get you to spill some kind of dirt about him, or making up stories about you like they do him.

“And to Max, who’s hurting so badly from how they treated his sister, and how they’ve spread so many lies about him, knowing he’d set them on you would be akin to feeding you to the wolves. He loves you enough he’s willing to do whatever is necessary to protect you from that.”

Andee’s will crumpled, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “But why did he have to leave? I understand he’s had a shitty year with losing his sister and all the stuff with the media. I really do, and I feel awful for him. But...I just wish...I wish...” A dry sob shook her.

“You’ve both had shitty years,” Judy said gently. “You’ve both been hurt. That’s one of the things that drew you together in the first place. All that stuff’s not magically going to go away just because you’ve found each other. It’s still there—each of you with your own issues—and has to be dealt with. But the fact you do love one another is the glue that will help mend all that pain.”

“How can it mend anything when I’m here and he’s two thousand miles away doing God knows what?”



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“Not all men are Jared, Andee. They don’t all look elsewhere.”

Judy’s blunt words brought her up short. Oh, God. Was that what was eating at her? The fear that another man might betray her like Jared had? Was she afraid Max would go back to California, realize just how ordinary she was and then find someone new?

“Just because Max isn’t here doesn’t mean he’s not missing you as much as you miss him,” Judy said. “Give it some time, hon. Everything will work out.”

\* \* \*

The days passed with excruciating slowness. Andee fell back into her pattern of teaching, reading, sleeping—though not much of the last. The one exception to her routine was her new obsession with the news. Both the five and ten o’clock broadcasts each night, and the cable entertainment news shows, had become “must see TV.”

Sick, really. Max hated the press, and she knew as well as anyone that everything one read in the paper and saw on TV was not the truth. Yet here she was, a slave to the media, in hopes of hearing something, anything, about him. The irony was that after all the hoopla of finding Max tucked away in small-town, USA, he’d dropped off the face of the earth again. So she discovered nothing new. No information on what he was doing, where he was. After a couple of days, even the reporters seemed to grow tired of telling the same old story of finding him in Illinois, hashing over the lawsuit with the *Star Inquisitor*, his purported encounter with Sarah Levine, and mentioning his mystery woman.

Joann and the twins stopped by Andee’s office on Thursday, much to Andee’s surprise. She’d just assumed Joann and her family were Max’s friends and if Max wasn’t around then they wouldn’t be either. That’s the way it had been with hers and Jared’s friends. When he was gone, those friendships had changed and she no longer fit in.

But Joann and the girls didn’t seem to know or care about such rules. They arrived at her office with Jo bearing a jar of freshly made

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peach preserves, and the girls with “pitchers” for “Aunt Andee.”

Andee’s heart lurched when Leslie, the shyer of the two, climbed onto her lap and snuggled with her. She pulled some markers and paper out of her desk and gave them to the girls. Libby sat on the floor, and Leslie continued to sit on her lap, her little hands moving the pink marker over the paper in the general shape of a stick woman with a crown.

“Uncle Max says you’re his fairy princess,” Leslie said, looking up at Andee with shining, innocent eyes. “I think you’re pretty and you are a princess. And I think Uncle Max is gonna to marry you and you’re gonna live happily ever after.”

The dam on Andee’s dry spell suddenly burst and tears welled in her eyes. She hugged Leslie to her, savoring the smell of baby shampoo and little girl, and wishing adult life was as simple as a child’s. She looked up over Leslie’s head and found Joann gazing at her with understanding in her violet eyes.

“We haven’t heard from him,” she said softly, answering Andee’s unspoken question.

Andee nodded, too choked to speak.

Before they left, Joann took Andee’s phone number and left theirs for her. “You call us if you need anything,” Joann said, hugging her.

It was on the tip of Andee’s tongue to ask for Max’s phone number in California, but she didn’t. It would probably bring up awkward questions as to why she didn’t have it in the first place. And also, what kind of hypocrite would she be to call him after she’d told him not to call her?

No. He’d asked for time to take care of his issues, and she still stood by what she’d told him on Sunday night...there wasn’t anything left to say that would change things. She could cry and beg and wish he was here, but until he made the decision to deal with his fears, any peace between them would be surface at best.

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What niggled at her night and day, however, was that he wasn't the only one who had to learn to deal with his fears.

\* \* \*

On a Friday afternoon in early November, three weeks after Max's departure, Andee was in her office when Judy burst through the door.

"What are you doing?" her friend demanded.

Andee looked up, blinking. "Writing an exam for next week."

"No! I mean, what are you still doing here? You're going to miss it. Come on."

"Miss what?"

Judy's mouth opened and her eyebrows rose nearly to the curly roots of her wild hair. "Are you honestly telling me you don't know?"

"Know what?" Andee was getting more than a little perturbed. She still wasn't sleeping well, and she'd been staring at exam questions for the past two hours, so she wasn't at her most patient.

Judy sighed dramatically. "You're hopeless! Didn't you read the newspaper this morning?"

"I overslept this morning," Andee admitted. After tossing and turning most of the night, she'd only dropped off to sleep around dawn. She'd slept right through her alarm and hadn't dragged herself out of bed until after nine.

"Come on. Let's go." Judy looked at her watch, then flapped her hand in a "hurry up" motion. "It's almost four o'clock."

Andee rose from her desk, feeling rather like she was being plowed over by a freight train. Then she stopped. "I can't leave. I'm holding office hours right now. What if a student comes by?"

"Trust me. No one's going to come by. The event of the year is about to happen. Hurry up."

Andee scowled, wondering what event the university could possibly be putting on that she didn't know about, but she gathered her purse and followed Judy, pausing only long enough to pull the door shut and

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lock it.

“Care to tell me where we’re going?” she asked as they cruised down the marble-floored hallway of Howard Hall and started across the quad.

“Student center.”

The cold snap that had hit in October hadn’t ever really let up and the temperature had been well below average for weeks now. Low in the sky, late afternoon sun peeked through the clouds, but it was a pale version of its normal self. Wishing she’d brought gloves, Andee slid her hands into the pockets of her navy wool blazer, which she wore with jeans today, because when you woke up late on a Friday morning and felt supremely sorry for yourself, comfort was everything.

The student center was abuzz. More than usual it seemed, though Andee couldn’t think why that would be. There was no home football game this weekend, and it wasn’t dinner time yet.

Judy led her into the large lounge where students often gathered to watch *Star Trek* and *Seinfeld* reruns on the huge projection TV. Today, the room was packed with students and faculty members, some on the couches and chairs, but many standing or sitting on the floor.

“What’s going on?” she asked. She and Judy had no choice but to stand near the back of the room, it was that full.

“Deirdre,” Judy said, then nudged her to watch the TV.

*The Deirdre Devlin Show* was the latest craze for the daytime talk-show devotees. She’d been on a couple of years now and was *the* show to watch, rivaling *Oprah* for sheer number of viewers who tuned in each day to learn about everything from weight loss to troubled marriages to addictions to interviews with authors, stars, and politicians. She was a thirty-something redhead. Though not a beauty, and always publicly fighting her weight problem, which only endeared her more to her viewers, she was compassionate, quirky, and at times downright funny.

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The *Deirdre* music queued up and Deirdre came onstage while the studio audience applauded.

"Judy," Andee whispered, "why am I standing in the student lounge watching Deirdre Devlin?"

Judy looked at her, rolled her eyes, then grasped her chin and turned her head back toward the TV where Deirdre was telling her audience about her very special guest today.

"He's brilliant, passionate, handsome, he's hot in Hollywood, he's won three Golden Globes and an Oscar...and, up to this point, he's never given personal interviews. But today, that's about to change. Because today, in a *Deirdre* exclusive, for the very first time you're going to hear everything you always wanted to know, straight from the man himself. Help me welcome...Max McKendrick!"

As the studio audience went wild, Andee's legs turned to Jell-O and her heart nearly pounded out of her chest. Judy grabbed her under the elbow and kept her upright—and that was the *only* thing that kept her standing.

Max came onstage, looking...*oh, my God*...as real and alive and down-to-earth as the man she'd fallen in love with. No suave, highbrow, tuxedo-clad star here. Dressed in jeans, a deep evergreen-colored polo sweater, and boots, his beard fully grown in now and neatly trimmed in a popular style, he was like a dream come to life. The smile he bestowed on Deirdre when she hugged him was open and easy, and when he turned to smile and wave at the studio audience, his emerald eyes twinkled.

Everything inside Andee that had shriveled in hurt and despair over the past weeks suddenly blossomed to life once again. Her pulse thrummed, her heart filled to overflowing, and heat shimmied through her veins.

"He looks fabulous," Judy whispered.

Andee nodded, unable to speak. She was too busy staring at him,

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remembering the sound of his voice whispering in her ear, the feel of his hands on her skin, the way their bodies fit together so perfectly. Lord, she missed him so much.

“Love the beard. You look great,” Deirdre told him when they were seated on her famous big brown couch. The audience clapped and whistled their agreement.

Max smiled again. “Thanks. So do you.” And he really meant it. Andee could see the sincerity in his expression. So could Deirdre, obviously, because she blushed and thanked him.

“This is the most relaxed I think I’ve ever seen you,” Deirdre said.

“I am relaxed. I feel good. Better than I have in a very long time.”

After another minute or so of general chit chat, Deirdre told him she’d been surprised to get his call asking if she’d like to interview him. Max told her he’d decided it was time to set the record straight about some things and she was his first choice to help him.

In her compassionate, encouraging way, she got him to talk, at length, about his sister’s battle with cancer, about how her young-in-life death—she’d been only twenty-nine—had affected him. Max’s quiet retelling of raising Jada, then losing her, had everyone in the studio audience—and the student lounge at Williams University—sniffing.

After a short commercial break, Deirdre asked him about his decision to disappear from Hollywood over the summer.

“I was sad, tired, stressed. I felt like some members of the press were not respecting my privacy, and I just needed to get away for a while.”

“You needed time to grieve in peace,” Deirdre said softly.

“Yeah, I did.”

“I understand the *Star Inquisitor* has dropped their suit against you for the incident at your sister’s funeral. And that *you’re* now taking the *Inquisitor* to task in a multi-million dollar suit for libel, invasion of

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privacy, and infliction of emotional distress?”

A rush of breath escaped Andee at this information. Max was striking back?

“That’s right. The *Star Inquisitor* has to be held accountable when they print fraudulent, denigrating stories. It’s inexcusable, and I won’t tolerate it any longer. Tabloids get away with far too much of this offensive nonsense, and it’s up to us to put a stop to it.”

“Sounds like you’re sending a message,” Deirdre said.

“Yes, I am. You know as well as I do that those of us who live in the public eye are, in spite of our fame, people just like everyone else. We have families, private lives, good days and bad days, and we have a right, just like everyone else in the world, to live without constantly having cameras in our faces and without having to read malicious mistruths about ourselves in the paper.”

Deirdre nodded with fervor. Andee remembered that the talk show host had dealt with her own paparazzi issues not too long ago. “If you could tell the tabloids anything right now, Max, what would it be?”

“Back off or pay the price because my patience is at an end.”

“Well said.” Deirdre smiled, then looked directly at the camera. “We’ll be right back with more from Max McKendrick.”

“Wow,” Judy said softly. “He’s incredible.”

Andee nodded, her chest squeezing tight. He was beyond incredible. And he was taking charge of his life again. She was proud of him, and terrified all at the same time. Terrified because, while this exclusive interview with Deirdre and his turning the tables on the tabloids was a wonderful sign, she was scared to get her hopes up that he might actually find a real place in his life for her, too.

“Is this live or taped?” she asked Judy.

“The paper this morning said it was taped, but just yesterday. Deirdre apparently put her regularly scheduled show on hold in order to get Max on, and his being there wasn’t announced to the media until

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late last night. That's why it wasn't in the paper until this morning."

*The Deirdre Devlin Show* came back on.

"Can we talk about Sarah Levine?" Deirdre asked Max.

"Sure."

"Any truth at all to the rumors of your affair with her?"

"No. Sarah and I worked on *The Mighty Fall* together, but our relationship was strictly platonic."

"I understand Sarah filed a restraining order against her boyfriend, cameraman Jed Cranston, yesterday. And that she made a statement to the press saying the pictures that had been floating around, showing her bruised and battered, were made after Cranston had been out partying and had lost control of himself."

"Yes. Sarah had talked to me in confidence about it some time ago. She asked my advice and I encouraged her to get help. I'm really glad she finally has. She's a lovely, talented, young woman, and she deserves to have a good life."

"Are you saying that while the tabloids were running you through the wringer, implying you were the one who'd hurt Sarah, you kept quiet about it when you could have simply told them it was her boyfriend?"

"What she told me, she said in confidence. I made her a promise I'd protect her privacy. I don't make promises lightly."

Max looked directly at the camera for a moment, and Andee's heart stopped beating.

"The only reason I'm talking about it now is because Sarah and I spoke yesterday—she called to tell me she'd filed a restraining order, and had already spoken with the press. She's also filing a lawsuit against the *Star Inquisitor*, for publishing those pictures."

"Good for her!" Deirdre said. "All the way around. I've had Sarah on the show and I agree with you, she is a lovely young woman with a bright future ahead of her."



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Deirdre crossed her legs. “So, changing gears... Give me the scoop. I heard this morning that you put your home in Hollywood Hills on the market. Is that true?”

“It’s true.”

“Too big? Too small...?”

“Change of location.”

“Are you following the trend of so many stars who are moving out of the fancy gated communities and into regular neighborhoods?”

“Something like that,” Max said with a smile. “I have my eye on a rural property owned by some friends. I’m toying with the idea of raising horses.”

“We’re not talking California, are we?”

Max chuckled. “No. I’ve lived here seventeen years, and while California’s been very good to me, I’m a small town guy from the Midwest at heart. I’m looking to move a little closer to my roots.”

“So you’re giving up on Hollywood?”

“Not giving up on acting, no. But it’s time to make some changes in my life. Time to simplify and focus on what’s really important.”

“What is important to Max McKendrick?”

“Love. Family. Friends. The job stuff certainly has its place, don’t get me wrong. I love acting, and I don’t plan to quit anytime soon. But I’ve had a pretty hectic schedule for a lot of years now, and I’m ready to slow down, enjoy life, be a little more selective about my movie roles, not travel so much, stay closer to home.” Once again he looked at the camera and smiled, and if Andee didn’t know better, she’d think the twinkle in his eye was directed at her, making promises. Except that was crazy.

Deirdre was smiling, a knowing smile. “Okay, I have to ask, and if I’m treading into sensitive territory here and you don’t want to answer, I’ll understand. But everyone’s dying to know...”

Max chuckled again as if he knew exactly what she was going to

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say.

“The mystery woman in Illinois...”

“Oh, Lord,” Andee wheezed. Judy grabbed her hand and pumped it a couple of times.

“Yes...?” Max said.

“Fact or fiction?” Deirdre asked.

A slow, sexy smile slid over Max’s face, and for a moment Andee grew light-headed. *Oh, God.* She couldn’t pass out now.

“Fact,” he said.

Deirdre gnawed on her lower lip, looking like she was trying hard not to smile again, but it didn’t work. “You’re how old? Thirty-nine?”

“That’s right.”

“You’ve never been married?”

“Nope.”

“Why in heaven’s name not?” Deirdre wanted to know. “You’re smart, famous, rich, and let’s face it...you’re a hunk!”

The studio audience loved that. They went crazy.

“He is, isn’t he?” Deirdre demanded. The audience went even more nuts—as did the audience in the lounge at Williams U. A barely perceptible flush of red crept up Max’s face, but he stayed collected, simply smiling and shaking his head modestly.

After the audience had calmed, Deirdre said, “I’m serious. Why has a man like you never been married?”

“I hadn’t ever found the right woman before,” he said, his voice husky.

“Before?” Deirdre picked up on the same word Andee had. “Hmm...interesting word choice. So...the woman in Illinois. Anything you’d like to tell us about her?”

“Don’t pass out,” Judy hissed under her breath, as Andee’s breathing grew more and more shallow.

“She’s...amazing. Intelligent, beautiful, giving. Nothing short of

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phenomenal all the way around.” His words and his soft tone of voice seeped into Andee, sliding through her veins, and settling in her heart.

“Spoken like a man in love,” Deirdre said softly. “Is she the one?”

An emotional surge filled Max’s eyes, and his smile was one of utter contentment. “Oh, yeah,” he breathed. “She’s the one.”

Andee’s vision grew blurry.

“Sorry, all you adoring fans out there,” Deirdre was saying. “I think I can say with certainty that this bachelor is no longer available.” The smile she gave Max was one of genuine happiness for him.

“So...what’s on tap for Max McKendrick in the near future? Any movies on the horizon? Anything else you’d like us to know?”

“Well, I have a commitment until February.”

“This is onstage, correct? Playing the Phantom?”

“That’s right.” He nodded and smiled. “Once the season’s finished there, I’m planning to take some time off. And after that, I’ll just have to see what comes up. As I said earlier, I don’t plan to go too far from home for a good long while.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s in love,” Deirdre crooned to her audience.

Max continued to smile.

Deirdre turned to him once more. “It’s always a pleasure, Max. I’ve known you for years, but having a chance to actually interview you has been a treat. Will you come talk to me again sometime?”

“Sure. I’d like that.”

As Deirdre said her goodbyes, Andee buried her face in her hands, the enormity of what she’d just seen and heard sweeping through her.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” a deep voice murmured against her ear.

Her breath seized in her lungs and she turned.

The sight of Max standing inches behind her, his eyes full of love, was more than anything she’d ever expected. Ever hoped for. The rest of the busy student lounge blanked out around her, leaving only him in the spotlight.

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"I told you I'd be back," he said softly. He brushed a fingertip along her cheek. "You're everything I've ever wanted, Andee, and I'd be lost without you. But only you can decide whether you want me to stay or not."

"Oh, Max..." Her voice trembled with tears. "You know I do."

She was in his arms without knowing who reached for whom first. "I missed you so much. I'm sorry I didn't believe sooner," she murmured against the warm skin of his neck.

"No, sweetheart." He held her tight and stroked her hair. "No apologies. I'm sorry I put you through this. This was my issue, my problem, and the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. But I promise, the crap is over now." He held her away from him and looked down at her, and she felt herself falling once more into the verdant heat of his gaze.

A slow grin curved his face. "Do you know how insanely in love with you I am?"

Andee smiled through a damp haze. "Yeah, I think I do. And do you know how much I love you?"

"Oh, yeah," he whispered a split second before he kissed her with an emotional hunger that turned her existence upside down. He tasted of warm butterscotch, comfort, and strength, and Andee felt like, at long last, she'd come home.

It wasn't until the sound of clapping and whistling slowly built around them that they returned to the real world and realized where they were. Clearly the students and faculty of Williams University approved of one of their history profs hooking up with a famous movie star.

Max's chuckle sent a zing of heat through her.

"What do you say we get out of here?" he said in a playful growl next to her ear.

"Definitely."

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"Excuse me." Andee felt someone tapping on her shoulder.

*Oh, shoot. Judy!* She quickly turned to look into her friend's beaming face. "Max, Judy. Judy, Max."

"It's a pleasure," Max said, squeezing Judy's hand.

Judy flushed and smiled. "Likewise. But right now you two better get out of here before word spreads and all three thousand people on campus show up to gawk." She gave them a little push toward the door.

Max's big hand curled around Andee's and he led her out of the lounge and through the throng of people in the student center, who seemed either tickled beyond reason to see them, or in various stages of shock to have someone like Max in their midst. Max, however, seemed to be at ease. He smiled and nodded at people along the way, as if he walked through the Williams U student center with her everyday.

Finally, they were out in the nippy air of early evening.

"Is there anything you need from your office, sweetheart?"

"Nothing I can't live without."

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles, leaving her quivering from just that simple touch.

"Come on, then. I want to show you something."

It was five o'clock—nearly dark this time of year with the days growing shorter. They took advantage of the heavy gray shadows to make their way unimpeded to Max's Tahoe, which was parked on the street not too far from the student center.

Once they were safely ensconced inside the SUV, he pulled her into another breathless kiss, taking his time exploring her mouth, as if refreshing his memory of every curve and dip. By the time he gave her a steamy grin and started the engine, Andee was little more than a puddle in the passenger seat.

"Good things come to those who wait," he reminded her, his voice a sexy purr.

"So I've been told." She couldn't seem to stop smiling. "How'd you

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know I was at the student center?”

“I didn’t. I remembered you had office hours on Friday afternoon, so I went there first. When I found your door shut and locked in spite of the sign on the wall saying you should still be there, I noticed your colleague up the hall, the infamous Professor Balmendash—” Max gave her a quick grin. “—was in and I asked him if he might know where you were. He said he’d seen you going into the student center around four. I put two and two together and hoped I’d still catch you there. If not, I’d have gone to your house, or wherever I had to.”

They passed the rest of the trip in easy silence, holding hands, and sharing quick kisses. Andee had so many questions she wanted to ask, but for now, it was enough to simply be with him again, to feel his love wrapped around her.

When they turned onto the dirt road that led to the farm, she could see the porch lights at the house glowing, but it wasn’t until they pulled into the turn-around near the steps that she spied it.

The moment the Tahoe stopped, she was out the door.

She stared at the new addition to the décor on the porch and smiled.

Max had exited the SUV and come around to stand next to her. He slid an arm around her waist. “Do you know how many of those things I looked at until I found just the right one?” His voice was a soft brush against her heart. “Do you like it?”

She laughed...and it felt wonderful. “I love it.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “And I love you.”

His shining eyes filled her with contentment.

“There’s more.” He turned her around and nudged her up the porch steps, toward the six-foot tall wood sculpture of two bear cubs climbing a tree. “Look by the little one’s paw.”

Andee climbed the steps and approached the bears, which stood a few feet from the front door. She rose on tiptoe and finally saw a small box resting near the smaller bear. She picked it up with shaking hands,

## MASKS

and turned to look at Max, who'd followed her up the steps. Her heart pounded so loud she was sure he must be able to hear it.

"Open it," he said in a low voice.

She did, even though she could barely breathe.

*Oh, Lord.* She thought she whispered Max's name, but she wasn't sure.

Max took the box from her, slid the diamond and sapphire ring from its velvet nest, then lifted her hand to his lips for a brief, soft kiss. He gazed down at her with those vivid green eyes, and the intensity in them, the love in them, caused her heart to skip several beats.

"I can't promise you that I'll always say the right things, or that I won't act like an ass sometimes because, in my own ignorance, I might," he said, his voice a caress. "But I can promise I'll always love you with everything that I am. And that you and our family will always come first in my life. I can't imagine living without you, Andee. Will you marry me?"

In that split second, Andee felt the chilly air on her cheeks, smelled the damp bite of rain in the air, and heard the huge elms around the front of the house sighing as they swayed in the night breeze. But the only thing that mattered was the man standing in front of her, offering his heart. Her own heart throbbed in response and she felt a smile curve her lips. "Yes!" she said without hesitation, half-laughing, half-crying.

And then she was in his arms and they were both swept up in the swell of love.

After several long moments, Max held her away from him. He smiled and his eyes sparkled. "Now, let's see if I got this part right." He slipped the ring onto her left hand—a perfect fit. "I know diamonds are traditional, but the sapphires were the color of your eyes, so I couldn't resist."

One of his big hands cupped her face and tilted it upward. "Those beautiful, expressive eyes. I was yours from that very first night I saw

## *MASKS*

you from up on stage.”

“I was yours that night, too,” she whispered, thinking of her unexpected, overpowering response to him during the performance.

They kissed again, and what started as tender built to a heated hunger, until they were both fondling with eager abandon.

“Let’s go inside,” Max rumbled. “I have some more promises to make good on.”

“You do?”

He grinned down at her as he unlocked the front door. Then he lifted her in his arms and carried her into the house. “Romantic dinner, bubble bath...and other adventures.”

As he set her back on her feet, his mouth found her earlobe and nibbled, then moved lower, his hands pushing aside her shirt and jacket, so his questing lips had easier access to that sensitive hollow between her neck and shoulder. A shudder of longing surged through Andee and heat built in her womb.

“Max?” she murmured, letting her head tip back.

“What, baby?” His long, skilled fingers were already unbuttoning her blouse, and his lips drifted downward with each button released.

“Do you— Unnh!” The volcanic heat of his mouth had just found her jutting nipple through the lace of her bra. “Do you think we could hold off on that dinner and bath until later?”

The low pulse of his chuckle filled her existence with love and desire. “I kind of thought you might say that. So what’ll it be, sweetheart? The kitchen table, the couch, the ottoman, upstairs in the bedroom?”

“Here!” she gasped, wrapping a leg around his hips and grinding her needy core against his erect cock. Even through the double layer of jeans, he was as hard and eager for her as she was wet and ready for him.

“Do you think we should shut the front door first?” came the



## ***MASKS***

mischievous response?

“Nah!” they both said at the same time.

Their soft laughter soon mingled with moans, and it would be much, much later before they got around to dinner.

## EPILOGUE

*November 28*

Sommerville, IL (AP) – Oscar-winning actor Max McKendrick, 39, tied the knot with his college professor sweetheart, Andrea Matthews, 34, over Thanksgiving weekend. The couple was married in a small ceremony at their farm in Illinois with only family and close friends in attendance.

According to talk-show host Deirdre Devlin, who interviewed McKendrick in early November, “Max is the happiest I’ve ever seen him. I wish him and his new wife all the best. They’re going to be one of those Joann Woodward and Paul Newman type couples. Together forever.”

\* \* \*

*July 22*

## ***MASKS***

Sommerville, IL (AP) – Actor Max McKendrick, 40, and his wife Andrea, 35, welcomed their first child into the world on July 20. The little boy, named Caleb James McKendrick, weighed a healthy 6 pounds 14 ounces. Mother, baby, and proud papa are all doing well.

## M. L. RHODES

Award-winning author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly ten years. Along with the erotic romance fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also published everything from poetry, to magazine articles, to short stories, to traditional romance, to steamy romantic suspense novels. In her fiction works, her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine* and *Word Weaving*, and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

Intelligent, empowered heroines and strong-but-tender heroes are her favorites. There's nothing more exciting than putting two spirited people on the page together and watching them navigate the pitfalls and the emotional and sensual delights of falling in love. That is, after all, what romance is all about!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, surf on over to her website at [www.mlrhodeswriting.com](http://www.mlrhodeswriting.com). She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at [ML@mlrhodeswriting.com](mailto:ML@mlrhodeswriting.com).

\* \* \*

***Don't miss One Enchanted Evening, by M. L. Rhodes,  
available soon from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

*Willow More's erotic lingerie line is the most sought after in the world. Her clientele is convinced she's a mysterious, sultry temptress. After*

*all, who but a true vixen could create the daring sweet nothings she designs? But in reality, the quiet, unassuming Willow lives alone in a hundred-year-old mansion with her treasured books, antiques, and her computer for company. The only passionate trysts she experiences are in the fantasies of her heart. That is, until she wins an antique glass bottle at an auction.*

*There's something alluring and...potent...about the bottle. When she holds the ancient glass in her hands, inhales the exotic spicy scent that wafts from within it, waves of intense desire sweep through her. In an impassioned moment, she cries aloud how she wishes she could spend just one night with a magnificent man who could love her as she is, and indulge in hot, mind-blowing sex.*

*Unbeknownst to Willow, her wish is about to come true...*

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