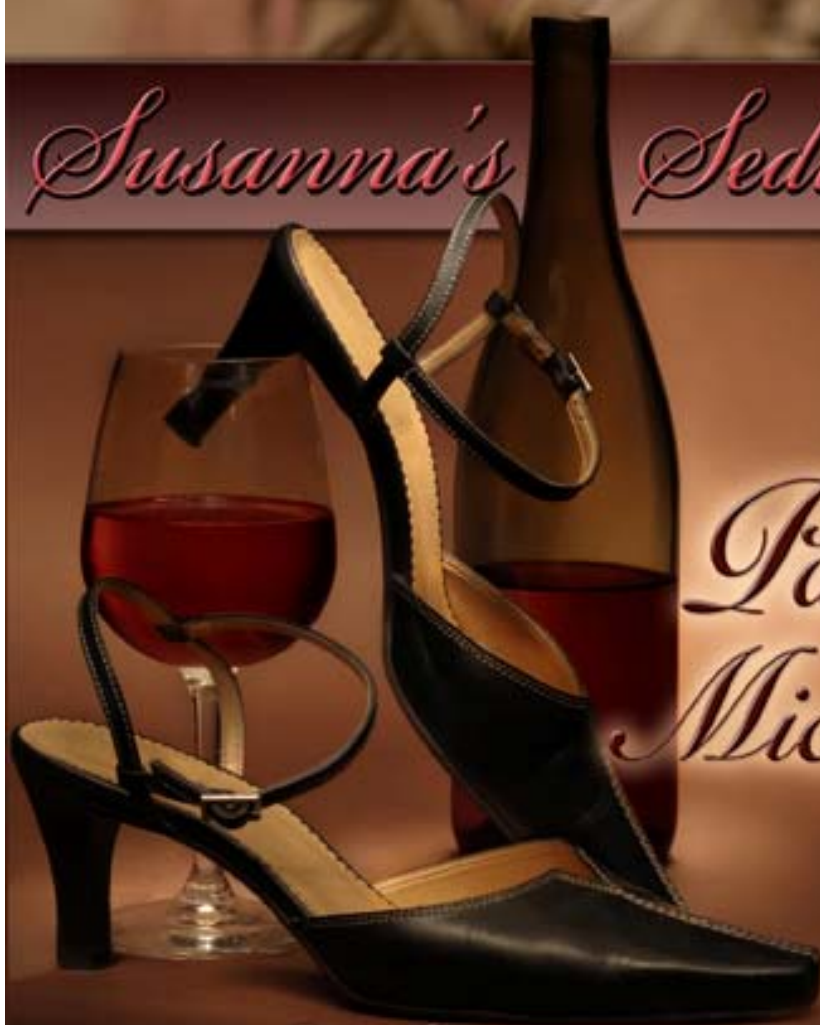


Susanna's Seduction



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Susanna's Seduction

Patrice Michelle

Dedication

Thank you to my Patrice Michelle Yahoo group readers for walking through this book a chapter at a time with me. Thanks for all your wonderful support!

To my family for supporting my crazy writing hours. I love you!

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Chapter One

Always the bridesmaid, Susan thought as a wry smile formed on her lips. Crisp fall wind ruffled her hair, blowing the long, blonde strands around her shoulders. She stood staring at the black granite sign outside an upscale Italian restaurant in East Hampton. *Piccoli's*, the fancy, gold letters read.

Why in the world have I let Jason talk me into being "the heavy"?

She knew why. He was her baby brother and ever since their parents' fatal car accident twelve years ago, she felt responsible for Jason, even if he was now a grown man of twenty-seven and about to get married.

A few weeks ago, during a luncheon with Jason and Melanie, his bride-to-be asked Susan to be her maid of honor in her "Melanie-ish" sort of way.

"Oh, Susan, could you please be my maid of honor? I would ask one of my friends to do it, but they're all so flighty. You've been a bridesmaid in so many weddings; you're a real pro at this. You're so sensible, Susan. I know you'd do an awesome job."

Susan didn't care for the indirect implication Melanie made—that she was "always the bridesmaid, but never the bride". She was about to decline when Jason piped in, "Come on, Susan. Do it for me?" He gave her those puppy dog eyes, stopping the "no thanks" on her lips.

When she'd first met Melanie, Susan wondered how the socialite and Jason had ended up together. Jason didn't run in the same social circles as Melanie. Melanie was a debutante through and through. Susan could only surmise it must be "true love" for Melanie. By the look in Jason's eyes when he shifted his gaze back to his fiancée, she knew it was for her brother. Against her better judgment, she heard herself saying, "Okay."

She should've listened to her reservations about accepting the task of maid of honor. This morning, Jason called her at work.

"Susan, I need your help. Melanie just received a fax from Piccoli's. The rehearsal dinner is in two days and she's in a panic because the menu isn't correct. She asked if you could handle talking to the restaurant manager and get this straightened out."

Susan sighed. "Why can't she call them herself?"

Jason laughed and whispered into the phone, "To be honest, I think she's a little intimidated. According to her, Piccoli's is the place to be seen in East Hampton and I think she wants to make sure she doesn't step on any toes."

"Oh, great, but it's okay for me to go in raging?" She snorted into the phone. Granted, she didn't personally frequent the restaurants in East Hampton, so she had nothing to lose, but it was the sheer principle that raised her ire.

"Come on, Sensible Susan," Jason cajoled.

She set her teeth. He'd taken to calling her that ever since their luncheon. "Jason, I don't appreciate the nickname—"

"I know, I know," he interrupted, snickering at her irritation as only a younger brother could. "But you're very good with people. After all, you didn't get to be the top public relations person in your firm by accident. This is the last request. I promise."

And here I stand. Susan shook her head and glanced at the faxed copy of the rehearsal dinner's menu in her hand. Opening the door to Piccoli's, she muttered, "Here goes nothing."

After she spoke to the waiter, she pulled out a chair at a nearby table and sat down to wait for him to get the manager. She was glad she'd picked early morning to accomplish her task, for the restaurant was currently empty. It would make for an easier discussion if she didn't have to worry about the patrons overhearing their conversation.

"How can I help you, Miss?"

Susan turned at the deep, masculine voice. She stood and extended her hand. "Susan Brennon."

Her heart thumped as the handsome man grasped her hand in his warm one. His chocolate brown eyes surveyed her face while his sensual mouth curved into a smile. The faint, arousing smell of aftershave tickled her nose, making her want to pull closer and take a stronger whiff. He didn't release her hand right away and tiny bolts of electricity shot up her arm. Her pulse thrummed at the sensation.

She let go of his hand then ran her fingers through her wind-blown hair, trying to smooth it. Handing him the corrected menu, she launched into her purpose for being there. "My future sister-in-law asked me to talk to you about the errors in the menu for her rehearsal dinner."

He raised a dark eyebrow, amusement reflected in his gaze. "Sent you to the wolves, did she?"

Susan laughed. "I hope not." More like the lion's den, she thought as she watched his dark head bend over the menu. He was tall and had the sexiest hands she'd ever seen. Neatly trimmed nails topped squared fingers and broad palms. She hadn't detected much of an accent when he'd spoken, but his pitch-black hair and olive skin tone made her wonder if he was Italian. Charcoal gray dress slacks and a black, fine-gauge sweater hugged his physically fit physique well.

He looked up, his expression apologetic. "Please forgive the error, Miss Brennon. I'm sure this can be corrected."

Susan smiled. "Thank you for your help, um...I'm sorry, I didn't get your name."

He extended his hand again and took her hand in his. "Michael." The electricity was back and her heart tripped several beats when his dark eyes fixed on hers. "You know, I'll bet I can even get a few bottles of wine thrown in."

"Really?" she asked, surprised.

"If you'll have dinner with me on Friday night."

Her stomach tumbled and her cheeks heated at his close scrutiny. "Is that a bribe?" She gave him a half smile while trying to regain her composure.

"Absolutely."

The sensation of his lips brushing against her knuckles made her body hum all over. After a few seconds, her brain reengaged, and the day he'd suggested for their date finally sank in. Disappointment made her growing anticipation plummet. "Um, wait...Friday night? That's the night of the rehearsal dinner."

His eyebrows drew together. "Do you have a date?"

"No, I—"

"Well then, it's settled. I'll be your date," he finished with a pleased smile.

"You don't have to work?" This was moving faster than she expected.

"No, I have that night off." His eyes twinkled and his grin broadened.

Susan thought about Jason's latest nickname for her. She *had* been sensible all her life, at least when it came to dating men. She'd always dated guys she could read—the most sensible kind—and as a result had had the most sensible relationships...which led to boredom.

Michael might be a total stranger, but the man certainly wasn't that easy to read. The attraction was obvious, but *he* was a mystery. She could meet him here at the restaurant, along with the rest of the wedding party. No harm in that. She smiled up at him.

"Sure, why not."

* * *

Susan stood outside Piccoli's trying not to look like she was expecting anyone. After all, what if Michael didn't show? She was soaking in the last warm rays of the setting sun when a sudden cold wind sailed through the parking lot. Her black silk knee-length dress did little to keep her warm, so she tugged her overcoat tight around her body and absorbed the wool's thick warmth. Jason passed her on the way back from his car, carrying Melanie's camera. He held the door open for her. "Coming, sis?"

She quickly glanced up one side of the parking lot then down the other. Nothing. Turning toward the open door, she shook off her sinking spirits. "Yeah, just getting some fresh air."

She followed her brother through the dimly lit, cozy restaurant. Smells of rich marinara sauce, garlic and steaming bread met her senses. Her heels made no sound on the deep red carpet as they walked past several tables with starched white tablecloths until they reached the large private room reserved for the rehearsal dinner guests. A long table housed the entire entourage of bridesmaids and groomsmen as well as Melanie's parents. Susan wished her parents were still alive so they could experience this evening with them.

After she handed her coat to the waiter, she settled into the plush leather seat next to Jason and smiled so no one would notice her melancholy mood.

"Oh, my gosh!" Melanie gushed, awe in her voice. She grabbed Jason's arm and peered out into the restaurant. "Mr. Piccoli is coming over to speak to us. I can't believe it. Maybe he's going to apologize for the menu mix up."

Susan forgot all about Mr. Piccoli when she saw Michael approaching the open door. He smiled as he entered the room, walked to her side of the table and put his hands on the chair next to her.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Susan."

Smiling up at him, Susan turned to introduce him to Jason when she realized she didn't know his last name. Embarrassed heat stained her cheeks. She locked gazes with her brother, hoping a great excuse would come to mind.

Michael took care of her dilemma when he offered his hand to Jason. "Michael Piccoli. Nice to meet you."

At the look of surprise on Melanie's face, Susan had to laugh, even though she was just as shocked to discover her date was none other than the famous restaurant's owner.

"How did you two meet?" Melanie's curious gaze darted between Susan and Michael.

Michael turned his warm brown eyes to Susan's upturned face. "I guess you could say we met over a meal, and I've been head over heels ever since."

While Michael pulled out his chair, Jason leaned over and whispered into his sister's ear, "Not so sensible now, huh, sis?"

Jason had to know she'd just met Michael since she told him she'd never frequented the East Hampton restaurants. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as she muttered, "Not a word."

Once Michael settled into his seat, Susan shifted her gaze back to her date. His eyes shining with amusement, he leaned close to her ear and said in a low voice, "I hope to go on a 'real' date sometime soon, Susanna."

Susan couldn't help the smile that tilted her lips at the nickname he'd given her. Susanna sounded beautiful coming from him and nowhere near as "sensible" as Susan.

When Michael lifted her hand and planted a tender kiss on her open palm, his penetrating gaze full of seductive promises, her breath caught in her throat. For once in her life, she was happy to just be the bridesmaid.

Dinner flew by much too quickly for Susan. Near the end of the meal, Melanie insisted Michael tell how Piccoli's got started.

He graciously told his story.

"I started with very modest means and nothing but my ambition and a dream. For years I worked in the kitchens of several local restaurants, learning everything I could from the chefs. Eventually, I worked my way up to head chef at an exclusive restaurant, but I craved more. I wanted total control. Basically," he said with a smile, "I wanted to run my own restaurant. Then, one day, as I was doing my rounds in the restaurant, making sure customers were happy with their meals, a customer stopped me and told me how impressed he was with my customer-centered attitude. He offered to back me financially if I wanted to start my own restaurant." Michael grinned, glancing Susan's way before continuing. "I

was floored by the man's generous offer. I agreed, and that's how Piccoli's came into existence."

"I guess you bought out the original investor a long time ago," Melanie added with a laugh as she picked up her glass of wine.

Michael turned her way. "Actually, no."

Her blonde eyebrows rose in surprise as she set down her glass. "Surely with the tremendous success of your restaurant, you could've bought him out several times over."

He gave her a half smile. "Yes, but that wasn't the point. This man believed in me. I owed him a great deal. He allowed me to achieve my dream. To this day, he still remains a silent partner of Piccoli's."

Susan's respect for Michael jumped a hundredfold at his response. This was a man of integrity, a man who not only ran his business with his head, but he didn't leave the heart part behind.

She'd seen it happen often. In the cutthroat world of advertising, she'd definitely been on the receiving end of ladder-climbing, backstabbing co-workers out for "number one" no matter who they had to step on to get there. Crossing over into public relations was the best thing she ever did. She'd found her niche, worked hard to earn her partner status and held her position with an iron fist—all while keeping her integrity intact. At the end of every day, she could still look herself in the mirror and like the person staring back.

Still, there were times when she couldn't help but feel like something was missing in her life. It would be nice to have someone to share her day with.

She came out of her reverie to see Michael looking at her. She smiled, thinking, *I really like this man.*

The wedding party had resumed normal across-the-table chit-chat. She tilted her head as Michael continued to stare.

"What are you thinking?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"That I'm a very lucky man," he replied, his eyes searching her face.

"I think people make their own luck. It sounds like that's exactly what happened when you started and then made a success of Piccoli's."

"I wasn't referring to my restaurant, Susanna. I meant every word of what I said about how we met."

She thought back to what he'd said and her eyes widened when she remembered his "head over heels" comment.

"I...uh...thought you were just making a joke."

Michael started to speak when Melanie interrupted them. "Thank you for coming tonight, Susan and Michael. Several of us are going over to Tease for drinks and some dancing, so I guess we'll see you tomo—"

"You'll see us there," Michael finished for her.

A surprised look crossed Melanie's face. "Oh, I didn't think you guys would be interested in coming."

Meaning: I thought you two were too old to hang with us, Susan translated with a mental snort. Though she was surprised Michael wanted to go to Tease.

Susan glanced at him. "You want to go?"

His black eyebrow rose. "We could always go back to my place—"

"We'll see you there," she replied to Melanie, her heart palpitating at the idea of being alone with this seductive man...er, stranger, she reminded herself. She didn't think she was ready to be one-on-one with Michael just yet.

"Then, I guess we'll see you guys there." Melanie rose from her seat and put her purse on her shoulder.

Jason stood, grinning. "See you later, sis."

When they walked away, Michael clasped her hand and kissed the back of it, saying with a chuckle, "You're not afraid to be alone with me, are you?"

"No," she said quickly, glancing up at him.

He gave her a knowing smile then said in a light tone, "Come on. We old people need to keep up with them young whippersnappers."

* * *

Michael followed her utility vehicle in his low-slung silver sports car over to the nightclub. Susan shivered when he put his hand on the small of her back to escort her inside. Once they entered the trendy nightclub with its dim ambiance and upbeat music playing in the background, she spied Jason and Melanie sitting among their friends in a circular corner booth.

Jason waved and Michael acknowledged him with a nod. At the same time he clasped her elbow and steered her toward the dance floor, whispering in her ear, "Since you're avoiding being alone with me, I have a confession to make."

Susan started to deny the first part of his comment, but the last half intrigued her. She allowed him to pull her up on the raised, lighted dance floor and deep into the crowd of gyrating dancers before she called out over the music, "What's your confession?"

He gave her a devilish smile then clasped her waist and pulled her fully against his chest. Leaning close, he said in a husky tone, "I see dancing as a form of foreplay...a way to seduce you into wanting to come home with me."

Heat suffused her cheeks and shot straight to her toes as she met his gaze. Raw desire flickered in the murky depths. Swiftly turning in his arms to face away from him, she rocked her hips to the song's fast beat, calling over her shoulder, "I don't go home with strangers."

Michael placed his hand on her waist and pulled her flush against his body. "Then I'll just have to make sure I'm no stranger to you before we leave this dance floor," he murmured against her ear as he spread his fingers wide and lowered his hand. The DJ started up a seductive song at the same time Michael applied pressure against her lower belly. He molded her entire backside to his hard frame, cradling her hips against his.

The crush of the people dancing all around, bumping and jostling them, while Michael held her in such an intimate embrace, literally

seducing her in a crowd, turned her breathing shallow and rapid. When his lips grazed her neck, she found herself laying her head against his broad shoulders. *Damn the seductive man.* "I—I barely know you."

Michael's mouth touched the sensitive spot behind her ear. "I'm your knight in shining armor, the man who wants to sweep you off your feet." His erection nudged her buttocks, making her body throb in heated anticipation.

She turned in his arms and put a bit of space between them, giving him a knowing look. "And right into your bed."

Michael gripped her waist and yanked her close, the look on his handsome face intense. "I won't deny my attraction to you."

Her heart skipped a beat at his adamant comment. She looped her arms around his neck as his hands slid to her hips and his rock hard thigh moved her skirt higher. He fit himself with her like a puzzle piece and tightened his hold, forcing her hips to move with his and the beat of the music.

"But I'm a man who enjoys foreplay just as much as the sexual act. You're beautiful inside and out. I look forward to seducing your mind as well as your body."

His mouth hovered over hers, close enough to kiss her. Susan's pulse thundered in her ears as she glanced at his very kissable mouth. Her instincts told her he had the kind of mouth that could be both hard and hot, depending on his intensity. She liked the idea of the dual scenarios pressing against her, but she wanted him to make the first move.

The alluring music stopped, pulling her out of the seductive moment. She lowered her arms and stepped back, expelling the breath of anticipation she'd been holding.

At the awkward pause between them, her stomach tensed. Things were moving faster with Michael than they ever had with any other man. The pace sent her senses reeling. She turned to walk away. "How about a drink?"

Michael clasped her hand, his expression determined. "Before you walk off this floor, I want to hear you say it, Susanna."

“Say what?” Unable to meet his gaze, she glanced down at his hand holding hers. She noted the difference in his olive complexion next to her fairer skin. Excitement skittered through her at his touch...and the thought of those dark hands skimming up her pale thighs. When he squeezed her fingers slightly, her gaze traveled up his expensive charcoal gray suit until she met his steady gaze.

His thumb rubbed back and forth along the top of her hand while his piercing eyes, unwavering and confident, locked with hers. “That I don’t feel like a stranger to you.”

Chapter Two

Susan grinned and gave him a neutral answer. "You certainly don't act like a stranger."

A challenging gleam flickered in his eyes. "That's not the answer I was looking for."

"Don't expect me to ever be predictable." She pulled her hand from his and turned to walk off the dance floor. Wow, she enjoyed the back and forth verbal foreplay between them, soaked it up. She did speak the truth. Nothing she'd done so far with Michael was anything her "old" self would've done.

He came up beside her and wrapped his arm around her waist, a sexy smile canting his lips. "I'm counting on that unpredictability, but there is one thing I can predict."

"What's that?" she asked as they walked together between the tables.

"You'll taste as good as a fine merlot."

Heat shot straight to her core at his intimate words. Susan resisted a shiver as he led her over to the bar.

* * *

As Michael ordered them a bottle of merlot, Susanna took a few minutes to speak to her brother and his fiancée. Michael's gaze traced the curve of her hips, and he smiled when carnal thoughts quickly followed.

"Your wine, sir?" the bartender asked, drawing his attention as he poured a bit of wine into his glass.

Michael swirled the merlot and inhaled the different scents while his thoughts remained on Susanna. Nodding his approval to the bartender to pour two glasses from the bottle, he set his jaw and forced himself to tamp down his intense desire for this woman.

His relationship with his ex-girlfriend Julie had moved at a velocity even he couldn't have seen with the naked eye. He was a passionate man who approached everything in life with a zealously and verve others envied. He wanted to follow his lustful instincts with Susanna, but warning bells rang with vivid clarity in his head. He didn't want a repeat of his last relationship and the ones that came before...all fire and no substance.

Susanna was different. When she came to his restaurant to help out Melanie, he figured she'd done it to help her brother. At the dinner tonight, he could tell Jason and Susanna were close, and considering their parents weren't at the rehearsal dinner, he assumed they only had each other. Family came first for him. They always had. He could tell family was very important to her, too.

He watched her talking with Jason and Melanie's friends. She had an infectious smile and exuded quiet confidence, yet there was something in her guarded blue eyes and the way she'd evaded his pursuit into her psyche that told him she usually held a part of herself back in relationships.

Michael wanted it all.

The entire package attracted him, grabbing him in the gut, to the point his attraction to her was almost painful, it went so deep. He wanted to explore every facet, from her gorgeous blonde head to her beautiful unpainted toes. He wanted to know what motivated her, her ambitions and desires. He wanted to know why she'd go along with his story of how they'd met, letting everyone assume she and Michael had been dating. He hoped to hell it was because she was as attracted to him as he was to her.

When Susanna approached, he handed her a glass of wine. She raised her right eyebrow and pursed her lips in a seductive smile before taking a sip. "Trying to prime me?"

He realized she was referring to his earlier comment that she'd taste like a fine merlot and his insides clinched. Even before he'd really gotten to know her, by her selfless actions with her family, he knew the things that mattered to her. Beyond his attraction to her...that was the reason he'd asked her out.

He raised his glass in a "touché" salute. "The evening is still young."

"And the wine bottle is still full," she said with a wink as she raised her glass.

Damn, he wanted this woman with a vengeance. The verbal sparring was almost as good as sex.

Almost.

Michael tilted his head toward a small, corner table for two. "Want to grab that table?"

Susan eyed the secluded corner. "You bring the wine and I'm yours." Before she walked away, she gave him a naughty smile.

Picking up the bottle of wine, Michael chuckled at her wit. How many double entendres could they exchange in one evening? He damned well planned to find out...along with a lot more about the intriguing woman.

Susan sat at the small café table, wine glass in hand as he set the bottle on the table between them.

Her eyebrow arched. "Think one bottle is going to be enough?"

"Depends on if you want to remember our conversation in the morning," he shot back as he sat down and raised his glass in salute.

"Am I going to want to remember it?" Her lips curved upward before she took a long sip.

She was challenging him, and he fucking loved it. "I'll do my best to make sure I'm worth thinking about tomorrow."

"You're doing pretty good so far." A serious look crossed her face and she set her half full glass on the table. "Tell me, have you always been so focused on what you want in life?"

He topped off her glass and his own before setting the bottle down. "You're referring to Piccoli's?"

When she nodded, he answered honestly. "I've always known I wanted to run my own business. Combining my love for delivering a good meal with entrepreneurship appealed to me on many levels."

"You *like* being the boss." She cast him a knowing smile.

"Calling all the shots has its advantages, but I'm willing to give up control with the right incentive," he said as his gaze slid suggestively down her body. Pleased with her low laughter, he moved the conversation to her. "What about you? What career have you chosen for yourself?"

She ran her fingers down the stem of her wine glass. "A career that's rewarding and challenging, but one that I've worked very hard to establish and maintain. I work for the PR firm Anderson & Manning."

He could see Susanna pitching to potential clients. Her open, honest face would be very appealing, while her professional air would instill confidence that she could deliver. She'd already sold him. "You'd fit right in doing that kind of work. It's very satisfying to be at a point in your career where your labors have paid off, isn't it?"

Raising her glass, she nodded. "Here, here...so long as we don't get complacent."

"That word is *not* in my vocabulary."

* * *

Susan chuckled at his adamant statement. In the short time she'd known Michael, she would never use the word complacent to describe the man. Intense, hard-working, dedicated, bluntly honest, yes, but never complacent. He was definitely passionate. The man oozed sexual charisma with every heated look, every well-placed touch.

Eyeing him, she asked, "Are you a workaholic, spending every waking hour at your restaurant?"

He shook his head. "No. I love what I do, but I work to live. I don't live to work. Like you, my family is very important to me. I make time for them."

Susan was surprised Michael had picked up on how important family was to her. She nodded. "It's true. I would do just about anything to help out my family if they needed me."

His eyebrow rose. "Like track down the owner of an exclusive restaurant to make sure your brother's rehearsal dinner menu is just right?"

She smiled. "Exactly." She might put being there for her family pretty high on her priority list, but Michael appeared to have a much better handle on balancing his life. He seemed relaxed and laid back. She'd had to work hard to get where she was in the firm. Only in the last few months had she allowed herself to truly enjoy the fruits of her labor at work.

All work and no play had made her very dull. Michael was a professional, but he was also exciting, spontaneous and so damned sexy. Picking up her glass, she took another drink, enjoying learning about the man behind the seductive veneer and enticing double entendres. "Now that I know how you work, what do you do for fun?"

A devilish grin tilted his lips. "You mean other than pursue you?"

Thoroughly enchanted, she refused to give him an inch—he would take way more than a mile. "Yes, other than that, King of Repartee."

Lifting his nose with a regal air, he spoke as if he were reading his own bio. "His highness has an affinity for roller coasters and collects first edition board games."

Susan choked on her wine and quickly set down her glass. She swallowed her gulp of wine, while tears welled in amusement. "Roller coasters and board games?"

"When was the last time you rode a roller coaster?" he asked, a curious expression on his face.

She thought back, trying to remember. "Um, probably when I was twelve."

Excitement sparked in his gaze as he leaned on the table. "Remember how free you felt?"

"I remember how my stomach felt. When I lay in bed that night after our trip to the amusement park, I kept feeling that same 'my stomach just met my throat' sensation over and over again. The only thing that stopped it was finally falling into an exhausted sleep."

"It's a thrilling, out of control, free-floating feeling." He sat back in his chair, appreciation reflected in his gaze. "Like being on a first date with a person you've just met."

Susan's gaze collided with his. Every nerve ending in her body jangled to life that he'd equated the exhilarating sensation to being with her. "You're definitely leaving a lasting impression."

Michael flashed a confident grin and held the bottle up. "More wine?"

After he poured more wine for her, he asked, "What do you do to relax?"

"Other than take long hot, baths..." She paused and swirled the wine in her glass, watching the deep red color cling to the sides. "I accept dates from perfect strangers and share a bottle of good Merlot with them."

* * *

An hour later, Susan and Michael followed the rest of her brother's wedding party out of the bar.

Susan hugged Jason and kissed him on the cheek. Pulling back, she said, "See you at the church, little brother."

Jason smiled. "You okay to drive home?"

Susan laughed and nodded.

"I'll make sure she gets home," Michael said from behind her.

Turning to Michael, she met his gaze. "You plan on following me?"

“Right up to your doorstep.”

Her stomach did fluttery flip-flops at the determination in his tone. She and Michael had exchanged many more double entendres while they'd finished off their bottle of wine. The man was a fantastic, witty conversationalist, not to mention sexy as sin.

Jason looked Michael straight in the eye as he shook his hand. “Thanks for making sure my sister gets home safe. By the way, you're invited to the wedding tomorrow.”

Michael grinned, glancing at Susan. “Another date with Susan. How can I refuse?”

“Oh, Susan, do you think you could be at the church an hour earlier tomorrow?” Melanie asked.

Susan groaned inwardly. It was one o'clock in the morning. At this rate, she'd get five hours sleep max before she'd have to be at the church. “Sure, Melanie.”

Melanie flashed her a bright smile. “Thanks. See you in the morning.”

While Michael escorted her to her vehicle, her body tingled all over at the sensation of his hand at the small of her back. He had her so caught up she barely noticed the cool fall wind. As she slid her key into the lock, his warm breath brushed her neck. “Are you at least going to let me kiss you tonight?”

She jerked her gaze to his. “I...really hadn't thought that far ahead.”

“Liar,” he said, amusement dancing in his shadowy gaze.

Barely an inch separated them. Time seemed to stand still for several long seconds until he reached around and opened her door for her. “I'll follow you home.”

A little disappointed he didn't take advantage of their close proximity, Susan slid into her seat and shut the door. Maybe he wanted to kiss her outside her apartment door?

Her spirits rose at the thought and she started her car, humming along to the song's upbeat tune on the radio.

She wasn't drunk by a long shot, but the wine had certainly done its job on her inhibitions. All she could think about as she drove home was how Michael's lips would feel against hers, the sensation of his hands on her waist, pulling her close.

By time she reached her apartment's parking lot, her nerves jangled with pent-up desire. But when she cut her engine, a depressing thought crossed her mind. *Sheesh, I hope the man can kiss. Damn, I've built it up in my mind so much on the way home the poor man doesn't have a prayer.*

Ironically, she'd never in her life fantasized about a man like this...but then, she'd always made sure to date men she could read. She knew exactly which ones would wait until the third date before trying to kiss her, which ones would shift straight into sex at the end of date number one, and which ones needed their mom's permission to ask her out on date number two. Safe men, staid men...predictable men. She'd dated them all. And had been left numb.

Michael came on full force. He left no doubt he was attracted to her, but the way he listened to her and asked her questions...he set her off kilter. When he looked at her, it was as if he already knew her deepest secrets and fears, but he wanted her to share what was buried in her soul. His penetrating gaze made her tingle all over.

Michael stood outside her car door and opened it for her. Her skin prickled as he walked beside her toward her high-rise, brick apartment building. Opening the heavy outside metal and glass door, he followed her into the lobby.

Susan proceeded to the elevator and pressed the up button. Her insides began to vibrate in aroused overdrive as Michael stepped next to her. She cast a surreptitious glance his way to find the seductive man staring down at her, an inscrutable expression on his face. The elevator arrived and Michael followed her inside.

Once she punched the button for floor nine, she walked to the back of the elevator then turned to face the doors. She gasped when Michael's hand landed on the wall next to her head. He'd moved right into her personal space and stared down at her with his seductive, warm

chocolate gaze. Michael's alluring cologne—its scent subtle yet commanding all at once—washed over her. After all the talking they'd done the past few hours, conversation evaporated away as simmering sexual tension boiled to the surface.

As the elevator began to move upward, she stared at his angular jaw. A five o'clock shadow had already begun to form on it. What would it feel like to have his rough stubble against her mouth?

I'm unpredictable, at least tonight, she reminded herself. She licked her lips. "Don't you want to find out if I taste as good as that bottle of merl—"

He cut her off, his lips landing on hers with an intensity that blew her away. Susan's world rocked when he stepped flush against her body, slanting his mouth across hers in a hungry kiss.

He grasped her hips, pulling her even closer as his tongue tangled with hers. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she moaned against him, reveling in his aggressive, dominant mouth pressing against hers. His sexy stubble made her want to kiss him all night long. When Michael's hand cupped her head and tilted it so he could thrust his tongue deeper, her breasts tingled and desire pinged, touching every part of her body like a rubber ball bouncing out of control. She knew sex with him would be just like that...deep, aggressive and unrestrained. Running her tongue alongside his, she gave as good as she got, enjoying their mutual hunger.

When he pressed his erection against her, her lower muscles flexed. Heat spread to her core, radiating in waves of heightened arousal that spread to all the erotic pulse points in her body.

"Ahem!" Someone cleared their throat.

Susan jerked her arms down and peered around Michael's broad shoulders to see her neighbor, Ms. Jenkins, standing in the elevator's open doorway, holding her long-haired, black and brown Chihuahua in her arms.

Embarrassed heat flooded Susan's face at the look of disapproval on the older woman's face. Michael clasped her hand and pulled her off the

elevator. "First date," he said with a grin to Ms. Jenkins as the old woman passed them and entered the elevator.

Susan's stomach flip-flopped the entire trip down the hall to her door. She couldn't believe the chemistry between them. It was so intense, so all-consuming of her senses, she'd gotten lost in that kiss to the point she hadn't even felt the elevator stop.

When she unlocked her door, Michael said, "I know you've got to get up early, so I'll say goodnight. See you tomorrow, beautiful."

At a loss for words, she nodded her agreement. The man had totally stunned her with that devastating kiss. Would she survive their next encounter?

She'd opened her door and started to walk inside when Michael spoke, the low register of his voice skidding down her spine. "As for the merlot and tasting you, I wasn't referring to kissing your delectable mouth, Susanna."

His ravenous gaze slowly slid down her body before he turned and walked away.

* * *

The warm summer wind felt good on her bare skin. Susan inhaled the briny air around her and turned her face toward the afternoon sun, soaking up the last few rays before it sank from the sky.

"Come on, slow poke." Michael's deep voice called out above the wind.

Michael stood on the beach, looking up at her. He was wearing sunglasses, worn jeans and a heather gray T-shirt. His sexy grin made her knees weak.

Every. Single. Time.

She waved to him and untied her sweat jacket from around her waist.

Shrugging into it, she zipped the black fleece over her white tank top, then straightened the gathered waist over her fitted, black yoga pants.

Sliding her feet out of her white flip-flops, she rolled up her pants legs and collected the thongs in her hand.

She took the wooden stairs two at a time down to the beach. As she walked quickly through the sand, the warm granules squished between her toes, while broken sea shells and dried sponges scattered away from her feet.

"Oooh, hot, hot," she called out, hopping along until she made it to the packed sand.

"Should've left your sandals on," Michael teased her once she reached his side.

She grinned up at him. "I know, but I like the way the sand feels between my toes." Glancing down at her feet, she squished them in the cooler, wet hard sand. "Even if the bottoms of my feet are nice and toasty now."

"I'll massage those burnt toes for you later," he said as he reached out and captured her free hand.

Susan's fingers laced easily with his and she leaned over and kissed him on his jaw, whispering, "Is this before or after our bath?"

As she started to pull away, he quickly turned his head and captured her lips with his. Her heart thumped with happiness and excitement at his sensual mouth claiming hers. His unique, masculine smell surrounded her while the intense, seductive promise behind his possessive kiss seduced her even more.

He slowly pulled his lips away from hers, as if he didn't want their kiss to end, and answered her question in a husky voice, "During."

A pleased shiver ran over her body, despite the warm air. "Promise?" she teased with a grin as the pounding surf rushed up and surrounded their feet. Wet, gray sand sloshed between her toes, chilling them and taking away the heated sting.

"She's bewitched me," he mumbled as he began to walk, tugging her along through the bubbly froth as the surf moved back out into the ocean.

"Only just a little." Deep, abiding love filled her. The man had totally stolen her soul as well. Her steps were light and carefree as she fell into a

leisurely walking rhythm alongside Michael, their entwined hands swinging between them.

They walked for at least a mile in companionable silence, just enjoying each other's company, the sand on their feet and the sound of the surf in their ears.

The sun had almost set when Michael stopped and pulled her in front of him. Wrapping his arms around her, he molded her back to his chest and faced them toward the ocean.

"What do you see?" he whispered in her ear.

He sounded so upbeat yet introspective. She smiled and dropped her shoes, hugging his arms with hers. "I see seagulls circling, hoping a tourist will throw them some food, swimmers enjoying the last bit of sun, boats off in the distance coming back from outings. What do you see?"

"I see a peaceful view I've always wanted to share with someone special." Clasp ing her hand, he held it in front of them and continued, "I'm looking forward to sharing every single one of them with you."

Michael made her feel loved and so very cherished. A lump formed in her throat and Susan tried to blink back the tears that filled her eyes, but the wind blew the wet streaks down her cheeks, refusing to let her hold her emotions in.

Michael's grip on her hand tightened, drawing her attention to her left hand lying on top of his.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the beautiful sight before her. The sun shimmered on the facets in her diamond wedding band and engagement ring. The reflection was so brilliant, it blinded her.

Intuitively, she squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them once more.

Susan jerked awake and squinted at the bright sunlight shining directly in her face. Trembling at the surreal emotions still riding high within her, she sat up in bed and let out a shaky breath.

* * *

As requested, Susan arrived at the church bright and early. Melanie was true to form, demanding this and that, but through her curt tone and frantic actions, Susan saw most of her future sister-in-law's briskness was due to nerves. When the organ began to play, the-bride-to-be's anxiety jumped twenty notches.

Melanie stood in front of the mirror and bit her lip as she adjusted her headpiece over her carefully groomed French twist. As she hitched her strapless, three-thousand dollar designer wedding gown higher against her breasts, she mumbled, "I hope I don't fall out of this thing."

Susan adjusted her own maroon, strapless silk bridesmaid's gown and said with a wink, "You be careful tossing the bouquet and I'll be careful reaching for it. Deal?"

Melanie giggled. "Deal. Thank you for coming in early and basically being my right arm."

Susan was surprised to hear the young woman thank her...even if she never looked away from her reflection to do so.

She smiled. "You're welcome, Melanie. Soon, you'll be family."

Melanie glanced at her mother, who'd walked up behind her. "Can you believe it? I'll be Melanie Brennon in less than an hour."

The mother-of-the bride was a tense basket case and had been ever since Susan arrived. *No wonder Melanie wanted me to come in an hour early.* Susan watched Melanie's mother flitter around the dressing room area. Instead of being helpful, her jittery movements only managed to cause additional stress.

Adjusting her daughter's train one last time, her mother stood back. "Hurry up, honey. They're about to cue the wedding march. Hundreds of guests are waiting to see us."

Susan lifted one eyebrow as she glanced at Melanie's mother. Us? Just who was getting married, anyhow?

Picking up the organza shawl that matched her bridesmaid's dress, Susan draped it across her shoulders. "That means I've got to go get ready to walk out with the rest of the bridesmaids." She approached

Melanie and put her hand on her shoulder. "Take it one step at a time. I'll see you out there."

Melanie took a deep breath and gave her an unsteady smile.

* * *

"The wedding ceremony was wonderful," an older lady said as she walked past, her hand curled around her husband's bent elbow.

Susan must've heard that same comment a hundred times after the wedding and now at the reception. For her, it was a bittersweet occasion. While it *was* a beautiful ceremony, Jason's marriage also marked a new stage in their sibling relationship.

First her parents, then her uncle and now...her baby brother had moved on. It was as if she'd lost everyone she'd ever loved. She knew it was irrational, but she couldn't help feeling the way she did. Jason and she had always shared every holiday together. Now that he was married, he'd probably be spending holidays with his wife's family.

As she'd gazed around the church, her stomach had tensed. All she saw were strangers. Jason's fraternity brothers and their dates had attended the wedding, thankfully filling up the Brennon side of the church pews to full capacity. When the ceremony was over and the bridesmaids had walked down the aisle, Susan's gaze had sought out Michael's.

She didn't know why...but she felt as if she needed a kind of familiar connection among a sea of unfamiliar faces. She spotted Michael sitting in the second pew, and the moment her gaze locked with his steady one, her insides turned warm and her nerves instantly settled.

The wedding guests had moved on to the reception, and Susan now stood next to the open bar, sipping her glass of wine as she took a brief rest. If one more person asked her to smile for the camera, she'd swear her face would crack. Melanie's photographer insisted on taking at least three hundred photos. Since most of the photos were outside and all she

had to cover her shoulders was a thin shawl, Susan had sent thanks to Mother Nature for making it a mild fall day.

Scanning the large reception ballroom decked out in black, maroon and silver decorations, she tracked the crowd for any sign of Michael. She hadn't seen him since the wedding, and she'd been at the reception for at least forty-five minutes. Her upbeat mood lowered. Had he only planned to attend the wedding?

The way she was feeling at the moment, shaky and unsettled, combined with the fact Michael's mere presence had calmed her earlier during the wedding ceremony, reminded her of the surreal dream she'd had the night before. She knew she'd dreamed they were married because of her brother's wedding happening the next day, not to mention the wedding was how she'd met Michael, but the way she'd felt about the man in her dream disturbed her a little. Her feelings for him were intense and deeply entrenched. She couldn't possibly have become so attached to him already. *Have fun but stay focused*, she told herself.

Then the group of people standing in front of her parted and her mind shifted from the dream Michael to the very real, very sexy version walking straight toward her, his stride firm and confident. Her gaze drifted over his expensive black tux, noting how well it fit his broad shoulders. The contrast of his white shirt against his olive skin made butterflies flit around in her belly. His dark looks attracted her completely, but it was the intense expression on his face that suddenly made it very hard for her to take a breath.

As soon as he reached her, Michael took her glass and set it on a nearby table. Without a word, he turned and pulled her toward the dance floor.

Susan clutched his hand. "Michael?" she said as she followed behind him at a brisk pace to keep up with his long, commanding strides.

Michael shouldered his way deep into the crowd of people slow dancing. When they reached the center of the dance floor, he wrapped his strong arms around her waist and pulled her body in line with his chest.

Once he began dancing, Michael lowered his head until his lips almost touched hers. Susan's stomach knotted in anticipation. Her breath caught in her throat while she waited for him to move that last quarter inch. Instead, he kissed her jaw and spoke next to her ear.

"All I thought about last night was you."

Every nerve ending skittered to attention. She bit her lower lip.

"And do you know why?"

She shook her head at his question and waited for his answer.

"Because your scent was all over me. On my clothes, on my hands. You smell like sheer seduction. Intoxicating and alluring."

Susan swallowed and mentally vowed to buy out the department store's supply of her perfume. The man truly left her speechless. She took a steadying breath. "My scent kept you awake?"

When his lips grazed her ear lobe, she hoped he'd nip at the sensitive skin. Her breasts swelled and her nipples tightened in expectation.

"Mm hm. I kept trying to figure out what you'd smell like once you're flushed from arousal, and I just couldn't conjure the scent." His hands slid under her shawl, touching her bare back. "I figure I'll just have to find out first-hand."

His warm fingers brushing against her skin caused a slow burn to spread across her back. Susan dug her own fingers into his shoulder while her other hand clasped the material on the back of his tux jacket.

"You left me with very diverting thoughts yourself last night," she whispered.

This time he kissed the spot behind her ear. "Good. I'm glad to know I wasn't alone in my consuming thoughts while I lay in bed."

The mental image of Michael sprawled out across his bed thinking of her made a shiver of awareness course through her.

The slow song ended and the mother-of-the-bride walked up to the mike. "If I could have all the bridesmaids up at the front, please."

Susan cast Michael an apologetic look. "I'm afraid it'll probably be like this the rest of the evening."

He kissed her hand. "It's okay. I have some things I need to take care of anyway."

He was leaving? Her excitement tanked along with her quickened pulse rate.

"After the reception, go home and take a nap. You have a date tonight."

"I do?" She lifted her eyebrow in surprise, her heart tripping.

A devilish grin spread across his face. "You do. We're going to enjoy some more merlot together."

"Merlot?" Her thoughts immediately reverted to the comment he'd left her with last night, and her body began to quiver deep inside.

He nodded. "Come by Piccoli's at ten o'clock."

She called out her agreement as two bridesmaids swept her away toward the front of the reception room.

* * *

Susan stood in front of Piccoli's staring at the black granite sign with its gold lettering. *What a difference a couple days make*, she thought as a plethora of carnal scenarios with Michael and a bottle of merlot bounced around in her mind. She felt like a very different person from the woman who'd stood staring at this same sign just a few days ago.

Once she'd seen her little brother drive away with his new bride, she'd done as Michael suggested and taken a much needed long nap that afternoon. Then she'd spent the rest of her waking moments looking forward to her evening with Michael. Once she'd tugged her black jacket closer around her royal blue silk blouse, she smoothed her hands over the black skirt that stopped a couple inches above her knees.

Opting for a skimpy black bra and matching underwear underneath her clothes made her feel ready for anything. An amused smile tugged on her lips as she remembered how her mom had always said, "You should wear your best underwear at all times, dear. You never know when you'll be in an accident."

I don't plan on being in an accident tonight, but this man is certainly dangerous enough to warrant caution. She chuckled inwardly as she pulled on the thick handle and opened the door.

"Good evening, Ms. Brennon." A dark-haired man in his mid-twenties approached and bowed formally as she entered the empty restaurant.

At her quizzical look, he smiled. "Michael told me to expect you. I'm Stephan. Let me take your jacket and purse for you."

After she shrugged out of her jacket and handed him her purse, Susan waited for him to hang them in a closet off the entryway.

Stephan closed the closet door and turned back to her with a pleasant smile. Handing her a glass of merlot he had sitting on the host's stand, he said, "Michael asks that you to meet him in the cellar."

"The cellar?"

He nodded and pointed toward a door in the back of the restaurant. "Go through that door and take the stairs down."

When he opened the door and started out the entrance she'd just come in, Susan asked, "You're leaving?"

Stephan smiled at her, his olive-toned complexion reminding her of Michael's. "Piccoli's is closed for the evening. Have a great night."

While Stephan locked the outer door, she thought it interesting that Michael would entrust an employee with the key to his restaurant. Then Michael's story about the man who'd believed in him and backed him financially came to her. *Trust had to start somewhere. Michael knew that better than anyone.* She walked toward the back of the restaurant, excitement skidding up her spine.

Her heels clicked on the cement stairs as she made her way down to the cellar. Once she'd reached the main floor, she gasped at the rows and rows of bottles all lined up neatly on racks of shelves lined twenty feet deep to her left. To her right, a long wooden table stood next to the wall. The soft, subdued lighting gave the room a very quiet feel...almost as if she had to keep her voice down so the wine would continue to age properly.

The wine cellar was a good ten degrees cooler than the main floor. The coolness felt good against her skin as she set her glass on a granite shelf above the table and began to walk down one of the long aisles, following the dim track lighting on the floor.

Merlots, Chiantis, Cabernets, Rieslings, Pinot Grigios and Chardonnays...you name it, Piccoli's had it, from the very high-end range to midlevel price points.

Impressive.

But where was Piccoli's intriguing owner? "Michael?"

As soon as she spoke, the room went completely dark. Susan gasped. Her heart began to hammer. Surely Michael was behind this. She tried to remain calm. She was afraid to reach out and attempt to feel her way back down the aisle. She could see herself knocking down a couple of the three hundred dollar bottles of wine on her way up the aisle in "blind" mode.

But Susan was never one to stand still in life. The lights at her feet put off a very little glow, but they did provide a path. She started to turn back when someone wrapped his hands around her waist from behind.

Fear gripped her throat, fisting it tight. Her scream came out in a garbled mewl at the same time Michael whispered against her ear. "Shhh. It's just me."

Chapter Three

Her pulse rushed double time from the spike of fear and Michael's close proximity. Clutching his hand at her waist, she let her back melt against his hard chest.

"Are you trying to give me a heart atta—" she started to ask.

But Michael's next words cut her off. "Don't you want to know how I found you in the dark?"

She nodded then realized he might be able to see her feet, but he couldn't see her face. "Yes."

Michael's fingers flexed around her waist, and he took a deep breath next to her neck. "I followed your scent."

Before she could respond, he splayed his fingers across her ribcage and continued. "When one of the senses is taken away, the others will kick in, compensating for the loss."

"What other senses kicked in?" she asked with a sigh of pleasure when his lips trailed down the side of her throat.

He nipped at her neck. "My sense of smell is very keen, but it's my sense of taste I want to explore in intimate detail with you."

Susan's sex began to throb in pent-up arousal at his seductive words.

She raised her hands behind her to loop them around his neck, pulling him closer. Sliding her fingers upward into his thick hair, she agreed. "I'd like to learn more about your senses, too."

His fingers moved to the buttons on her blouse. As he began to unbutton the silk material with slow movements, he kissed her jaw. "The cellar was the perfect place to bring you for this tasting."

She closed her eyes at the things this man made her feel. She'd never felt so achingly desperate to have a man touch her like she did this one.

"Want to know why?" Michael asked as the first button gave way.

"Why?"

"Because smell and taste are two of the most important senses in wine tasting." He finished unbuttoning her blouse and started to trail his fingers up her waist and across her ribcage toward her breasts.

"Do you...um...offer...wine tastings down here?" She opened her eyes and wrangled out her question between tantalizing sensations rippling through her body. Soon her brain wouldn't be able to perform cognizant, upper-level thinking. Well, one thought would continue to run crazily through her mind. *He's driving me insane with his teasing touches.*

"Yes, Piccoli's offers wine tastings, but not the kind we're about to embark on," he purred next to her ear.

"Oh good. I've always liked private lessons. I usually retain a lot more that way."

His low chuckle reverberated against her back. She liked Michael, liked the way he made her feel and how easily he caused her inhibitions to simply disappear. Susan let out a low moan when he cupped her breasts through her lacy bra.

"I'll be sure to take my time then. I wouldn't want you to forget a thing about tonight." He pressed his erection against her backside as he ran his thumbs along her nipples. His touch caused them to harden even more.

"Not too much time," she breathed out with a laugh. Her legs were already turning to rubber and her sex pulsed painfully at his suggestive words. Susan covered his hand with hers and led his fingers to the hook between her breasts that held the scraps of her bra together.

While Michael unhooked her bra, he slid his other hand up her arm around his neck and laced his fingers with hers. His breathing increased when his warm fingers clasped her breast. Her heart was too busy hammering at record speeds for her to say a word. Instead, her stomach

fluttered as he pulled her hand from around his neck and moved it between them where he wrapped her fingers around his cock.

Emboldened by his need to feel her touch, Susan didn't let the fact she was standing with her back to him slow their intimacy. She flattened her palm against the hard ridge of flesh pressing against her buttocks then curled her fingers around his erection, sliding them lower to include every part of him.

Michael groaned against her neck. He nibbled at the soft flesh and his hips moved forward, locking her hand between his body and hers. "You make me crave every part of you. I've never ached to taste a woman as much as I do you."

"Then what's stopping you?" she asked, turning her head sideways and tilting her face toward his.

"I wanted to take this slow."

She felt the heat of his mouth right above hers, smelled his masculine cologne and the scent of merlot on his breath. Her skin prickled.

"I'm a breath away. We can take it slow another night." She hoped she sounded sultry and not desperate, but the truth was...she desperately wanted to experience Michael's body aligned with hers, to feel his heart pound against her chest and know he was just as affected as she was.

As if her permission was all he needed, Michael turned her to face him. His hands slid up her back and his fingers branded her skin with his heat. His lips collided with hers, hitting the corner of her mouth.

She smiled and moved her head slightly, assuming he'd missed his target. But when Michael's mouth connected with the other corner of her lips, she realized his slow, teasing seduction was very purposeful.

"I'm right here," she encouraged in a whisper.

His fingers massaged her upper back and he pulled her close until her nipples brushed against his dress shirt. One of the buttons rubbed a sensitive tip, making her want to scream in frustration, while his mouth forged a hot path up her jaw.

"When I kiss you this time, I won't stop until you're begging me to."

"Is that a promise?" She really hoped it was.

"I want to hear you panting, to know what you smell like when you're fully aroused and sweaty from sex. I don't want to fantasize any longer."

Susan couldn't help but shiver at his intimate words. That was definitely a promise! Her exposed skin pebbled in excitement, yet heat spread throughout her body like fireworks flying in a zillion directions.

"Then you'd better kiss me. Chill bumps don't go with sweat."

His fingers slid across her back, touching her raised skin as if he wanted proof she spoke the truth. When his hand lowered and he palmed her hip in a tight hold, she sensed the sexual tension building within him and realized he was just as caught up in the moment as she was.

Susan tilted her head to give him better access to her mouth and waited, her breath caught in her throat.

Michael's lips covered hers and desire shot straight through her chest then down between her thighs. She adored how his mouth applied just the right amount of pressure to let her know he wanted more.

Moving her hands up his shoulders, she slid them around his neck. She teased the tip of his tongue with hers. Michael groaned and ran his tongue alongside hers in a slow, sensual glide. She kissed him then sucked on his tongue.

He grunted and his hands slid lower. Before she knew it, his hands were cupping her ass as he lifted her against him.

Susan let out a surprised gasp then smiled her approval that he'd taken their foreplay to a much closer level. She clung to him, glad her shorter skirt allowed her to wrap her legs around his trim hips. When she locked herself against him, finally, she felt it—his heart slamming against his chest, just like hers. Her electric attraction to Michael might jumpstart her pulse, but from the moment they'd met, something about him felt comforting and familiar. He'd never felt like a stranger to her.

Maybe because he'd ensconced himself in her life at such a rapid pace she didn't have a chance to erect the normal walls she did around herself. This man left her breathless, feeling a bit out of control...as if she

were constantly trying to catch up. It was an exhilarating and unique feeling...one she planned to indulge in tonight.

Michael trailed kisses down her neck as he turned and walked toward the entrance of the cellar. Sparks splintered through her at his possessive hold on her body. Susan relished every minute of his burning kisses and thanked the stars above he knew his way around the cellar in the dim light.

When he set her down on a hard surface, the track lighting glowed on the bottom stair behind him. She realized he'd lowered her to the wooden table she'd seen when she'd entered the cellar earlier.

Michael stood between her legs as she tugged his shirt out of his pants and fumbled with the buttons down its front.

Soft lighting suddenly came on above them and she blinked in surprise until her eyes adjusted to the change. They came into focus and she stared at Michael's bare chest as he lowered his hand from the light switch on the wall. God, the man had a beautiful body. A light coating of dark hair sprinkled across his muscular pectorals before it thinned into an inviting line that disappeared past his toned stomach and waistline of his dress pants.

She couldn't resist touching the hard chest in front of her. When her fingers connected with his skin, his body tensed.

Afraid she'd done something wrong, Susan jerked her gaze to his.

It was one thing to feel Michael's passion, but the sensual look in his bedroom eyes as he stared at her took her breath away. His heated gaze slowly lowered to devour her breasts and her puckered nipples.

Feeling more confident, Susan laid her hands on the table behind her. She arched her back and gave him seductive smile. "Are you going to sample them or just stare at them?"

Michael raised his eyebrows at her challenging comment. A wicked smile tugged at his lips as he retrieved the glass of wine that sat on the shelf next to her. The look on his face told her he had plans for that wine. The devil! He'd planned this breathtaking seduction...and she thrilled in every minute of it.

He took a sip and set the glass back where he found it. Placing his hands on the table on either side of her, he drew close, but didn't touch her. They stared at each other, tension arcing between them.

Susan took an unsteady inhale, unsure what to do or say next. Michael surprised her when he lowered his head and clamped his mouth around her nipple. The dual sensation of his warm mouth cooled by the wine only fueled her libido. She gasped at the electricity that zinged through her. He didn't ease her into it...he sucked hard immediately as if he couldn't get enough of her and he wanted her to know it.

Susan's sex pulsed at the pressure he applied, but she couldn't help the moan of sheer pleasure that escaped when he nipped at the hard tip. Without a second thought, she lifted her hands and cupped the back of his head, pulling him closer.

Michael placed his hands on her bare thighs underneath her skirt. His fingers flexed on the muscles as if he wanted to move them higher.

Susan opened her legs wider to let him know she was more than willing to accommodate his wishes.

He lifted his head and met her gaze, his chocolate brown eyes churning with varied emotions, desire front and center. An unspoken, seductive communication passed between them as his fingers moved to the button on the side of her short, wraparound skirt. She normally didn't jump into intimacies like this, usually reserving them for long-standing relationships, but with Michael the connection felt so right...more than with any other man. Her stomach fluttered when he freed the button and pulled her skirt open, revealing her sexy black panties underneath.

She set her hands down on the table and let her head fall back, silently inviting him to touch her, to move his hands higher.

When she felt his heated breath a second before his mouth came in contact with her sex through her underwear, Susan gasped and lowered her gaze to his dark head. Her core clenched at his incredibly sexy, intimate kiss.

She throbbed painfully, surprised she wanted to demand more when she'd expected so much less.

Michael's hands moved to her rear as he kissed her again. This time, he grasped her ass and his kiss was harder yet slower, as if he couldn't resist lingering.

She threaded her fingers in his thick hair and was taken aback when he shuddered and groaned as he ran his tongue along her damp underwear. His shoulders tensed and he moved to plant a kiss on her belly before he laid his forehead against the smooth skin. "I've barely tasted you and I'm ready to explode," he rasped, his breathing sounding harsher.

He wasn't the only one. She scooted back a little on the table then lay down fully on the surface, panting out, "The ties."

Michael lifted her ankles and placed her heels on the edge of the table. His probing gaze locked with hers as he reached for the ties on her bikini underwear and tugged them both open in one swift pull. Then he lowered his head once more and kissed the underwear out of his way until her wet entrance was fully exposed.

It wasn't just his mouth moving toward her sex that had Susan so caught up in the intense man. It was the way he slid his hands down her thighs and gently pressed them apart as if he revered everything about her that knocked her for a loop.

Her throat closed when she glanced down and faced the reality of his tanned hands against her fair skin. When she'd fantasized about him touching her, she hadn't thought it would be such an enchanting scenario. She realized he'd wanted this moment to be about her, yet he'd planned it in such a way to make it about him as well. The thought melted her all over.

His tongue slid up her entrance, aggressive and determined, then his mouth fully connected with her body. Susan's heart rate skyrocketed. She cried out in sheer bliss while her back arched of its own accord. He had her. In so many ways, the man had her!

She closed her eyes and reveled in what it felt like to be in the arms of a man who knew how to please a woman on a spontaneous level. All her past relationships had always been carefully planned dates, and carefully planned sex was always the result. Her time with Michael was nothing like she'd ever experienced, which made her wonder why the hell she'd waited so long to say "yes". She knew why—it had to be the right kind of man. Michael was her right kind of man.

Her body tensed as he ran his tongue over every spot, exploring every crease and crevice, tasting her juices thoroughly. She wasn't far from climaxing. He was slowly making his way toward her sensitive bud and the anticipation was killing her. She felt on the verge, ready to leap at any moment.

"I want you to wait for me."

Michael's comment made her pause in tense, sexual frustration. Had she been waiting for him emotionally, too? Nah. It was true this man made her feel free, but what they had was just a fling. Anything more would only lead to heartache later. Every time she'd formed strong attachments in her past she'd been left behind—first her parents, then her uncle and now her little brother was moving on.

Michael was like a strong wind and she was the chimes hanging in the air...unable to resist reacting to his presence moving all around her, making her play a unique melody just for him. The way she felt so free around him, so in tune, like she did in her dream, scared her. As his warm hands trailed with intimate surety over her skin, her entire body trembled. She was afraid she could really learn to care deeply for this man.

That scared her.

She thrilled in their strong attraction and sexual connection, but she resolved to keep her emotions closely guarded while spending time with this irresistible Italian.

The sensation of his finger sliding deep inside her was more than she could handle. She began to shake, holding back from climaxing. Heat

spread all over her while her breathing increased to a steady pant. Her skin began to glisten. "I—I can't wait."

"I love how responsive you are." Another finger joined the first. He thrust then turned his fingers upward toward her belly, his knuckles brushing her sensitive skin. "You don't have to wait any more," he said right before he pressed on her hot spot deep inside. At the same time he captured her nub with his lips and sucked on the highly sensitized tip.

Susan screamed and rocked her hips against him as she came. Rippling waves of pleasurable sensations scattered through her. Her skin flushed hot then cold as every crest rushed through her. She clenched her convulsing walls around his fingers, wanting to hold on to the body-rocking moment as long as she could. Just when she thought she was done, Michael began to thrust his fingers deeper, touching every delicate part of her as he laved at her sex once more.

Intense pleasure built in an impending storm once more within her. She climaxed again, moaning at the all encompassing tremors. She'd barely caught her breath from the second orgasm when his mouth connected with her over-sensitized clit, obviously ready for another round.

She clamped her thighs around his head and begged, "Please, Michael. Don't you want to—"

"More than anything." He withdrew his fingers from her body and quickly lifted his head, his expression full of sexual frustration. She watched in fascination as he slid the two damp fingers inside his mouth. While he savored her taste, his eyes, dark with arousal, locked with hers for several electrifying seconds, snatching her ability to move, let alone speak.

* * *

Michael watched Susan's rapt expression and her beautiful eyes lower to his fingers as he sucked her juices from them. Damn, she made him hard as a fucking metal pole! The sensation of her body eagerly

clasping his fingers with an unyielding, never-let-him-go grip made his cock throb and his balls ache for release.

In all his thirty-five years, oral sex with a woman had never been this erotic and strangely fulfilling in a ball-busting kind of way. He'd wanted to climb up on the table, unzip his pants and slam his cock deep inside her warm, wet body until they both groaned in sexual fulfillment.

Yet he was glad he'd stuck to his convictions. The look in her eyes, the total amazement at his enjoyment in her unique flavor and the act of making her come while holding back his own pleasure, helped him get a handle on his sexual needs. No woman made him this selfless. He'd found the entire sexual experience with Susan an unexpected aphrodisiac. But he also wanted to make sure their relationship went deeper than just their mutual attraction for each other.

The way she held back some of her moans told him she was still fighting herself around him. He didn't want bits and pieces of her...he wanted the whole uncensored, uninhibited package, because he knew once they finally had sex, it'd be days before he let her up for air.

Pulling his fingers from his mouth, he grasped her hands and helped her to a sitting position. "I want you more than you'll ever know, but not tonight."

Shock crossed her expressive face. "What!"

Chapter Four

A muscle ticced in Michael's jaw as he hooked her bra back in place. When his fingers moved to button her shirt, Susan grasped his hands, her stomach tensing.

"What's wrong?"

He finished his task and the look of restrained desire in his gaze made her throat fist into a hard knot.

Confusion caused her belly to ache. "I can see in your eyes you want to continue...but, I don't understand. Talk to me, Michael."

He turned his hands over and captured hers. Raising her fingers to his mouth, he brushed his lips over her knuckles before he spoke. "I do plan to talk to you, but not here."

She raised an eyebrow. "Where, then?"

"When I get you back to your apartment."

Still perplexed by his comment, Susan let out a relieved breath to know he wasn't planning on leaving her with things unfinished between them.

Once Michael helped her down from the table, she held her hand out for her underwear. He gave her a naughty smile and shook his head as he shoved her panties in his front pants pocket.

She chuckled as she retrieved her skirt from the table and wrapped it around her waist.

After she'd buttoned it, his smile widened. "No one will know you're naked under there but me."

"I will," she snorted as she followed him out of the cellar.

* * *

The elevator was crowded when Michael and Susan got on. Michael moved them to the left side and wrapped his arms around her waist. He settled her back against his chest as the elevator door closed.

As they headed up, the way she felt in his arms, secure, like she'd be there forever, reminded her of her dream. She felt too close, too connected to this man already. Michael's selfless act of giving her oral sex without expecting anything in return really threw her. Maybe it was just *her* feeling this way. She'd better set the expectation early on. Turning her head, she whispered in his ear, "Have you ever had sex in public?"

His heart rate ramped up, thudding in rapid beats against her back. She grasped his hand around her waist and tilted her head to the side to hear his whispered answer. "Yes." Her breasts tingled and her core clenched in sheer excitement. The man was so sexually adventurous. She'd never done anything so daring.

Susan moved even closer to his hard frame and shivered deep inside when she felt his erection press against her rear and lower back.

Michael's hands tightened around her waist. He kissed the curve of her ear. "You're killing me, especially since I know you're naked underneath this skirt."

She couldn't help the pleased grin that crossed her face. Her arousal escalated as she purposefully ground her butt against his erection.

His low growl rumbled against her back at the same time the elevator stopped.

Three people got off and six got on.

Susan was forced to align the rest of her body against Michael to make room for the additional passengers. She was so close she felt the entire outline of his cock imprinting itself on her ass. Sexual tension roared within her, making her nipples ache to be tweaked and her sex wet for his kisses and the sensation of his cock stretching her wide.

He groaned against her neck and his warm breath bathed her skin as he spoke in a raspy tone. "Since I can't do anything about this torture, I'll just tell you what I *want* to do to you."

Her libido vaulted to the ceiling. She encouraged him in a low, excited voice. "Do tell."

His mouth grazed the curve of her ear. "I know sliding inside you will be like finding heaven. I can't wait to feel you taking every inch, to feel your warm body soaking me. I'm going to enjoy every damned thrust drowning in your sweet wetness, Susanna."

His erection slid back and forth against her rear and his erotic words made her feel all woozy deep inside. Susan's breathing increased while her face flooded with the blush of unadulterated arousal.

She closed her eyes and rocked her hips against him, a counter to his relentless pressure against her backside.

When Michael's hands suddenly clamped down on her hips, ceasing her movements, Susan opened her eyes to see Ms. Jenkins' wide-eyed stare locked on his firm hold on her hips. Apparently the elevator had stopped and everyone else had exited except the older lady. Her wrinkled hands clutched her shaking pooch closer to her chest as her condemning crystal blue eyes locked with Susan's.

Embarrassed heat flooded Susan's cheeks, making her feel faint.

Michael took it all in stride. He kissed Susan on the cheek and said, "Second date," to Ms. Jenkins before he walked out of the elevator, tugging Susan along.

Michael made her feel so free, Susan's mortification quickly turned to humor. As she stood in front of her apartment door, she had to hold back her laughter at the memory of the holier-than-thou expression on her neighbor's face.

The older lady cast a disapproving "harrumph" as she passed them, shuffling her way down the hall toward her own apartment door in her fluffy, baby-pink bedroom slippers.

Susan clamped one hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud while she slid her key into the lock and turned the knob to open her door.

Before she could walk inside, Michael cupped his hand around her neck and turned her back toward him, pulling her against his chest.

His mouth covered hers in a heated kiss that stole the words she'd been forming to invite him in.

When her tongue brushed against his, he thrust his against hers once, twice, then a third time before he broke their kiss. The hungry look in his shadowed gaze made her feel like she was the sexiest woman who had ever existed.

Then he released his hold and stepped back, an apologetic expression on his face, and she realized he was going to leave. Her heart jerked at the letdown. She clasped his arm, halting any further retreat. "I thought we were going to talk."

Michael closed his eyes for a brief second and she noted the tension in his face as his fingers gripped hers. "There's nothing I would love to do more than walk inside your apartment with you, but I plan to keep my promise to talk to you."

"And how are you going to do that out here?"

Without a word Michael pulled a cell phone out of his jacket pocket and dialed a number.

The telephone in her apartment started to ring. Susan cast him a confused look. "You have my phone number in your cell phone?" It was entirely possible. Her number was listed in the phonebook.

"Your phone's ringing. I think you'd better answer it." He put his cell phone up to his ear and gave her an encouraging smile before he walked away.

She wasn't sure what Michael's plans were, but the incessant ringing of her phone drew her like Pavlov's dog...*must answer*. She walked inside, shut the door and picked up her cordless handset from the end table next to her couch.

Pushing the talk button, she put the phone to her ear. "Hey."

“Better lock your door, love.”

Susan let out a sigh at the sound of his bone-melting baritone. If she couldn't have him with her, at least she could listen to his voice. She kicked off her shoes and walked over to slide the deadbolt on her door.

“Michael, I don't understand...”

“Did you know I have five brothers?”

Susan sank onto her overstuffed, toffee-colored couch, kicked the decorative navy blue pillows out of her way and curled her feet underneath her. He had her attention. “No, I didn't. Knowing what life was like with *one* brother...let's just say I feel for your poor mother. And where do you fall in the litter?”

His low chuckle made her stomach flip-flop.

“I'm the oldest.”

She laughed. “Ah ha. I knew it!”

“I love the way you laugh.”

Her laughter slowed and silence came across the line for several seconds.

“The truth is...I want you more than I've wanted another woman, Susanna. You make me ache. I knew if I followed you inside your apartment, we'd do very little talking.”

Her lower muscles flexed at the seductive purr in his tone.

“I want to get to know your mind just as much as your body.”

His serious words made her appreciate him even more. Did that mean what she thought it meant? That Michael was slowing things down and taking the time to get to know her because he wanted something more? The thought both scared and excited her.

She settled back on the couch, her spirits rising. “You're a very astute man. Tell me about your brothers. Are they as tempting as you?”

His car door closed and the sound of an engine starting came across the line.

“As far as you're concerned, my brothers don't hold a candle to me.”

She shook her head at his typical male posturing. "You know what I meant."

The rev of his engine sounded in the background as if he'd just pulled into traffic. "Jonathan's the brainy one, Sean's the handy man, Joshua's the wanderer, Keith's the artsy type and Stephan's the youngest and the most like me. You met him tonight."

She did? Susan frowned for a brief second, and then the picture of the dark-haired man who took her coat and closed up Piccoli's popped into her mind. "Is Stephan the young man who took my coat and handed me the glass of wine tonight?"

"He is. As soon as he's done with school, he wants to open his own restaurant."

"And how do you feel about having a brother as a competitor?" she asked.

Michael laughed. "He won't know anything I haven't taught him. Now, give him five years and I'll be a bit concerned. But hopefully by then I'll have convinced him to open another Piccoli's across town."

She loved hearing the pride in Michael's voice when he spoke of his brother. "Sounds like you have a stake in his success."

"In a way, I do. Ten years ago, while my mother went through chemotherapy for cancer, I knew my dad needed to focus on her. I took over raising Stephan until my mom was fully recovered. Ever since then my little brother and I have had a special bond."

While he told her a few amusing stories about Stephan as a teenager and having to have "the talk" with him about the proper use of condoms, she walked into her bedroom, turned on the bedside lamp and lay down on her bed.

After Michael finished, Susan laughed and felt an even deeper connection to him due to their similar circumstances. "I know what you mean. Even though I'm only four years older than Jason, for the longest time he and I had more of a mother/son relationship. Only in the past few years have we been able to talk on the same level. Now it's a mostly sister/brother relationship."

"Ahh, I thought I heard Jason mention that you'd raised him. What happened to your parents?"

Her heart constricted. Even after so long, she still missed them. "My parents died in a car accident twelve years ago. I've been Jason's mom, confidant, mentor, sister, you name it, ever since."

His car door slammed in the background. He must've made it home. "I knew there was something I admired about you. I saw your closeness to Jason. He's very protective over you."

"He is?" She was surprised by his comment. It had always felt the other way around.

"He thanked me for making sure you got home safe, remember?"

"He was just being polite," she scoffed.

"No, you didn't see the look in his eyes or feel how hard he squeezed my hand. His expression and rock solid grip held quite an interesting challenge that basically said, 'I'll kick your ass if you screw with my sister'."

"And I'll kick your ass if you don't," she replied with a grin at Michael's interpretation. Apparently Jason really *had* grown up under her nose.

His low chuckle came across with seductive undertones. "I love a woman who's not afraid to tell me what she wants."

Emboldened by the fact he'd moved their conversation to sexual banter, Susan asked, "You still have my underwear, which means I'm lying here in my bed with—"

"Nothing covering that sweet body of yours," he finished for her. "What do you sleep in? A T-shirt, frilly lingerie or nothing at all?"

Her breasts tingled at his intimate question. She bent her knees and dug her toes into the bed's soft comforter. "I thought you said you wanted to get to know me?" she teased as she ran her fingers down her bare thigh, pulling her skirt back.

"I am getting to know you...on a *very* personal level. Tell me," he urged.

"I usually sleep in a T-shirt. Soooo sex-ay," she said in a dry tone.

"It is if you're wearing *my* T-shirt and nothing else." He exhaled as if he were sitting down or stretching. "I'm now lying on my own bed with this sexy scrap of black underwear in my hand to remind me of your naked state."

His comment left her completely breathless. "And what *would* you do if I was lying there beside you wearing your T-shirt and nothing else?" Her fingers moved lightly along her inner thigh as she waited for his response.

* * *

Michael's cock grew hard with the knowledge she was open to verbal foreplay. He couldn't believe in all his thirty-five years he'd never had phone sex. Susan made it one of the most enticing "nevers" he looked forward to remedying.

"I'd slide my fingertips back and forth across your nipples until they hardened, begging me to suck them."

"And then what?" she asked in a breathless voice.

Michael smiled as he unbuttoned his pants and unzipped his zipper. "Are you hot, Susanna?"

"Mm hm, and wet. What would you do next?" she encouraged.

He immediately conjured a mental picture of her—blonde hair spread out from her beautiful face and lying across his dark blue sheets. Her pink sex would be swollen and glistening. She'd be ready, eager and so damned reactive to his touch...just like she was earlier. His brain left the room and his body reacted, skin tingling with tiny pinpricks as his balls tightened painfully. If he didn't come soon, he'd spontaneously explode.

"I'd slip my hand under your shirt and spread my fingers across your belly while I captured your nipple in my mouth. I'd want to hear that breathy little moan you make when you want more, so I'd suck hard, T-shirt and all until you came off the bed, begging me to remove the rest of your clothes."

"That's exactly what I'd do," she said, her mewling soft sigh yanking a physical response from him like the gentle brush of her fingers across his aching erection.

Michael slid his hand down into his underwear and gripped his cock. Closing his eyes, he fought the need to come...all brought on by his strong imagination and the sound of her hitched breath. "Imagine me sliding my fingers down your thigh, enjoying the feel of your soft skin."

"Mmmmm," was the only response he got. He smiled as he pumped his hand up and down his cock.

"When you finally touch me, you'll feel just how wet I am, how warm and tight, she said. "I push your pants down, not even bothering to get them all the way off you before I grab your erection and lead you to me...I want you that much."

Her breathing had changed, along with the "what they'd do" scenario. She was with him real-time. He felt the heat and need in her voice. He knew she was sliding her fingers inside her channel, and at the erotic realization he closed his eyes for a brief second. "I'm sliding inside you, Susanna. What do you do?"

"I—I'm so close. You feel so good. You press against me and I welcome the fullness of your weight on me. You're heavy and hard as you move inside me. I want to scream, but instead..." she paused and sighed before finishing in a vixen's tone, "I wrap my legs around your waist and dig my nails deep into your shoulders."

Michael's heart thumped hard at the provocative scenario she painted. He loved this give and take. His turn. "I bury my nose in your throat and hair, inhaling your scent as I drive inside you. I thrust hard and deep, because I know with you...I'll never get enough." His body jerked at the thought of the acts behind his words, things he really wanted to do with her. He groaned. "I want to stay buried as far as I can get. Forever."

Susan didn't speak, but he heard her staccato pants. As much as he wanted to make himself come, he needed to hear the sounds of her

climaxing even more, so he gave her what she needed. "I rock into you and grind my hips against yours until you scream—"

"Yes, God...yes!" she answered, interrupting him, her breathing expelling in heavy gusts. Michael's pulse rushed in his ears and his cock turned to smooth granite in his hand. He pumped harder, so on edge he ground his teeth to keep from yelling out.

When she sighed, he managed to continue in an unaffected tone, "I felt your spasms lock me in a vise hold, sweetheart. I'd want that sensation to go on forever...for both of us."

"Then you'd better let go, Michael. You're tense and you need a release. You've held back long enough. I'm warm and eager and moving just right so you tap against the hottest, wettest spots deep inside me. That's the most sensitive part, isn't it? The tip of your cock."

Michael held back the growl that threatened to release from his throat as he slid his hand all the way down his erection and back up, cupping the tip of his cock. She was right, of course.

"Imagine I'm running my tongue all around the tip, right before I take all of you deep down my throat. And then I suck...long and hard."

Her explicit words, describing in intimate detail an act he would love to watch her perform, sent him over the edge. Michael's body jerked as he came, his hips moving in hard punches toward the ceiling then slamming back on the bed. He'd denied himself too long and the pent-up sexual frustration made his orgasm both pleasurable and painful all at once.

When a low groan erupted from him, her sexy voice brought him back down to earth as his heart pounded like a jackhammer. "You know the great thing about this kind of sex?"

"What's that?"

"Very little clean up and no condom to dispose of."

"Speak for yourself," he said, dreading the job. Her light-hearted laugh at his dry response made his lips tug upward in a broad smile.

As her laughter died down, silence came across the line. The quiet simmered just under the surface, their building attraction like a thin bed

sheet between them, letting them feel everything, but still keeping them apart.

Susan exhaled in a soft sigh. "Well, I'd better get some sleep. I have a plane to catch tomorrow morning."

Michael's gut tensed. He'd been planning to ask her to go out to dinner tomorrow night. "Where are you going?"

"I'm taking a business trip to Virginia."

"When will you get back?"

"I'll be back Wednesday night. You going to miss me?" she teased.

"Yes, I will." He was surprised how disappointed he was to learn she'd be gone for three days.

"Good."

Damn if the pleased tone in her voice didn't arouse him all over again.

Chapter Five

"There's a Mr. Piccoli on line two for you."

"Thanks, Callie." Susan picked up the phone and punched the button for line two. As anticipation thrummed, making her skin pebble, she tried to sound causal. "Hey, Michael."

"You didn't say that the name of your firm was Anderson, Manning & Brennon."

She smiled at the deep respect that laced his chiding. "The third name was just added a couple months ago."

"Bravo to you, Susanna. I have a project I've got to do. Would you like to come along this evening?"

She stood and leaned against her desk to face the huge picture window behind her chair. Smiling at the secret tone in Michael's voice, she pressed the telephone receiver closer to her ear. "How should I dress?"

"Wear black."

The way he said "black" sounded clandestine and naughty. "Definitely. Where do you want me to meet you?"

"I'll pick you up at your apartment at six. We'll go to dinner first."

And the naughty part later. "Sounds like a plan. See you then."

She started to hang up when Michael spoke. "Susan..."

"Yes."

"I'm glad you're back."

Elation swept through her. She'd thought about Michael non-stop the entire three days and nights she'd been gone, especially the long, drawn

out nights. She was glad to know he'd missed her. "Me, too." When she hung up the phone, she couldn't help the happy grin that spread across her face.

"Hot date?"

Susan glanced up and laughed at the expectant look on her assistant's face. The younger woman stood in her doorway, twirling a strand of her short red hair between her fingers. That was why Callie made the perfect assistant. She was like a hound—always able to sniff out the good stuff.

"With Michael, it's guaranteed."

* * *

A flute glass waited on the table in front of her as she sat down and draped her black fringed shawl over the back of her seat.

Susan arched an eyebrow and stared at Michael as the formal waiter set another flute glass on the table for Michael.

When the waiter pulled out a three hundred dollar bottle of champagne and poured her a glass, her eyes widened. "What are we celebrating?" she asked as he moved to fill Michael's glass.

Once they were alone, Michael raised his glass to her. "Here's to your new partnership. When you work that hard, you deserve to be acknowledged."

Susan swallowed the emotion that knotted in her throat. She hadn't even told Jason about her promotion because she didn't want to take away from the excitement of his pending wedding.

Lifting her glass, her smile trembled a little. "Thank you for making me feel special. I truly appreciate it."

"You're already special, Susanna. I'm just giving your accomplishment the due it deserves."

When the waiter returned with their menus, Susan asked, "So what's this secret project you're working on?" She took the proffered menu and

returned her line of sight to Michael. His olive skin appeared even darker against his white shirt tonight. And the black suit he wore fit his broad shoulders as if it were made just for him. All she knew was...he looked damned good.

Michael's gaze traveled across her shoulders and down her exposed neck to the cleavage her black spaghetti-strapped dress revealed. Desire flickered in the deep brown depths when he met her gaze over his own menu. He waited for the waiter to walk away before he spoke.

"I never realized how alluring black looks against fair skin until this moment."

A shiver skidded along her back at his compliment. "And here I thought you asked me to wear black for that very reason."

"There is an added benefit, yes, but the truth is...we're going shopping."

Michael's wicked grin made her stomach flutter, but the shopping thing...now that surprised her. "Shopping? What kind of shopping are you planning to do?"

"I'm looking to make a deal."

"You don't strike me as a bargain hunter type."

Michael laughed and her pulse skittered at the genuine open boyishness his expression conveyed. "You could definitely say this is a longstanding bargain that needs to be addressed."

She shook her head at his enigmatic response. When he opened his menu, she did the same. No matter what Michael had in store for the rest of the evening, she had a feeling it wouldn't be dull.

* * *

Susan glanced over her shoulder at the brown paper-wrapped package taking up most of Michael's back seat. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Ohmigod. The man had just paid two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a painting. In an auction, no less. He'd bid on the landscape scene like a man on a mission, as if there was no way he

was leaving that gallery without that painting in his hands. She had no doubt he would've paid more for it if he'd had to.

"That was interesting—" she started to say as Michael drove out of the museum parking lot.

"Do you remember me mentioning the investor who helped me start Piccoli's?"

Susan glanced down at Michael's firm hold on the gearshift as he moved it to the next gear. Lifting her gaze to stare at his profile in the dark car, she answered, "Yes. You said you've never bought him out because he was the one who believed and took a chance on you."

Michael cast a broad smile her way. "You paid attention."

She appreciated the respect reflected in his tone. Susan returned his smile and waited for him to continue.

"Charles Harrington invested in me when no one else would. I was so close to quitting, so close to losing faith that I had what it took to make my dream a success..." He paused for a second as if collecting himself, then let out a deep breath. "Charlie took a risk on me and never asked for anything in return."

When Michael's gaze returned to the road, Susan realized he was thinking deeply about his benefactor. She decided to let him tell her the rest when he was ready. That painting in the backseat had something to do with Charlie.

They'd traveled for fifteen minutes and entered an exclusive residential area before Michael pulled his sports car up to the curb along the tree-lined street and cut the engine. He got out of the car and walked around to her side. Opening the door, he offered his hand. "Ready to help me finally repay him?"

Susan followed Michael's gaze as he peered up the street. Wrought iron fencing edged several acres of land surrounding a beautiful brick mansion perched upon a hilltop.

Witnessing Michael's sense of duty and commitment to friendship firsthand dug a little deeper into her heart. She smiled as she put her hand in his and accepted his help out of the car. "I'd love to."

Her breath caught when his arm came around her back. He pulled her close and buried his nose against her neck. "I've missed your warmth and your smell these past few days, Susanna."

The cool night air didn't faze her with Michael's strong arms wrapped around her. She let a low laugh escape as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Maybe it's a good thing I had to go out of town for work the day after you kept me up with our tantalizing phone conversation. I'd say the adage is true; absence does make the heart grow fonder."

"Your absence made me ache."

"Ditto," she whispered next to his ear before she pressed her lips against his cheek.

Michael kissed her neck then her jaw before his lips covered hers in a quick, hard kiss. "Duty first," he said as he stepped back.

Susan gave him a brilliant smile. She knew he had a hard time pulling away...just as much as she did. The sexual tension between them felt like a powerful magnetic pull.

She pushed the bucket seat she'd been sitting in forward and swept her arm toward the painting. "Am I right in assuming this painting has to do with Charlie?"

Michael grinned then leaned over and grabbed the painting. "Indeed it does."

She quietly followed him up the hill and waited while he punched in a code to get them through a back gate. Going in the back was kind of interesting. "Why didn't we just drive up to his front door?"

He chuckled as they continued up the sloped manicured lawn toward the huge home. "You don't know Charlie. As I said before, I would never buy him out, but do you have any idea how many times I've tried to give the man the money he invested in me all those years ago?"

She'd had to almost run to keep up with Michael's brisk pace, which wasn't an easy feat in heels, not to mention it was nighttime and she couldn't see where she stepped. "How many?" she panted out in a whisper. Dang, she hoped they didn't have dogs that left behind presents. She would have worn more sensible shoes if he'd told her

they'd be traipsing through several acres of property tonight. There were lights on the four corners of the house, but they were still in the dark open field behind it.

"I've lost count over the years." He glanced at her and slowed his steps until she caught up with him. A few minutes later, they finally reached the cobblestoned patio. As Susan stepped beside Michael onto the patio, bright lights flooded the surface.

When sudden brightness announced their stealthy arrival, she and Michael froze in unison. A second passed before he nodded and gave her a reassuring smile while glancing up at the floodlights. "Motion sensors."

She let out a sigh of relief and followed him forward, walking on her toes so her heels wouldn't clatter on the hard surface. Michael turned the knob on the french door and stiffened at the resistance.

"Damn. Sheila was supposed to have left this door unlocked."

Susan noted the disappointment in his tone. "Ah, so you elicited help from the inside, did you?"

"Charlie's wife knows how stubborn we both are. In answer to your question...yes, I did, but apparently someone came behind her and locked it."

"I didn't realize I'd be breaking and entering tonight. And here I thought you asking me to wear black had naughty, not nefarious connotations." She hoped her wry tone would lighten the situation and ease the tension that radiated from him.

"When it comes to you, every word out of my mouth could be a double entendre," he said with a wicked grin.

She smiled, glad to have brought his humor back. Staring at the lock, she opened her purse and dug around inside. "Is the alarm system turned off?"

He cast a curious gaze her way, nodding.

She pulled out her keys and unfolded a thin, flathead screwdriver from an all-in-one army knife that dangled from her keychain. When she dug out a couple of paperclips from the bottom of her purse and began to unbend them, she grinned at Michael's perplexed expression.

"You should see the what-the-hell-is-she-doing look on your face." As she slung her purse over her shoulder, she explained, "I have an uncle with a big heart and a...colorful background. Before he went to prison—curse the man for his forever sticky fingers—he taught my brother and me some skills I never thought I'd put to use. Well, except for that one time in high school when Marie Renee stole my softball glove. I knew she'd locked it away in her locker, so I took matters into my own hands."

"Naughty little Susan." Michael flashed her a devilish smile. He sounded almost pleased. Double entendre, indeed.

Susan gave a low laugh and started to work on the lock. "I'm sure Marie Renee thought I was a witch who had the power to spirit away her stolen goods." She winked at him then turned to focus on her task.

After a couple of minutes manipulating the pins inside the lock, she heard the lock's final pin click into place.

"You're just full of surprises," he murmured next to her ear as she turned the knob.

"Ever need your car hot-wired, I'm your woman. But...um...don't go advertising that. I have this whole 'Sensible Susan' reputation to uphold."

When she opened the door wide, she took in the rows of leather-bound books lining the floor to ceiling bookshelves, a couple of leather reading chairs and a large banker-style desk off to their left. Michael gave a low chuckle, drawing her attention.

"The fact your pristine halo is being held up by a cute set of horns will remain just between us." He tucked the huge frame under his arm and kissed her on the cheek before he walked past her into Charlie's study.

Susan's heart leapt at his brief, warm kiss. His quick wit made her smile. Intelligent, funny, sexy...the man hit all the right buttons. Putting away her improvised tools, she walked inside to stand next to him as he turned on a small lamp on the desk.

“Sheila said she and Charlie would leave at eight and not return for a couple of hours,” Michael said in a low tone as he began to pull the tape away from the brown paper.

She set her purse down on the floor next to the desk and glanced at her watch. Eight-fifteen. They had plenty of time.

She and Michael worked in companionable silence removing all the paper and tape. They’d just pulled the last bit of tape off the brown paper when a deep voice sounded down the hall—as if the person was approaching the office.

“Phillip won’t give a rat’s ass if we’re late, Sheila.”

Susan and Michael’s gazes locked and widened in shock. As if an unspoken agreement swept between them, she gathered up all the tape and paper bits into a ball while Michael pulled the leather chair out from behind the desk and set the picture on the chair’s arms.

“Charlie, this is ridiculous. See, yet another reason you should give up smoking.” A woman’s voice resounded from farther away as if she were yelling after her husband.

Michael grabbed Susan’s hand and started to yank her toward a side door. She pulled her hand from his, scooped up her purse and followed him through the door he held open.

Charlie harrumphed. “You know my smoking is just recreational, but if I don’t have at least one stogie to get me the hell outside and away from the stuffy riff-raff for a bit, we’ll leave after half an hour. I swear it!”

Susan’s breathing came in choppy gusts as she and Michael shouldered their way among the long, heavy coats packed inside the closet until they found a small empty corner to squeeze into.

“Michael, the lamp,” she whispered in a panic after she’d set her purse on the floor near her feet.

“Too late, love,” came his low, amused response.

“What the hell...” Charlie’s voice boomed throughout his office. “Sheeeeeeeila!”

“Yes, dear?”

“What’s the meaning of this?”

Charlie didn’t sound happy about the painting. Despite the wonderful sensation of Michael’s body pressed against hers, the anger in the man’s voice made Susan’s entire frame tense. Her fingers curled around the brown paper ball.

Heels clicked on the hardwood floor then stopped as if a woman had stepped onto the carpet in the office. “It looks like a painting, honey.”

“I’m going to kill the sonofabitch.”

Michael chuckled close to Susan’s ear then pressed his lips to the sensitive spot behind it.

Susan’s stomach fluttered at the physical contact. If Michael wasn’t bothered by the man’s obvious rant, then she wouldn’t let herself be, either.

Sheila laughed. “Darling, you’re just angry Michael finally one-upped you. It’s about time you accepted his appreciation.”

Michael kissed her temple. Susan’s libido kicked into full throttle when he continued kissing along her jaw toward her mouth.

“Damn it, but...she’s a freakin’ beaut, isn’t she?” Charlie sounded so proud.

Michael’s hands encircled Susan’s waist. “She is indeed,” he echoed Charlie’s sentiment right before his mouth covered hers. The thrust of his tongue against hers set her pulse thrumming.

“The painting is gorgeous and the perfect gesture. I’m sure Michael paid a pretty penny for it,” Sheila replied.

Susan thrilled at the hot, all-consuming kiss. She so wanted to feel him inside her, thrusting deep. God, she craved his naked body pressing against hers, to feel his hard chest crushing her breasts, his hips spreading her thighs wide. Oral sex and mutual masturbation weren’t going to cut it any longer. She let go of the ball of paper and thrust her fingers into Michael’s hair to pull him closer and deepen their kiss.

“Probably way more than I initially invested in the sod,” Charlie grumbled, his angry tone softening. “He knows I love him like a son. Why does he have to be so stubborn?”

“His stubbornness is the very reason you believed he could succeed, honey,” his wife answered. “Do you think he has any idea how much you respect him?”

Michael pressed his hard body flush with Susan’s, pushing her back flat against the wall as his tongue speared deeper, tasting all of her. The coats rustled with their movements, but Susan didn’t care.

“Hell, no. I can’t let him see my softer side.”

Susan felt Michael’s rakish smile against her lips. *I think he already knew that, Charlie*, she thought as she ran her tongue alongside Michael’s.

“Come on, get your stogie and when we get back from the party, we’ll find the perfect place to hang this painting. It’s worth way more than the money Michael paid for it. After all...friendship is priceless.”

The sound of a drawer opening filtered through the closed door at the same time Michael’s hands gripped her waist tighter and he lifted her in the air. When he set her back against the wall and ground his erection against her sex, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Exquisite fluttering sensations rippled through her body at the friction and the feel of his hard cock grinding against her clit. Susan bit back the moan that threatened to escape. She was on fire. Her tongue parried with his as she rocked against him. Michael’s heart pounded against hers at a rapid-fire rate.

The sound of more drawers opening and closing filtered through her foggy thoughts. She knew she was on the verge. Susan locked her heels at the base of Michael’s spine and wrapped her arm tighter around his neck, pulling him closer. She couldn’t get close enough. “I’m on the edge,” she whispered, her voice breathy next to his ear.

Michael’s heavy pants sent warm gusts of air down her throat. He continued his relentless, aggressive thrusting against her, his lips

trailing across her jaw. His mouth hovered over hers as he paused his pistoning. "Come for me, Susanna."

"I—" She didn't even get out another word when he began to apply pressure, rubbing his cock in arousing circles against her. Susan's entire frame shook, wanting more. She clenched her sex, wishing he was deep inside her, but at this point, the pressure alone was enough to send her over.

He captured her lips with his, cutting off her scream as she climaxed. His fingers bit into her buttocks as rippling, goose bump-inducing, wave after wave of intense pleasure slammed through her, making her sex alternately ache and pulsate.

Susan swallowed her scream, but tears seeped from the corners of her closed eyes. As her orgasm slowed within her, she began to quake deep inside at the intensity of her attraction and total oblivion when she was with Michael. He made her forget everything; every inhibition she'd ever had slipped away the moment he touched her.

Never, not in a million years, would she have thought she'd have sex, make that semi-sex, while hiding in a closet with two people right outside the door. Michael made their near-public intimacy feel exciting, sexy and strangely natural.

"Hmm, I seem to have smoked my last one. Oh, wait, I think I have another box in the closet."

Susan and Michael froze at the comment that floated through the door as Charlie's voice came close and the doorknob began to turn.

Michael lowered her legs to the floor and whispered, "Busted." He rested his cheek against her forehead as they waited for the door to fling open.

"I think receiving this painting gives you plenty to talk about tonight. Skip the stogie. Let's go."

Charlie's deep chuckle sounded. "You're right. Can't wait to see the look on Phillip's face. He'd casually mentioned bidding for this particular painting himself, and if you hadn't had that flat tire, I'd have made the auction—" He cut himself off, his tone turning suspicious. "There wasn't

an emergency, was there? No *good* Samaritan beat me to your rescue, did he? I'd assumed you'd somehow helped Michael get this painting in here tonight, but you were in this all along, weren't you?"

"I thought it was about time you accepted Michael's thanks. It means a lot to him that you do."

The man laughed outright. "Duped by my friend and my wife. Ha! I think I'll leave that part out of the story tonight. Come on. Let's go *wow* the crowd."

Michael let out a low "Whew" as an outside door closed and silence greeted them. "You make a great partner in crime," he said against her cheek.

Her fingers flexed in his hair at his compliment. "You just like the perks having a sidekick allows."

"What can I say..." Michael's lips brushed against hers. "You're irresistible." He kissed her throat. "But as much as I find the idea of having full-fledged sex with you in a dark closet damned appealing...I want to make sure we won't be interrupted. How about we go back to my place and finish what we started?"

Michael's desire to take his time shook the taut hold she had on her emotions. She was glad he couldn't see the emotional tears she'd shed when she climaxed. Blinking back the tell-tale signs that he'd burrowed straight to her heart, she pulled him close and said, "I couldn't agree more," right before she kissed him.

As if he couldn't resist taking everything she offered, Michael slid his tongue aggressively against hers once more. He grasped her hips and began to rock against her in slow, purposeful thrusts for several seconds before he broke their kiss and said in a strained voice, "We'd better stop soon or our first time *will* be in a closet."

Susan's body shook from the desire Michael elicited within her. "To be honest, I'm past the point of caring where, but if you insist..." She started to withdraw her hands from his hair until she felt a tug.

"Ow!" Michael said.

When he tensed, something pulled at the skin on her palm and she realized what had happened. A piece of tape had stuck to her palm and was now imbedded in Michael's hair.

Susan tried to hold back her amusement at their situation, but failed miserably.

Chapter Six

When her laughter subsided, Michael opened the door then reached up and ripped the tape from his hair. He gritted his teeth at the pain. “That’s one way to redirect my attention from the fact I’ll be walking funny all the way back to the car.”

Susan cast a sympathetic yet amused gaze his way. Gesturing toward the closet, she said, “We can always finish what we started in there...”

“Don’t tempt me,” he all but growled.

The look he gave her was so intense it swept her breath right out of her lungs in a quiet whoosh. Susan tingled all over at his husky, primal tone. She cast him a wicked grin and preceded him out the patio door, swinging her hips just a little more than she normally would.

She’d only taken a few steps before Michael grasped her hand. He pressed his warm lips against her knuckles briefly then started across the patio, pulling her with him. The fact he held her hand tight but didn’t say a word turned her on even more. Her belly tensed and her core began to ache all over again in anticipation as she walked down the grassy slope beside him.

When they reached his car, Michael’s fingers lingered at the base of her spine as he opened the car door for her. The tiny bit of contact was both intimate and incredibly arousing. She climbed inside the car and settled in the seat, wondering how far Michael’s house was. The man had her so wrapped up she realized she’d never asked him where he lived.

Only the hum of the car’s engine and the sound of Michael shifting gears filled the electric air between them as he drove to his home. It was

as if neither of them wanted to talk—to break the magnetic attraction building between them.

The silence didn't stop Michael from casting his hooded gaze her way a few times. At the heated look she saw reflected in his eyes from an approaching car's lights, Susan gave him a sly smile.

They both knew what they wanted, and they'd damn well waited long enough to get there, she thought when he returned his gaze to the road. Why had he waited so long? The man had made his attraction to her very clear from day one.

In so many ways, from the very beginning, she knew Michael was a wonderful man. He'd sympathized with her over Melanie's "errand", had championed her in front of the whole rehearsal dinner crew and had basically been an all-around gentleman since she'd met him—like the fact he'd been the one to slow things down between them.

Susan furrowed her brow and cast her gaze out the window. Michael had said he wanted to get to know her. And in many ways he had, but did he know the real Susan? He'd seen a little of her tonight when she picked Charlie's lock, but as much as Susan abhorred being called "Sensible Susan", she knew she subconsciously worked hard to maintain that image...to keep an emotional distance.

The strong front she put on had given her a sense of authority over her kid brother throughout their years alone together. Her outward demeanor also demanded respect from her superiors and co-workers, not to mention it put a barrier around her heart six inches thick.

The reality was...as excited as she was by their upcoming evening, Michael scared her on many levels.

He was so confident and self-assured. She would have never propositioned him if the situation had been reversed. But he didn't hesitate...not once. He saw what he wanted and he became a part of her life...almost as if he'd always been a part of it. She wished she could be so carefree with her feelings.

What would he think when he finally met the real Susan? If they continued to spend time together, he would eventually see every facet of

her personality, right down to the insecure and doubtful angles. She took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders, forcing herself not to worry about the future and what-ifs. Tonight was about an enjoyable evening with a sexy man, not a lifetime commitment.

Right. If that was true, then why did Michael's spicy, seductive aftershave make her think how nice it would be to wake up to that scent every morning? She banished the indulgent thought from her mind, refusing to get attached to him.

She was so deep in her thoughts she lost track of time and place until Michael pressed a button on his steering wheel and the iron gates in front of them began to open. Susan sat up a little straighter as he drove through the gates and proceeded up the long drive. She smiled as she realized where he'd taken her. She should've known he lived in the Village.

When he parked his car in the circular driveway in front of his Manor-style home, Susan took in the huge white columns on either side of his front porch, the nice-sized balcony above the porch's roof and the plethora of windows on either side of the porch. Trees sprouted all around the cobblestone circular drive and a brick-lined fountain graced the center.

Once he cut the engine, the lone spotlight on the side of the house gave off very little light from the angle he'd parked, and darkness surrounded them. She unbuckled her seatbelt, and while electric silence stretched between them, the sound of the ocean's surf filtered through the closed windows, making Susan's skin prickle and her smile falter. Her dream came back to her full force.

I was about to go to a wedding, I love the beach...and Michael really wound me up that night before I went to bed. That's all it was, she told herself. "You have a beaut—"

Michael unbuckled his seatbelt and laid his hand on her neck, causing her to pause. She trembled as his thumb moved up the side of her throat to rub behind her ear. His heated touch soaked through her

skin, igniting a fire within her. Susan let out a steadying breath before she finished, “—iful home.”

“Welcome, Susanna,” he said in a desire-filled voice before he pulled her close and covered her lips with his.

The sensuous slant of his lips devouring hers melted Susan's insides. She opened her lips and cupped her hands around his jaw, enjoying the sensation of his rough, evening stubble against her palms.

Michael's tongue slid deep into her mouth, aggressive, but not forceful. He set a seductive, assertive pace that made her want to linger in the car and allow him to explore every crevice, every dip and hollow inside her mouth and beyond.

His hands darted in her hair and found the clip she'd secured it with. She felt it give way and heard a clatter as her clip hit the console before it fell to the floor.

“Impatient, are you?” She smiled against his lips as his fingers tunneled in her hair, unwinding the twist.

“I believe that'll be the understatement of the evening,” he mumbled right before he gripped her shoulders and pulled her closer.

Susan let out a surprised yelp, but continued their kiss. Instead she nipped at his bottom lip and said in a husky voice, “Well, if you wanted me to come over, all you had to do was ask.” She broke their kiss and climbed over the console. Michael tilted his steering wheel upward to give her room as she squeezed in front of it to settle on his lap.

The console dug into her left calf and she had to lower her head to keep from hitting the roof, but Susan didn't care. She chuckled as she moved her head beside his and whispered in his ear, “Hmm, this is a bit cozier than I expected.”

Michael's right hand slid up her left thigh under her skirt at the same time the entire seat shifted back a good foot and a half.

“Comfortable?” he asked as he laid his other hand on her right thigh.

When his thumbs pressed on her inner thighs, flames swirled in her belly. The heated skin-against-skin contact of his fingers so very close to her aroused sex felt intimate and erotic. She pressed her mound against

his erection, enjoying the feel of his hard cock rubbing against her damp silk panties and sensitized clit.

“Very cozy,” she said right before she pressed her lips against his.

Michael’s hands trailed up her back as he kissed her deeply. The distinctive sound of her zipper opening, along with the cool sensation of night air hitting her back, elicited a primal response in her. Susan moaned against his mouth and slid her hands into his thick hair, thrusting her tongue more aggressively against his.

Michael pulled her dress down her shoulders and then to her waist, exposing her bare breasts. She shuddered as the cool air puckered her sensitive nipples even more. When Michael’s hands encircled her waist and he pulled her forward to press his face against her breasts, all she could do was clutch him close in surprise.

He turned his head and pressed his ear against her breastbone. “I’ve fantasized about the feel of your skin against mine, your heart’s frantic beat underneath my cheek, and now that I have your provocative smell added to the mix...nothing compares.”

His words and actions were so tender and reverent, they stole her breath. Susan’s stomach fluttered. She closed her eyes and ran her hand through his hair, totally floored by the emotions this man’s roughly uttered statement evoked in her.

Michael rocked his erection against her as his fingers pressed against her upper back. His heated breath warmed her breast right before his lips made contact.

Her heart ached as he kissed a slow, fiery path across the curve of her breast until his lips hovered over her nipple.

As she waited for his mouth to connect, Susan bit her lip in expectation. Need rose within her, clawing her belly, demanding that she move her body closer to him.

When he closed his mouth over her nipple and sucked on the hard peak with fervor, Susan clenched her fingers in his hair and let out a moan of sheer bliss. Pleasure radiated from her breast, jolting straight through her insides and ramming into her core.

She ground her sex against his cock and was stunned by the sense of rightness that slammed through her when he let out a deep groan against her breast.

Michael's hands moved to her ass and his fingers shoved past her underwear, grabbing the bare cheeks. His steel grip tightened and he jerked her harder against his upward thrusts.

"Damn, I hadn't planned to have sex in my car," he said as his mouth moved to her other breast.

Michael had to release his hold on her nipple when she leaned back to unbuckle his belt buckle and unbutton his pants. Her breathing came in rapid pants while she pulled down his zipper. "If you think I'm waiting until we get inside, you can forget it."

Michael grabbed her wrist before her hand could connect with his erection. His dark gaze searched hers. "Are you sure, Susanna?"

She saw the raw hunger reflected in his gaze, even in the dim light. She didn't care that the seatbelt holder was digging into her knee or that the console was keeping her from fully wrapping her legs around this man the way she wanted to.

She gave him a half smile. "I want to feel you inside me, now, as deep as you can get."

Michael nodded and glanced toward the back seat where he'd tossed his jacket. "I have condoms in my jacket pocket. Can you reach them?"

"As long as you release my hand," she said with a laugh.

He rubbed his thumb over her pounding pulse then released her.

Susan tried to lean around the bucket seat, but her fingers couldn't quite reach the dark material. As it was, she was smashing her bare breasts against Michael's neck. Not that he seemed to mind.

Suddenly the seat began to tilt backward. Michael brushed his lips across her collarbone and chuckled. "Better?"

"Much." She grabbed hold of his jacket and felt around until she found the pocket. When her fingers touched several foil packets, she sat back up and faced him in triumph, condoms in hand.

“Mission accomplished.”

He raised a dark eyebrow, his expression so hungry he made her tingle all over. “Not yet, sweetheart. Will you put it on for me?”

Her eyes widened. “You want me to put on your condom?”

He pulled his silk boxer briefs down, exposing his rigid erection. He grasped her free hand and wrapped her fingers around his thick cock.

When his other hand lifted her chin, Susan managed to unglue her gaze from the sight of her fingers gripping him tight. Her body shook with the need to have him inside her.

“I want to feel your hands around me as much as possible,” Michael rasped.

His smoldering gaze yanked the air from her lungs. She’d never put a condom on a man before. Her past partners had always preferred to get the deed out of the way and then move on. None of them had ever suggested the act itself could be a pleasurable experience.

Susan’s fingers closed around him and she began to slide them up and down his engorged cock.

Michael’s fingers dug into her thighs. He closed his eyes for a brief second, laying his head back against the seat. His hips rocked in time with her movements and the groan that erupted from him made her feel incredibly powerful.

His head snapped up and his gaze lasered into hers. “You need to do it now, love.”

Susan released her hold and peeled open the condom. Tossing the wrapper to the side, she placed the condom over the tip.

Instead of immediately sliding it over him, she ran her fingers, wet from the condom’s lubrication, down his length, enjoying the feel of soft skin over steel hardness.

“Susanna,” Michael gritted out, palming her ass once more.

Susan raised her eyes to his, loving the near-the-edge roughness in his voice. After she’d rolled the condom the rest of the way down, she put

her hands on his shoulders and pressed her breasts against his chest, whispering in his ear, "How much do you want it?"

"More than you'll ever know," he replied at the same time he gripped her underwear, yanked it to the side then guided her hips lower.

She shivered deep inside at this primal side she was seeing of Michael. She liked it!

As she lowered herself over him and his impressive cock began to stretch her in wonderful, delicious ways, Michael kissed her neck and rocked his hips upward, thrusting deeper inside her.

Her body broke out into a fine sheen of sweat and her inner walls clenched as she gripped his shoulders tight. Shoving her hips downward, she buried his cock as deep inside her. Jaw-grinding deep.

The act sent her right over the edge. As her orgasm splintered around her and her heart thumped in erratic beats, she tensed and held her body as still as she could. She didn't want to send Michael too soon into his.

"It's not working, love. You're clamping onto me like a fucking glove—God, you...feel...good!"

Michael's breathing turned choppy as he began to rock his hips forcefully, jerking upward and deeper inside her. Susan finally moved, meeting each of his thrusts with downward counter movements. She'd never felt so full before, not to mention the fact his actions were rubbing his pelvic bone against her clit, the erotic sensations sending her to a new plane of bliss.

Her body heat spiked and she panted as she dug her nails into his shoulders, slamming down on him hard. When Michael nipped at her collarbone and then her neck, she keened her excitement and squeezed her muscles around him.

Michael shuddered then let out a primitive growl as he came. His thrusts went impossibly, claim-staking deep as his fingers bit into her rear, his strength pulling her even tighter against him. Susan's orgasm ricocheted through her in a never-ending tidal wave of pulsing sensations. By the time the contractions ended, her thighs trembled and

her entire body shook. She closed her eyes, almost overwhelmed at the sheer heat, intensity and depth of their lovemaking—as if they were subconsciously trying to fuse their bodies together.

When Michael ran his tongue up the middle of her chest, swiping away sweat that had formed between her breasts, Susan gasped and held the back of his head, loving his attentive nature. Her eyes slowly opened and the sight of the windows' condition shocked her. The glass was completely fogged to the point condensation rolled down the slick surface.

Michael kissed her neck then her jaw, saying in a husky tone, "Even your sweat tastes like an aphrodisiac. It's just the right amount of musky sweetness."

Susan met his steady gaze and spoke, her voice shaky. "I knew we'd be good together, but I had no idea we'd—"

"Connect?" he answered for her, his expression serious. "I had no doubts, Susanna." He gave a wry smile as he cast his gaze around the car. "Though I didn't expect our first time to be in a car like a couple of hormonal teenagers."

"I never could've predicted that one," she said with a wink as she carefully moved off him, over the console and back in her seat.

Tossing Michael a tissue pack from her purse, she grabbed her hair clip off the floor and dropped it into her purse. As he straightened his pants, she adjusted her underwear and pulled her dress back up on her shoulders.

Once she was presentable, she turned her back to him and glanced over her shoulder, "Will you zip me up?"

Once he'd zipped up her dress, Michael leaned close and whispered in her ear, "I don't know why I'm bothering. I'm just going to unzip it again the first chance I get."

Chill bumps formed on her skin at his promise. "Then you'll have something to look forward to," she teased before she put her purse on her shoulder and opened the car door.

Michael's deep chuckle followed her out of the car, keeping her warm against the breezy, cool night air. She couldn't help but smile. The man made her feel so good. He made her feel...special.

"Care to let me in on the secret?" he asked as he came around the car and handed her the wrap she'd left behind.

Susan took her wrap and stared into his eyes. "No secrets, just happy to finally spend some time alone with you."

Michael kissed her forehead then clasped her elbow in a warm grip. "Me, too."

Susan allowed him to escort her up the walkway, smiling as the path lit with each step they took toward the front door. "Motion detectors," she said. "Nice touch." Excitement grew within her once they reached the front door. She was curious to know the type of home Michael would pick for himself.

He unlocked the door and as she entered the foyer, she gasped at the beautiful, open design. It might look like a traditional manor home on the outside, but she loved the huge atrium-style room that greeted them. With the exception of a wide staircase that came down the center of the room, she could see straight through to the backside of the house from one side of his home to the other. Huge picture windows went all the way up to the ceiling and only a catwalk on the second level blocked her view. From what she could see, it appeared the catwalk hallway connected one side of the house to the other on the second floor.

Michael flipped a switch on a side wall and the oversized chandelier above them came on. He touched another switch and the lights dimmed to candlelight strength. Taking her wrap and purse, he set them on a dark walnut hall table. His fingers laced with hers and he pulled her farther into the living room on the right side of the house. Her heels clicked on the polished wood floor until she stepped onto the area rug in the living room.

The bit of light from the entryway allowed her to see the room boasted warm browns, reds and touches of honey-colored pillows on plush, buttery soft light brown leather furniture. A stone fireplace took

up the right wall along with built-in shelves that boasted cabinet space underneath. Michael picked up a remote control from the oval glass-topped coffee table and pressed a button.

Saxophone accompanied a piano as jazz music floated from all corners of the room. He hit another button and floodlights came on outside, giving her a gorgeous view of a split-level deck that spanned the entire back of the house.

“Do you want me to turn on the lights?” Michael asked, looking down at her.

She shook her head. “No, I like listening to the surf in the dark.”

His white teeth flashed in the dim light as he lowered the music so she could still hear the waves before he set down the remote. “I’ll be right back.”

She smiled and chill bumps of excitement formed on her arms as she watched him walk toward a closed door. As he stepped through the swinging door, she caught a glimpse of a sterling-front refrigerator. *What does the man have in store for me?*

Once Michael was out of sight, Susan’s gaze landed on the other half of the darkened house. With ceiling to floor built-in bookshelves flanking either side of a movie-sized projector screen and a built-in stereo system that had to cost at least fifteen grand, she decided the other room was a combo library/entertainment room.

The surf pounding the beach outside drew her attention, making her wish it wasn’t fall. If she could hear the waves, she knew his house had to pretty much be right on the beach, even if she couldn’t see the sand or the white foam the waves usually left behind. If it were summer, she’d insist they walk the beach tonight, hand-in-hand. She’d relish the feel of the sand squeezing between her toes and a sexy man by her side. Nothing more committed than that!

Susan slipped out of her shoes and closed her eyes for a few seconds as she dug her toes in the carpet and imagined the sand between her toes.

When Michael wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest, her heart sped up. She let out a soft sigh and settled against his hard warmth, folding her arms over his. "I'm incredibly jealous. You get to see the beach every day. The view must be breathtaking."

He nuzzled her neck and his arms lightly squeezed her waist. "I have a spectacular view of the sunrise. I hope you'll watch it with me in the morning."

She glanced at him, her eyebrow raised in question.

A serious expression settled on his face as he turned her around in his arms. His fingers laced against her spine and he pulled her flush with his hips. "Yes, I want you to stay."

Chapter Seven

The man left her absolutely speechless. What was it about him that swept away her ability to form a coherent sentence, let alone a witty comeback? At the moment, no one would guess she could be a hell of a negotiator in the board room, spinning a tale about her client that would have potential supporters salivating to close the deal before anyone else could scoop them.

Then she realized what it was about Michael that drew her in. Sure he was sexy as hell, but the man wore confidence like a very comfortable second skin. Not only was he self-assured in his professional life, but when it came to his personal one, he went after what he wanted, no-holds-barred.

“Are you always so confident?” she found herself asking with a half smile as she stared up into his penetrating gaze.

Michael leaned close and inhaled near her neck before he spoke next to her ear. “When it comes to you...yes. I knew the moment I looked into your gorgeous blue eyes we’d be very good together.”

Her breath caught at his sexy comment, and her body tingled all over when his hands shifted to the bare skin on her shoulders to press her upper body closer to his. It was as if he couldn’t get close enough to her. Susan wrapped her arms around his neck then slid her fingers into his hair. Pressing her nose against his throat, she inhaled the seductive scent that was all Michael.

“Say you’ll stay,” he said in a low tone.

“Promise I’ll see the sunrise?”

"Guaranteed." He stepped back and laced his fingers with hers before tugging her along behind him.

"Where are we going?" She allowed him to lead her toward the french door in the corner of the room.

He opened the door, and the sound of the waves slamming against the shore made her body sing. "Taking you where you can hear the surf," he replied as he pulled her outside onto a deck that spanned the entire backside of his home.

Susan laughed and tugged against his hold. "But it's at least fifty degrees out here. We'll freeze our asses off."

She caught his amused grin as he grasped her shoulders and turned her away from him. Placing his warm hands on her shoulders, he gave them a gentle squeeze. "Then you'd better get rid of these clothes."

The cool wind caused chill bumps to form on her arms. Susan held her hands over her bare arms while Michael slid the first spaghetti strap down her shoulder.

His comment made absolutely no sense. "You're cra...zy," she said through chattering teeth while suppressing the giggle that threatened to surface.

"Only about you." His lips connected with her shoulder as he pulled the other strap down then unzipped the back of her dress. "Move your hands, Susanna. I want to see all of you."

Sudden warmth swept through her at his statement and the need that resonated in his voice. She allowed her hands to fall. Her dress slid down her curves to land in a rumpled pile at her feet.

Michael grasped her hand and spun her around to face him. The hungry look in his gaze as it swept over her entire body stole her breath.

"You're gorgeous," he murmured.

The cool, salty air licked at her nipples, making them pucker instantly. She did her best not to shiver under his intense stare. Instead she slipped out of her underwear and stepped close to him. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she tilted her head so she could stare into his eyes. "You're a bit overdressed."

He slid his hands down her spine, palming her bare butt. When his fingers flexed on her skin and he pulled her flush against his erection, Susan gasped and her body tingled.

“Let’s take care of you first,” he said before he quickly lifted her in his arms and carried her toward a stone wall on the side of the deck. A rumbling sound, different from the surf in the background, caught her attention.

Susan gripped Michael tight around the neck as he descended a few wooden stairs then turned to walk past where the stone wall had ended.

When her gaze landed on the bubbling hot tub, she shot a wide grin his way. Taking in the unique oasis of flowers and plants that surrounded the oversized tub that looked more like a small pool, she said, “It’s perfect,” as he lowered her feet into the heated water.

As she stepped to the deeper side of the tub and lowered herself into the welcoming warmth, he shook his head. “Not yet.”

Once he kicked off his shoes, he walked over to a panel on the side of the house and hit a couple of buttons. The light behind him doused right before the turbulent bubbles ceased.

On the other side of the wall the deck’s light gave off a dim glow in the hot tub’s area. For a couple of suspended seconds, complete silence greeted her ears. Then the ocean waves filtered into her consciousness. Her heart swelled and Susan closed her eyes so she could listen to the soothing sound.

“I’m in heaven.” She tilted her head back and waved her arms in the water.

“My thoughts exactly.”

Michael sounded closer. She opened her eyes to see him squatting on the side of the tub, holding a wine glass out to her.

Her body ignited when her wet fingers brushed against his to retrieve the glass. She knew without looking that it was a Merlot.

Michael reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. His fingers caressed her jaw before he rested his forearm on his knee. “It’s a reserve I’ve kept for a special occasion.”

His words warmed her. She didn't want to think about how many other women Michael might have had in this very same hot tub. For tonight she wanted to believe she was the only one who mattered.

Susan took a sip of her wine while Michael stood. He'd left his jacket in the car, and the sight of him unbuttoning his shirt made her pulse skitter.

Susan smiled in the darkness. "Michael," she called out in a quiet voice. She set her glass on the deck and pressed her breasts against the side of the tub to look up at him.

"Hmm?" he asked.

She beckoned him closer with a crook of her finger and a sexy, come hither look.

When he put his knee on the deck and leaned close, Susan ran her hands along his shirt over his chest. "You have waaaay too many clothes on," at the same time she tugged on the cotton material, pulling him into the water beside her.

Water sloshed and overflowed onto the deck from Michael's abrupt entry. Susan laughed at the sopping wet sight he made as he came up out of the water, his dark hair down in his eyes.

When Michael pushed his hands across his face, shoving his wet hair back, his intense expression cut off her laughter. Her lungs seized as he ripped his shirt off and threw it on the deck with a wet plop. He advanced on her, and she stepped backward against the edge of the hot tub.

Her gaze locked with his as Michael placed his hands on the deck on either side of her, caging her in. Placing her elbows on the tub's edge, she leaned back a little as he leaned forward. "Surely you're not mad?" She kept her tone light-hearted.

He held her wine glass in front of her. "Wine goes well with dessert, and I see a perfect place to start," he said, tilting the glass.

The red liquid hit her right in the hollow of her throat before sliding down between her breasts.

Susan tingled all over when he grasped her waist. Her hands moved to grip his muscular arms and she let her head fall back as he leaned down to suck the wine from the small indentation.

His lips connected with her skin, and she shuddered as sheer desire shot to every part of her body. Despite the cool air around her, she was on fire. Michael nipped at her neck and her body molded to his as if she were literally melting into him.

"You'll just have to figure out how to remove the rest of my clothes," he said in a low, sexy tone while he gripped her upper back and lifted her slightly in the water.

When he lapped at the wine streaks between her breasts, her fingers moved of their own accord to his wet hair. She cupped his head at the same time she wrapped her bare legs around his hips. His mouth connected with one of her nipples and she gasped at the splinter of pleasure that spread through her. Pressing her mound against his erection, she gyrated her hips against him. "I have a feeling you can get your pants off faster than I can."

"Ah, but the point is...I want *you* to take them off," he said after he released her breast and began to walk backward while holding her close. He stopped walking when the height of the water stopped at his mid-thigh. Lifting her completely away from him, he slowly set her down in the water.

The intensity in his gaze hadn't changed, but this time she recognized it for what it was...pent up arousal. Susan had never felt more sexually powerful than she did at that moment.

She slowly slid her hands across his chest, pausing to appreciate every dip and contour his muscles created before she moved her fingers down his hard abs. When his stomach muscles flexed, her gaze jerked to his, but Michael's eyes were closed, his jaw tense. Susan watched his face as she moved her fingers to unbutton his pants. The soaked fabric made sliding the zipper open difficult, but not impossible.

As soon as she tugged the wet material down Michael's hips, revealing his underwear molded to his erection, his gaze seared into hers

and his hands cupped her face. Running his thumbs along her jawline, Michael pulled her close and covered her lips with his. Susan craved his taste, his touch, his closeness. Her mouth opened under his, welcoming the aggressive thrust of his tongue.

She could hear the ocean's waves above the rush of hot tub bubbles, and when Michael's lips met hers, all her senses sharpened. She tasted the salt in the air, smelled the secrets of the ocean surrounding her, making her feel a part of the incessant waves crashing against the shore, moving in perfecting time with her wild heartbeat.

Michael's hands speared into her hair and he cradled the back of her head as he slanted his mouth over hers, deepening their kiss. The coolness of his skin combined with his internal heat pressed against her front and the brisk wind blowing against her back made her shiver and tremble all at once. He kissed her as if he couldn't get enough of her taste, as if he wanted to make sure he left behind an indelible part of himself when their lips finally separated.

The hot water surrounding her sex made it sensitive and swollen. Her channel throbbed with heat at his possessive kiss and the tense dominance in the way he held her...like he never planned to let her go. This kiss was different from any other time he'd kissed her. It was more intimate and thorough, almost soul-searching in its intensity, eliciting an emotional response she hadn't expected...desire for permanence. She knew she was caught up in the moment, but she reveled in the fantasy as she ran her fingers over his erection through his underwear to stoke his arousal even more.

Michael gripped the back of her neck and placed his forehead on hers as his other hand moved to palm her hip in the water. His heavy breathing made her smile. She kissed his jaw as she slid her hand down his hard cock to grasp his sac. His hips rocked, encouraging her.

She trailed her nails down his back and dug them into his butt to pull him closer while she wrapped her fingers around the bulge, grasping his erection. She felt his groan rumble in his chest as she kissed his pectorals then moved her lips down the center of his cut abs. Feathering

kisses lower, she tugged his underwear down and then pushed his wet clothes even further down his thighs.

As soon as his cock sprang free of his clothes, Susan ran her tongue around the tip. He tasted of salt and chlorine, all male. She paused in her efforts to remove his clothes, wrapping her warm mouth around the tip of his erection.

Michael's hand gripped the back of her head and he moaned as she took him deep inside her mouth. He groaned and his fingers wound in her hair as she used her tongue to caress him. Rocking forward, he sent his cock deep into the recesses of her mouth. She loved the feeling of power his response gave her.

She ran her tongue all the way down his length and closed her lips tight before she began to apply arousing suction all the way up his hard length. His breathing turned shallow right before he gripped her shoulders and pulled away from her mouth, surprising her. Susan gave him a confused look. Surely he wanted her to continue.

"You're right, I can do it faster."

The intense, on-the-edge look in his expression made her shudder. While he finished removing his pants, she turned away to retrieve the glass of wine from the side of the tub.

"The bottle is by the stairs," Michael answered her unspoken question when she picked up the almost empty glass.

As she approached the tub's stairs she noted the hot tub was an unusual design with several contoured seats along the edges. There was even a seat next to the stairs.

Susan tried to lean over the top stair to retrieve the bottle, but her arm couldn't reach, so she put her knees into the contoured seat off to the right of the stairs and was finally able to reach the bottle.

After filling her glass, she'd just set the bottle back down when Michael's pants made a loud plop on the deck next to the bottle.

The sight of the condom wrapper landing beside his pants caused her heart rate to kick up several more notches. Not to mention the fact her rear end was currently on display in the cool night air. She set her glass

on the side of the tub and started to lower herself all the way back into the water when Michael's firm hands grasped her hips.

"Stay put."

Her body throbbed as his hand massaged her bare buttocks. She gripped the side of the tub in front of her and closed her eyes in sheer delight as his fingers slid between her legs.

"I've never seen a more inviting picture."

His dark tone made her shiver as he trailed a feathery touch closer to her core. Susan arched her back and clenched her lower muscles, waiting...dying for him to touch her.

When he slid a finger straight past her opening to ride her clit, her hips moved, encouraging him. A soft whimper bubbled past her closed lips, despite her effort to keep quiet.

"Don't hold back, Susanna. I want to hear your cries, to know you want me as much as I want you," he said at the same time his hands gripped her hips. He guided her hips lower until his erection pressed against her opening.

Skin prickling, her pulse thrumming, she dug her fingernails into the wood flooring around the tub and clenched her muscles around the tip of his cock in excited anticipation.

"You feel perfect," he groaned at the same time he pulled her off the seat and toward him, driving his cock deep inside her.

"Oh, God," she panted out as her feet touched the tub floor. Michael's deep penetration had set her on the verge of a climax. Her arms shook and her heartbeat at an out of control pace. The sheer ecstasy that rippled through her at their joining was almost overwhelming.

With one hand clasping her hip, Michael moved his other to her bare breast and leaned over her back, surrounding her with his heat. "Not yet, my sweet Susanna. Wait a little longer," he said close to her ear, then kissed her temple with a gentle brush of his lips.

Every nerve ending in her body flexed and jumped, ready to pounce and push her headlong into orgasm. She was on fire, her fingers and toes full of needles as he rolled her nipple between his fingers, once, twice. He

gave the hard bud a pinch, and her breath hitched. She whispered his name at the erotic connection radiating from her breast to her core. When she clenched her inner muscles hard and heard his hissing intake of breath, she managed a smile. "Are you sure you want to wait?" she teased as she began to slowly move her hips back and forth.

Grasping her hips to stop her movements, Michael pressed her body forward until her pelvis touched the front of the seat. "You'll thank me later." His low baritone rumbled in her ear as he slid her feet farther apart with his foot then laced his fingers with one of her hands on the side of the tub.

"This feels wonderful," she managed to pant out as he laid his chest across her entire back to push a button on the side of the tub.

The tub's jets came on again as he threaded his other hand with her free one. She felt the jet pounding on her stomach, but didn't have time to miss the sound of the surf drowned out by the bubbles as Michael began to move in and out of her.

With each thrust her body zinged, spiraling tighter and tighter. His lips grazed her neck and the sound of his labored breathing turned her on even more.

The cool air caused a new round of goose bumps to form on her skin and her nipples to harden to pulsing nubs. The myriad of sensations was so intoxicating. She ached all over for release.

Then Michael's grip tightened on her hands and he flexed his arm muscles, tugging her hands farther away from them, lifting her higher.

Pounding water suddenly invaded her sensitive clit as the jet hit her dead on. Susan's panting turned to choppy gusts at the oh-so-sweet onslaught.

"Oh, God, Michael...I can't...oh, God..."

Her toes were barely touching the bottom of the hot tub, giving her very little choice but to take whatever Michael chose to dish out. And it felt so ever-lovin' good!

His hips ground against her buttocks and his thrusts grew harder, more demanding. Perfect friction and stimulation surrounded her, front to back, igniting all her senses. And then his words undid her...

"Come for me, Susanna. I want to hear you scream out, to feel you gripping me like you never want to let me go."

"I don't," she answered honestly right before a scream erupted from her lips unlike any she'd ever heard before. Susan climaxed in body-encompassing shudders over and over to the point she wondered if she would survive Michael's intense lovemaking.

She was so out of it, her body so sensitized, she was glad his tense arm muscles had relaxed enough to allow her feet to touch the bottom once more. No longer inundated with dual sensations, she was able to concentrate on moving against him as he pistoned twice more inside her before his fingers gripped her hands tight. A guttural groan rushed past his lips as he pressed her hard against the tub with his own climax, then collapsed against her back, his breathing just as heavy as hers.

Susan lifted one of his hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. "I've never felt anything like that before."

Michael gave a low chuckle as he untangled his hands from hers. Clasp her breasts, he guided her to a standing position and pulled her back against his chest. He ran his lips up her neck then planted an achingly possessive kiss on her jaw. "I have all night to discover the many ways to make you scream, and I intend to explore every one of them."

Susan shivered at his sexy promise, but she wasn't about to let him think this would be a one-sided deal. Sliding her hand between them, she clasped his sac and ran her fingers down the middle as she cupped his bare buttock with her other hand. "Turnabout is definitely fair play. I always give as good as I get."

Michael turned her in his arms and locked his hands at the base of her spine. His white teeth flashed in the darkness. The man's devilish grin made the butterflies in her belly lift and swirl like helpless leaves in a strong wind.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said right before his lips met hers.

Chapter Eight

Michael woke to the sensation of Susan's warm body curled up beside him in his bed. Glancing at his clock, he saw he had forty minutes before the sun began to rise. He turned his bedside lamp on low and leaned on his elbow to watch her sleep for several minutes. Her blonde hair was a tangled mess spread out on his pillow. He picked up a few strands and pulled them toward his nose, inhaling her appealing scent. She smelled like home; rumpled fresh-laundered sheets, faint remnants of his bath soap and her own sexy, feminine smell.

He ached as his gaze traveled her slender nose, to her high cheekbones and full mouth. As much as the ache had to do with his arousal whenever she was near, the sensation moved deeper into his gut. He realized why he'd been so determined to delay having sex with Susan. It had very little to do with his last relationships and everything to do with the fact this woman got under his skin.

She went to bat for the ones she loved, no matter her own reservations. She was fun, smart, sexy...everything he wanted in a woman. He'd always thought his career would be his first and last love...until the day she walked into his restaurant and blew him away.

He pulled back the sheet, exposing her naked upper body. Running his fingers along her soft skin, he relished the difference in their skin tones—his dark and hers fair.

Last night proved everything his body had been telling him. Not only were they matched intellectually, but their sexual chemistry was as explosive and fundamentally satisfying as it could get.

She moaned in her sleep and rolled over onto her back. The erotic sight of her naked body sprawled in his bed, her warm, pink nipples

hardening as they reacted to the cooler air, made him throb. He wanted her to start this new day the way yesterday ended...in sheer pleasure.

* * *

Susan dreamed of Michael's hands on her body...his heavy weight pressing her to the bed as his cock thrust deep, spreading her walls wide. She rocked her hips in blissful pleasure at the sensations swirling through her.

The dream changed and Michael's warm breath bathed her skin as he kissed a sexy path up her inner thigh toward her sex.

With a blissful sigh, she let her legs fall to the bed in total surrender...

The jostling of the bed jerked her eyes open at the same time Michael's lips connected with her entrance.

Susan gasped at the exquisite building sensations rippling through her with each swipe of his tongue against her clit. She arched her back and pressed her body closer, moaning as he began to suck on the firm nub.

Michael lifted his head and cast his gaze toward the sliding glass doors near the bed. "The sun will rise soon. I thought you might want to be awake to see it."

He looked so sinfully seductive with his black hair all askew. She sat up on her elbows and followed his line of sight before returning her gaze to his. "I couldn't have asked for a better alarm clock." She laughed when he gripped her rear end and yanked, pulling her back down onto the bed, but her amusement changed to a whimper when he slid a finger deep inside her body and pressed on her g-spot.

She dug her heels into the mattress and lifted her hips in time to the rhythmic slide of his finger moving inside her. Last night with Michael had been like something out of an erotic fairy tale. The man made passionate love to her all night long. His attentive nature made her feel incredibly sexy and special.

In return, she'd given herself over completely to their lovemaking, giving him as much pleasure as he did her. She lay in Michael's bed last night with her head on his chest and her legs entwined with his. Snuggling close to his masculine warmth felt so natural, she instantly fell into an exhausted sleep. She'd never done that with another man. In the past, after having sex, her mind whirled for hours before she could finally close her eyes.

As Michael ran his tongue along swollen, sensitive folds and across her clit, he added another finger to the one penetrating her. Her breath caught. She bucked and moaned at the whirlwind of erotic sensations swirling inside her body. Tightening her stomach muscles, she clenched her sex around his fingers, her actions adding to the friction he provided. At the same time his lips latched onto her clit, Michael slid another finger down her slit and pressed against that soft spot just below her entrance.

Every part of her sex was on fire with sensations. Susan screamed out at the unique combination of his mouth and his knowing touch sending pleasurable pinpricks scattering from her core and upward throughout her body.

Her climactic contractions were both rapid and intense, sending her breath rushing through her lungs in frantic pants of keening rapture.

When her tremors stopped, she ran her fingers through his hair as he withdrew his hand from her body and pressed a light kiss against the bit of blonde hair on her mound. She expected him to move over her and rub his erection against her, enticing her to want to please him, but he didn't.

"I always keep my promises," he said as he grabbed her hand and pulled her off the bed. Tugging her toward the sliding glass doors, he pushed the sheer curtains back and moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. Susan settled her back against his warm, hard chest and waited for the sun to rise.

"Your sunrise, coming right up," he whispered next to her temple.

As the sun began to rise over the water, its deep orange and pink colors reflecting in elongated ovals across the rippling surface, she

smiled, feeling more contented and comfortable with this man than she'd ever been before with her past lovers.

She dug her fingers into his muscular thighs and ran her nails up the sides before she slipped her hands behind her and grasped his erection. Curling her fingers around his hard length, she slid her hand all the way to the base and back up at a slow pace. "I think we can make it a perfect sunrise, don't you?"

* * *

After a long, drawn out shower with Michael, Susan wrapped his thick white robe around her and brushed her teeth with the new toothbrush he'd left on the counter for her before he went downstairs, saying, "It pays to have a dentist in the family who keeps me in constant supply of extra toothbrushes, toothpaste and floss." As she padded down the stairs, she chuckled in memory of the huge box of toothbrushes she'd seen under the sink's cabinet when she threw away some tissue.

Michael met her at the bottom of the stairs wearing navy lounge pants and a sexy grin as he held out a steaming black coffee mug for her. Standing on the bottom stair, she was eye to eye with him. The unique vantage point allowed her to view the morning sun reflecting on his pitch black hair. Intriguing blue streaks highlighted the wet strands, reminding her of raven's feathers.

Smiling at her fanciful thoughts, she wrapped her fingers around the warm mug while her gaze slid over his angular, clean shaven face. "Thank you. It smells delicious. Do you have any cream?"

He stepped close and lifted some of her hair, inhaling. "You smell good enough to eat." His predatory gaze swept over her as he slowly rubbed the damp blonde pieces between his fingers. The possessive appreciation in his gaze told her how much he enjoyed seeing her in his robe. "I'll be right back with the cream."

Susan shivered at the loss she experienced the moment he stepped away and headed for the kitchen. Shaking off the odd sensation, her line

of sight drifted to the open living room and caught on the sun reflecting off the glass fronted built-in cabinets lining the far wall. She took a sip of her black coffee, wrinkled her nose at the strong taste—needed cream—and entered the living room. As she headed toward the cabinet she instantly recognized several of the bright colors behind the glass doors.

Board games.

Stacked neatly on the cabinet shelves behind the glass, she saw Parcheesi, chess, checkers, backgammon, Life, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit and the list went on and on. Michael had every classic game she'd ever remembered playing growing up.

"I've been collecting them for fifteen years." Michael set the container of cream on the desk in front of them and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back against his chest. His low voice sent a thrill zinging through her. "Do you collect anything? Or have a hobby?"

She'd honestly thought he was joking when he'd said he collected board games. Her grip tightened on the coffee mug. She wasn't used to telling others much about herself at this level, yet Michael made her feel like he genuinely wanted to know.

Nodding, she answered his question. "I collect fairies. My parents started giving me figurines as a child and well, after I lost mom and dad in the car accident, keeping the collection going was my way to remember them—like my parents lived on, watching over me through the little sprites' magical eyes."

She laughed softly. "I know it sounds silly, but it helped me cope with being an 'instant' mom at such a young age. You should see the collection of figurines I have in a curio cabinet at home. I'm going to have to buy another case soon."

"Fairies... You look like one yourself." His arms tightened around her and he kissed the back of her head.

Her cheeks warmed at his compliment. Glancing up at him, she asked, "What about you? Why do you collect board games?"

"To me board games symbolize togetherness with friends and family." Gesturing toward the cabinet, he elaborated. "I like what these bright

packages represent—lots of laughter, good natured competition and general good times.”

Susan loved his philosophy. Seeing all those board games brought back many fond memories from her childhood. She leaned against his warmth, glad he wasn’t able to see her misty eyes. “My parents, Jason and I would play Life and Monopoly for hours. When we got older, Jason and I used to have backgammon tournaments.”

Releasing her, Michael opened the cabinet and picked up the backgammon game. When he broke the cellophane wrapper and began to pull it off the leather bound case, she gasped. “What are you doing? That’s a first addition.”

Michael gave her a devastating smile. “As I said, board games are meant to bring friends and family together. Grab the cream and I’ll meet you at the table in the kitchen. We’ll have our own tournament.”

As he walked away carrying the game, he called over his shoulder, “Get ready to be stomped. Winner gets to pick how *he* wants to be spoiled for the day.”

Her competitive nature shoved all the sentimental memories to the back of her mind. Grabbing the creamer, she quickly followed after him. “You don’t have a prayer, Piccoli.”

* * *

Michael smiled at her as she smoothed her skirt for the twentieth time. “You look great,” he said with a wink.

They’d been going out for a month and a half now, and every time she was with Michael, he’d planned a new adventure, from hiking to football games to yep, lots of roller coaster rides. And the sex, God, the sex was out of this world, curl your toes exceptional! Their chemistry was so tangible, so electric she worried she’d become addicted to the man.

She’d been surprised and pleased when Michael invited her to have dinner with his family. But now that she was standing on the Piccolis’

front porch waiting for Michael's parents to answer the door, she found her throat closing with nerves.

As she started to rub away another imaginary wrinkle in her skirt, Michael grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Just be yourself, Susanna."

The door opened and a tall man with thick salt and pepper hair smiled at her. "You must be Susanna. I'm David, Michael's father. Come on into the kitchen. We've got the wine, cheese and crackers ready to go."

Susan gave Michael a tremulous smile as he put his hand on her back and ushered her inside.

The smell of rich marinara sauce and garlic bread welcomed her as she entered the huge kitchen that was full of people.

Taken aback, Susan glanced at Michael, her eyes wide and her chest quickly seizing at the sheer number of people. She counted at least ten, and she'd only expected to have dinner with his parents.

Wrapping his arm around her waist, Michael grinned. "Meet my family, Susanna...all ten and a half of them," he said as a very pregnant woman with long black hair approached and handed Susan a glass of wine.

"Hi, Susan. I'm Rachel, Michael's sister-in-law." She pointed to a stocky, dark haired man with a goatee who was leaning against the center island and stuffing a breadstick in his mouth. "That's my husband, Keith." She moved closer and whispered as she patted her round belly, "He seems to believe this 'eating for two' philosophy extends to him as well." Pointing to a thin man and a blonde woman, she said, "That's Joshua and Kelly and the short, spiky-haired guy with glasses is Jonathan. His wife, Sherri, is the cute redhead with a temper to match her coloring. Sean's easy to pick out. He's the only one with light brown hair. We tell him he's secretly adopted and light hair on an Italian is why he's still single."

"I heard that, Rachel," Sean called from a few feet away. Stealing the steaming breadstick Keith had just picked up, Sean took a bite then turned his green gaze Susan's way and said with a confident grin, "I'm

unattached because I'm smart. Truth is, I'm the only sane one in this family, hence the gorgeous green eyes."

"Due to recessive, better known as *weak* genes," someone taunted in the background.

Rachel chuckled and continued her introductions as she nodded toward Stephan talking to Jonathan. "I believe you've already met the youngest Piccoli."

Susan couldn't help but laugh and feel completely at ease with Michael's family as they each walked up and introduced themselves, always giving some amusing tidbit about each other. It was all good-natured and from their comments she could tell they got along and genuinely liked one another.

"Your family likes to tease, don't they?" she whispered to Michael as he sliced a few pieces of cheese for her and handed her a plate with the cheese and crackers.

"Get used to it. Today, you're the guest and as such exempt from their torture, but the next time you're fair game," he warned with a wink.

Next time? He planned to invite her again? The thought warmed her all over. At that moment his youngest brother Stephan approached and poured himself some wine. "I've already met Susan, so does that mean *I* can tease her?"

Susan choked on her cracker and cheese as she thought about the only thing Stephan would know about her—he'd sent her to the Piccoli's wine cellar after hours with his older brother.

When she cast imploring eyes Michael's way, he chuckled and addressed his brother. "Watch it or you'll be out of a job. Then how will you pay for all those expensive presents you buy for Alyssa?"

Stephan lifted his glass in acknowledgment. "Noted, big brother. Alyssa does have very expensive taste." A dreamy, puppy dog look crossed his face as he continued, "But she's worth it."

"Speaking of Alyssa...where is your girlfriend tonight?" a petite, older woman with short dark hair asked. She held her wooden cooking spoon covered with sauce out of the way and kissed Stephan on the cheek.

Stephan grimaced. "She had to study. She said to tell you she hated missing the Piccolis' monthly dinner and she'd be here next month, Mom."

"Good." Turning her doe brown eyes toward Susan, she came around the island and smiled as she held out her hand. "Welcome to our home, Susan. I hope you're hungry. We have five courses planned for the evening."

Five courses? Then again, I should've known Michael learned his talent for providing a great meal from his mother. Susan smiled and shook the woman's fine-boned hand. "Thank you for inviting me, Mrs. Piccoli."

She gave Susan a warm smile and squeezed her fingers before releasing her hand. "Call me Sophia, dear. I'm glad you came tonight."

* * *

Dinner at the Piccolis' was a very interactive, fun affair with much laughter and just as much ribbing. Funny, embarrassing stories were told over mouthwatering homemade pasta, gourmet salad, fluffy breadsticks and lots of wine. No one was left out of the mix. From Michael's parents to the youngest Piccoli, everyone was included in the conversations. His family even asked her to relate stories of her life with Jason and she felt so at ease, she quickly told a few amusing tales of her own.

While they were finishing up their coffee and rich mocha cheesecake for dessert, the Piccoli siblings got into a disagreement about the board game they were going to play.

"Anyone up for Monopoly? What about Scrabble? Or that new game Outburst?"

Board games...now I know why they're so important to Michael. They bring his family together at least once a month.

Finally, Michael raised his hands and said over the loud voices, "Since I'm the oldest, I'll pick. Trivial Pursuit. We'll play in teams."

While his brothers and their significant others cleared off the table and his parents retired to the living room during their game, Michael lifted Susan's hand from the table and kissed her palm. "What'd you think of dinner with the Piccolis?"

Susan smiled and answered honestly. "I can see why your restaurant is so successful. You've created an ambiance that brings people together in a wonderful, relaxing environment—a place conducive to great conversation, enjoyment of fine wines and excellent food."

Lifting her coffee cup, she said, "Imagine this is champagne as I salute your success."

Michael picked up his coffee cup and clinked it with hers. "I'm happy to share this with you, Susanna."

She was a bit surprised by his serious expression, but didn't have time to ponder it, because Michael's brothers and the women all filed into the room.

Jonathan laid the board game on the table and removed the lid, his tone dead serious. "I'm setting the ground rules. No cheating. Got it, Joshua?" he said as his dark gaze drilled into his younger brother's.

Unoffended, Joshua tucked his shoulder-length black hair behind his ears and shrugged his thin shoulders. "I don't cheat."

To which everyone in the room, even his live-in girlfriend, snorted in unison. Susan raised her eyebrow in amusement. Apparently, he did.

Jonathan lifted the plastic bag that held all the game pieces and dumped the colorful wheels and wedges on the table. "Teams, pick your playing pieces."

"Grab my favorite color," Michael said to Susan as he moved his coffee cup onto the china buffet behind him.

Susan stared at all the pieces and realized everyone was waiting for her to take one before they picked theirs. *What was Michael's favorite color?* Feeling at a loss, she thought about how Michael had decorated his house in shades of navy blue, deep reds and taupe. Navy blue one was the closest color to the pieces in front of her.

She started to pick the light blue piece when Stephan made a tsking sound and handed her the green piece instead.

As everyone else picked up their playing piece, she looked sideways at Michael. "You like green? But your house is decorated in navy blues and reds."

He nodded. "Green is my favorite color. It's just not the easiest color to decorate one's house with."

"Bet she doesn't know your favorite teddy bear growing up was named Piggy either," Stephan teased.

Susan laughed. "A teddy named Piggy?"

Michael shrugged, unapologetic. "I wanted a pet pig."

"Or that when you were a teenager you pulled off all of your braces with a set of pliers after the orthodontist said you had to wear them for another year," Sean piped in, his eyes full of laughter.

Susan winced. "Pliers?"

"See, perfectly straight teeth." Michael flashed her a wide grin.

"What about the fact—"

"That I can still torture every single one of my younger brothers in various ways," Michael cut Keith off, staring meaningfully around the table at each of his siblings.

"Michael's got that look." Stephan snickered. "Better save it for next time, guys."

"Okay, everyone," Jonathan said, pushing his fashionable, rimless glasses up his nose. "Let's get started so I can annihilate you all."

"And I thought *you* were competitive," Susan whispered to Michael.

He gave a low chuckle and responded in her ear. "Jonathan is the brainy one in the family. He takes this particular game very seriously."

* * *

When the competitive game was over and Michael and Susan were declared the winners, Jonathan's wife, Sherri, smiled at Susan as they

all filed out of the dining room. "Jon's going to go home and lick his wounds while bemoaning the fact Michael brought a 'ringer' to the table."

Susan laughed and cast an apologetic gaze Jonathan's way, but Michael's younger brother was saying goodnight to his parents by the front door. "Tell him, I'm sorry," she whispered to Sherri.

"I'm not!" Sherri's auburn eyebrows rose. "You won fair and square. He needs to stew on that for a bit."

As everyone pulled on their coats and said their goodbyes to Michael's parents, Michael whispered in Susan's ear, "I knew with you on my side, we'd kick Jonathan's butt."

"I retract my earlier comment. *You* are more competitive," she shot back with a low chuckle. "I think your brother was truly bothered he didn't win."

"Of course he was. He has never lost that game. Ever."

Once all their other children had left for their respective homes, Michael's parents turned to Michael and Susan in the foyer as Susan spoke, "Thank you for a wonderful dinner, David and Sophia."

"You're welcome here anytime," David said with a genuine smile before he addressed his son. "I need to ask you a question about a wine I just purchased. I don't believe your restaurant has this one and I found it quite good. Do you have a minute?"

As Michael followed his dad down the hall and through a door on the right, Sophia grasped Susan's hand. "You were a pleasure, Susan. You fit right in with the Piccolis. I hope you'll come again."

Susan's heart swelled that Michael's mother seemed to like her. "Thank you, Sophia. I'd love to come back."

His mother gave her a knowing smile as she released her hand and patted Susan's arm. "You're good for Michael."

Sophia's casual comment shocked Susan. "I am?"

His mother laughed, her brown eyes sparkling. "Michael must've figured you could handle this rowdy bunch. I know they all liked you."

Swallowing the emotional lump in her throat, Susan laughed. "It was probably because he needed a partner to help him beat his younger brother tonight." She bit her lip and continued, "I hope Jonathan isn't too upset."

Sophia squeezed her arm. "Don't you worry about Jonathan. He needed to be taken down a peg or two. He never lets anyone live it down when *he* wins."

Nodding her understanding, Susan said, "Thank you for being such a wonderful hostess, Sophia. Your family made me feel right at home."

"Of course we did. We're Piccolis," Michael announced with a wink as he entered the foyer once more.

His mother reached up and hugged her son. She kissed him on the cheek and said, "Take care of Susan. She's a keeper."

Michael's gaze met Susan's over his mother's head. "I couldn't agree more."

* * *

Susan and Michael stood in the lobby of her apartment complex, staring at the brushed silver elevator doors. The lobby was unusually quiet for nine o'clock on a Friday evening. Then she remembered. There was a game tonight.

Michael had taken her to a fancy restaurant and then he'd brought her back here. She was so confused, her insides felt like a coil tightened to its breaking point. Ever since the night she'd spent with Michael at his family's home he'd acted different toward her. He'd still been his attentive, attractive, stimulating conversationalist self, but for five nights in a row the man had left her standing at her apartment door, dumbfounded and hungering for more. Other than a quick kiss, he hadn't touched her, which was driving her sanity right to the edge.

Over the past month and a half, she'd learned to crave his hard body pressed against hers, to smell his unique masculine scent all over her skin while he made her scream in sheer fulfillment.

Every night.

With Michael's platonic behavior this week, she'd begun to wonder if she'd committed some kind of grievous error at his parents' home she was unaware of, but then at dinner tonight Michael had given her the most beautiful gift. One doesn't normally give presents to someone if they're mad or upset with them.

She glanced down at the intricate fairy charm that hung from the delicate gold chain around her neck.

With its back arched and its wings tucked, the fairy smiled skyward, appearing to be enjoying the wind in its waist-length hair. The way the fairy hung on the necklace, its pixie face stared directly at her.

"So your parents can continue to watch over you, no matter where you are," Michael had said when she'd opened the jewelry box.

She'd cried over his incredibly thoughtful gift.

Hence her current confused state.

As the elevator doors slid open, she realized excitement would be growing in her belly right about now...if she hadn't had the last five frustrating evenings to stew on. Tonight they were alone in the elevator. Once the heavy doors slowly slid closed and the elevator began to move upward, a sudden, jolting thought occurred...one she hadn't considered until this very moment, driving her self-esteem into the ground.

Hard.

Had he lost interest? Was he was trying to figure out a way to stop seeing her and the fairy necklace was a parting gift? The thought slammed her in the gut, making her almost double over as her body experienced true, physical pain.

She forced her shoulders to straighten and took a deep breath. Casting her gaze Michael's way, she hoped he hadn't noticed.

He looked mouthwatering and devastating in his custom made business suit. His white shirt and deep red tie made his olive skin seem even darker. Droplets of rain glistened across his broad shoulders, highlighting his strong jawline, reflecting in his pitch black hair like tiny

diamonds. Her fingers itched to slide through the thick, silky locks and rub away the moisture.

Her gaze drifted to his handsome hands and she was surprised to discover they were curled inward instead of hanging relaxed by his sides.

This...this distance he'd put between them bewildered her, but she didn't know how to broach the subject without looking like a clingy, needy woman.

Until an idea came to her.

She'd make him want to stay tonight.

Rubbing her suddenly damp palms across her black skirt, Susan reached out and pulled the red emergency button, thankful no blaring alarms went off in the process.

When the unit came to an abrupt halt, Michael's eyebrow rose and he looked at her.

Susan inhaled to calm her nerves and turned to walk right into Michael's personal space. "Remember when we talked about having sex in a public place?" she asked as she unbuttoned his jacket.

When she began to tug on his tie, his warm hands encircled her wrists, stopping her movements. "No, we didn't. You asked if I'd ever had sex in public." His chocolate brown gaze searched hers as his hands tightened around her wrists. "And I said, 'yes'."

Her breath caught at the look of banked desire reflected in his gaze. Hope rose within her. She splayed her hands across his hard chest then slid her nails over his nipples. Dropping her gaze to his chest, she said, "How many times have we ridden this elevator up to my apartment?"

"At least forty," he responded as his thumbs rubbed small circles along the soft insides of her wrists.

"And how many times have you wanted to have your way with me against one of these walls?"

"All forty," he shot back.

Her heart skipped several beats at the unadulterated intensity in his tone. No hesitation, just blunt honesty.

But it was the sensation of his erection brushing against her lower belly combined with the hunger in his eyes that snatched the breath right out of her lungs.

Tugging her wrists from his hold, she ran her fingers slowly down his cock and wrapped them around the hard outline in a firm grip. With an intentional challenge lacing her tone, she said, "Then what's stopping you—"

The words weren't even out of her mouth before his hands cupped her face and his mouth claimed hers in a dominant, possessive kiss.

Yes! She mentally rejoiced as Michael slanted his mouth over hers, thrusting his tongue deep. She kissed him back with just as much passion, tangling her tongue with his.

Somewhere deep within him, she felt a rumbling growl in his chest. He crowded her, walking her backward a couple of steps until her back pressed against the cool elevator wall.

He took no prisoners, his tongue exploring every dip and hollow in her mouth at the same time he shoved his thigh between hers. His hands, both rough and warm, began to slide her skirt up, exposing her thighs.

Susan dug her nails into his shoulders, the rich material crushing under her fingers as her heart rate skyrocketed. She'd never seen him like this, aggressive and edgy, on the verge of losing total control.

Damn, she loved it!

She broke their kiss and whispered in his ear, "Don't stop. I love your hands on me, touching me everywhere. When you look at me, you make me melt. I feel like the most cherished woman in the world when I'm with you—special and unique in every way."

"The way you smell, the way you move...you drive me out of my fucking mind," he said in a hoarse, tortured, husky tone as he skimmed his lips across her jaw.

Susan thrilled when he moved his cock between her thighs and his hands grasped her buttocks through her silky underwear, lifting her off the ground slightly so he could grind against her. Her core throbbed and

her breasts ached for his touch—her entire body shook with need to feel him deep inside her.

“Then we’re even, considering the way you’ve left me wanting this week,” she replied as his lips pressed against her throat.

Michael froze, every part of his body stilled and tensed at once.

When he began to pull away, a part of her soul went with him. Susan gripped his shoulders, her stomach churning. “What’s wrong? Why’d you stop?”

Michael growled and turned away from her, slamming his hands through his hair.

Susan felt like someone was stomping on her chest, twisting the toe of their shoe in delighted glee as she slowly tried to breathe. Fear that she was losing him made defensive anger surface. “What did I do wrong? What do you want from me?”

He whirled on her, his hands dropping to fists by his sides as he snarled, “I want you to give a damn, Susanna!”

Chapter Nine

He wanted her to give a damn?

Astonishment ricocheted through her, knocking her in the gut. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear from him. "What are you talking about, of course I give a—"

"No, you don't," he cut her off, his tone angrier than she'd ever heard it.

Stepping into her personal space, he continued, his expression fierce, "Sex between us is...damn...I can't even put a word to it, it's that good, yet I know there's more between us. Only you won't let me mean more to you."

Susan's safe world, the one she'd created to keep her heart intact, was crumbling around her. "What are you talking about? You mean a lot to me."

"Do I?" he challenged, his expression doubtful. "I know you grew up feeling like a gawky kid, that your favorite color is purple, that jazz music relaxes you while pop turns you on, that you talk and make sexy little sounds in your sleep, that your favorite toy as a kid was a Raggedy Ann doll, that you miss your parents a great deal and if one more person asks you to be in yet another wedding as their maid of honor, you'll commit hari-kari."

Michael shocked the hell out of her with his diatribe. She had no idea he'd paid so much attention. Then again, he'd given her a fairy necklace to "watch over her", which meant he'd remembered her story about "why" she continued to collect fairies. Finally she realized what was bothering him. She touched his cheek as her gaze searched his. "I know that you're

the oldest of five boys, that you love a good Merlot, that you're a very talented cook, that you'll go out of your way to repay old debts—"

"All things I've told you about myself, Susanna." His hand covered hers, hurt reflected in his gaze. "I want you to *want* to know everything about me. To care enough to ask."

His last comment floored her, making her stomach lurch as if the elevator had dropped three floors. She had no idea Michael felt so strongly. When she thought back to when Michael had begun to distance himself from her sexually, it had all started right after they'd had dinner with his family. During the game, she hadn't known his favorite color or anything about his childhood. In reality, she hadn't asked him direct, intimate questions about himself or his past because she didn't want to get too emotionally close to him. But the truth was, she had soaked up all there was about Michael on her own, despite her best efforts to remain at an emotional distance.

Grasping his hand, she smiled. "I know you like toast with marmalade for breakfast, but you'll toss the whole thing if the bread's not crisp enough for you, that you forget to put the cap on your toothpaste, not because you're lazy, but because you set the cap you've rinsed down to dry and forget to put it back on, that your favorite music is soft jazz, that you read the newspaper from back to front, that your family means more to you than you'll ever admit to them, that you love the fact you're the oldest of your siblings and by the nature of being so, always the one to take charge."

At the look of complete surprise on his face, she tilted her head to the side and grinned. "Does that about sum you up in a nutshell, Michael Piccoli?"

"How do you know all that?" He turned her hand over and kissed her palm, his expression shifting to amazement.

"Because I cared enough to pay attention."

In spite of all her efforts to keep him at an emotional arm's-length, she realized just how much she'd fallen in love with the handsome

Italian. One day she'd tell him how she felt. For now, she linked her fingers with his, just content to share a special moment with him.

When his expression turned serious, she asked, "What is it?"

Michael shook his dark head and flashed a brief smile. "Nothing. I just like looking at you." As he ran his thumb along her jaw, his gaze searched her face. "I've lived long enough to know what I want in my life and I definitely want you in it."

His comment warmed her all over. Susan closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his palm. "I love having you in my life, too."

"Susanna, I'm asking you to marry me."

Her gaze jerked to his, eyes wide in surprise. "Marry you?"

He palmed her cheeks with his warm hands. "I know you think this is sudden and I'm willing to wait a year if you wish for a longer engagement, but I know I want you. I knew the moment I touched your hand that first day at my restaurant. We were meant to be."

"I..." She was so shocked, she was speechless...both thrilled and frightened. A sinking sensation began to spread in her stomach. Marriage? The thought of giving Michael that kind of power to possibly hurt her made her chest ache.

His gaze locked with hers. "I love you very much."

Her skin prickled at his declaration. "Michael...I—"

"What's wrong, Susanna?" His brow furrowed. "I know you care for me, but you've held back a part of yourself ever since the day we met. I've felt it and had hoped over time you'd come to trust me, especially after meeting my family."

"I thought you brought me there to kick your brother's butt and because you knew I liked board games."

He frowned at her. "Couldn't you see what I was doing? I wanted you to meet my family because you were important to me. I've never taken another woman to my parents' house."

She had no idea that she'd been the only one. "I—I thought since Stephan brings his girlfriend each month that was why you felt

comfortable inviting me—that friends were included in the Piccoli family circle.”

He shook his head, his gaze intense. “Stephan falls in and out of love about as often as he changes his clothes. That’s not who I am.”

Michael had been completely honest with her. He deserved the truth. Susan swallowed the lump in her throat. “Every person who has meant something to me has moved on...my parents, my uncle...and recently my brother. I just didn’t want to open myself up to the possibility of that kind of emptiness yet again.” Her gaze dropped to his tie as she finished, “Marriage...well, it scares me.”

He tilted her chin up with his finger. Understanding reflected in his eyes, his gaze steady and tender. “Have you considered the fact I’ve opened myself up to be hurt as well? I told you I loved you and have asked you to marry me without knowing for sure how you truly feel about me...about us. Loving another person is a risk worth taking.”

Michael *had* taken a big chance emotionally with her. The man rocked her world. He was the kind of man she thought she’d never meet...the kind of man she completely respected...the man she knew she loved. She thought of how happy she was in the dream she’d had about Michael and her. And the real-life Michael had turned out to be exactly like the Michael in her dream—a loving, generous man who wanted to share his life with her in every respect.

For the first time in her life, she decided to follow her emotions and her heart. Refusing to allow herself second thoughts or doubts, she jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Kissing him square on the mouth, she said with a laugh, “How’s this for an answer?”

Michael started to speak when a voice came through on the loud speaker, interrupting them. Rounds of applause and catcalls sounded in the background as a man spoke. “If the show’s over, do you think you could press the red button back in? We’ve got a crowd down here waiting to use the elevator.”

Mortified heat flooded Susan's cheeks as she glanced around the elevator for signs of a camera.

"To your right and up a little. See the decorative glass ball in the corner?" the disembodied voice came through the speakers again.

Her gaze jerked to the corner he described and Susan's stomach pitched. A hidden camera must be behind the ball. She had no idea.

"There ya go. Wave to the crowd of voyeurs behind me. Think you can hit that button now?"

Gripping one of Michael's shoulders tight, Susan leaned over and pushed the button. As the elevator began to move, she glanced down to make sure her disheveled clothes covered everything, while a sneaking suspicion wormed its way into her mind. Michael was being way too quiet.

She narrowed her gaze on him. "You knew, didn't you?" she mumbled.

He gave a low chuckle. "I suspected."

Despite her embarrassment, Susan laughed. She couldn't help it. He always made her smile.

Michael's laughter slowed and he gently squeezed her waist. "As much as I love your enthusiasm, I'd kind of like to hear the words."

"Me, too," someone grumbled in a grouchy tone.

Michael grinned at Ms. Jenkins' scowl. Neither one of them had noticed that the elevator had stopped at Susan's floor and the doors had opened. He scooped Susan up and walked off the elevator, saying to the older lady as she got on the elevator, "It's our fortieth date and she's about to say yes."

"I'll just bet she is," Ms. Jenkins snapped in disdain right before the doors closed behind her.

As Michael carried her down the hall, Susan didn't care that in her current position her short dress probably showed her underwear. At least she was wearing some! She was too happy to worry about appearances. And at this point, her entire apartment building knew she

had the hots for the tall, dark-haired man. When Michael set her feet on the floor next to her door, she kept her arms wrapped around his shoulders and smiled up at him as he smoothed down her skirt.

"I love you, Michael Piccoli. I love everything about your sexy Italian self. From your strong work ethic, to your self-confidence, to your tenacity in business as well as your dedication to family and friends. I think I'll like being the woman you love."

"Does that mean yes?" he asked, linking his hands at the base of her spine to pull her close.

"There's that tenacity." She laughed, nodding. "It most definitely means yes. We can discuss the long engagement part later," she finished with a wink.

When Michael's shoulders began to shake in suppressed laughter, she eyed him warily. "What's so amusing?"

He gave her his devilish grin, the one that always made her melt.

"I can't wait to see the look on Melanie's face when you ask her to be your *matron* of honor."

Susan laughed so hard tears filled her eyes. Pulling him close, she didn't care that they were standing in the hall for anyone to see. Instead, she brushed her lips against his and whispered, "I love how you bring out this spontaneous, emotional side in me."

"It was always there, Susanna..." Michael paused and trailed kisses across her cheek until his lips hovered over hers "...waiting to be seduced out of you."

Susan tilted her head toward her apartment and said in a sexy tone, "Speaking of seducing me...you have some lost time to make up for, mister. And don't think I'm not going to make you pay."

"Promise?" Michael whispered in a husky voice as she slid her key in the lock.

God, the man just makes me melt, she thought as she opened the door.

Once Michael followed her inside and pushed the door closed behind him, she arched her eyebrow and stepped back, her pulse already thumping. “Does your ‘promise’ question go back to that comment you made about you being willing to give up control with the right incentive?”

Michael shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on the chair next to the couch. After he pulled off his tie, he let it dangle suggestively in his hand as he advanced on her. Unbuttoning his shirt with his other hand, he swept his seductive gaze over her body in blatant lust. “In answer to your question, my question was entirely related to my statement about giving up control...”

Susan’s body heat rose at his predatory approach. There was nothing acquiescent or submissive about it. Before she could say a word, he quickly grabbed her around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Michael!” She smacked him on the butt. “This doesn’t look like you’re giving up control to me.”

“Oh, I’m more than willing, sweetheart. You’ll just have to figure out what that incentive is,” he said in a wicked tone as he carried her off to the bedroom.

About the Author

Born and raised in the Southeast, award-winning author Patrice Michelle gave up her financial calculator for a keyboard and never looked back. Thanks to an open-minded family who taught her that life isn't as black and white as we're conditioned to believe, she pens her novels with the belief that various shades of gray are a lot more interesting. She's a natural with a point-and-shoot camera, likes to fiddle with graphic design and, to the relief of her family, strums her guitar to an audience of one.

Patrice also writes sexy, heart-tugging contemporary and paranormal romances and dark, seductive paranormal romances.

You can visit Patrice to learn more about her novels, read excerpts, join her yahoo group and sign up for her newsletter at www.patricemichelle.net

Psychic matchmaker Cally gives everyone their happy ending. But can she ever have one herself?

Touch Me

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When Sloan Janson's best friend makes a sudden marriage after being "matched" by Cally, Sloan is convinced his friend is the victim of a con. He storms into Cally's small Texas town, determined to expose her as a fraud. The minute he meets her, he still wants to expose her, but now in a totally different sense!

Years of matching soul mates, however satisfying, hasn't prepared Cally for the electrical effect Sloan has on her. She's tempted, and terrified—she's always known matchmakers can't have love without blowing the fuse on their gift.

Her worst fears come true when her ability to match deserts her. If she cuts Sloan out of her life, she's sure it will return. But is that a choice she can bear to make—or to live with?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Touch Me*:

Gazing through the dirty windows behind Millie Jo, Sloan searched the area for any signs of available housing. "Is this the whole town?"

He could tell by her smile—a smile offering more than the store would ever have in inventory—that she'd warmed up to him and was getting overheated at an alarming speed.

"Yep, all two main streets of it. The only real buildings, besides houses and this place, are the hunting lodge, the Legion Hall, Mabel's Beauty Box, Jimmy's Diner, and the school. But Mr. Dobbs fixed up some rooms in the old lodge. Nothing fancy and there's only one shower for all the men..." she paused to run her tongue over her top lip, "...but most hunters and fishermen like it good enough." She rested her elbows on the counter, giving him an eyeful of her generous cleavage.

Okay, maybe not such a little girl.

“Would you like me to call Mr. Dobbs for you?”

Sloan stepped away in a gut reaction to the teen’s blatant come-on. If he didn’t watch her, she’d have him up against a wall with his dick in her mouth. Right before the town sheriff popped out of the back room and declared them engaged. “Uh, no. That’s okay. I have my cell phone. Can you give me his number?”

Millie Jo flashed him a look of disappointment mixed with last chance hope. “It’s no trouble at all. Hey, I could even take you there myself. Maybe even show you one of the rooms personally. You know. Give you a real small town welcome.” The pink tongue slipped over crimson lips again. “Would you like me to show you?”

Hell, no. I don’t want any show-and-tell from Little Miss Horny.

“Now, Millie Jo, put your tail back on the stool or I’m going to tell your mama you’ve been flirting and carrying on with a stranger. She’ll be meaner than a hornet on a honey-dipped bear when she hears you’re throwing yourself at another full-growed man.”

Sloan turned around to face the speaker. Standing within a foot of him was a squat, barrel-chested man with a graying, unkempt beard and mustache.

“I’m Luke Dobbs. You looking for a place to stay?”

Sloan’s extended hand was accepted in a grip nearly costing him the use of his fingers. He tried to cover his wince at the pain by turning it into a smile. And failed.

“Yes, sir. I’d like a room at the lodge if you’ve one available.”

“Are you here for hunting or fishing?”

Inwardly, Sloan cringed. The word *fishing* would never have the same meaning it once had thanks to Millie Jo.

“Just a little, uh, fishing. Vacation, you know. Time away from the old grind.” Sloan wriggled his fingers and the blood crept back into them. Wow, what was with this town? First he meets the local Lolita and now

Grizzly Adams. But if he had a chance of helping Rob, he'd confront all the offbeat characters Lawson could throw at him.

"The room is fifty dollars a night, paid in advance each day or by the week." Luke's mouth moved in what Sloan assumed was a smile. Seemed old Luke never spent much money on a good dentist what with all the missing teeth.

"That'll be fine. Can I get in this afternoon?"

Luke flipped his cap onto his bald head and lumbered for the door. "You can get in right now. Follow me on down to the lodge and I'll open it up for you. Millie Jo, you better mind yourself before you get into trouble like you did the last time."

The last time? For once in his adult life, Sloan experienced a real sense of relief in putting distance between him and a female. Especially after she called a disappointed "By-ee" and blew him a kiss.

He wasted no time in following the box-shaped man out of the grocery. "By the way, a friend of mine wanted me to look up an acquaintance of his. Her name's Cally Mathews. Do you know her?"

Luke stopped short, causing Sloan to bump into the other's massive torso. Within seconds, friendly Grizzly Adams transformed into one menacing Big Foot. With one eye squinted shut, Luke moved his other eye slowly up and down, measuring every inch of Sloan. Now Sloan knew what a chicken must feel like when it was about to have its neck wrung.

Damn. Between learning a new meaning for the word *fishing* and his sudden empathy for chickens, he'd eat a lot more red meat in the days to come.

"Everybody round here knows Miss Cally." Luke's inspection hardened and his tobacco-laden breath assaulted Sloan's nose, hurtling a gargantuan dose of secondhand stench straight into his nostrils. If he developed lung cancer later, he'd hold old Luke responsible. "You say you're a friend of a friend?"

Sloan tried hard not to squirm before the older man's piercing gaze. Somehow he imagined this guy wouldn't appreciate his real reason for

finding Cally. “Sort of. She matched my friend to a woman from here. Her name is, or was, Lisa Callow.”

Relief flooded him when another transformation returned Luke’s wide, yellow smile to greet his explanation. He blew out pent-up air, letting the worry of getting his ass kicked seep from his body.

“Oh, sure. Lisa got hitched up with some city boy from Dallas. He’s your friend?” At Sloan’s nod, Luke continued, “Well, won’t take you long to find Miss Cally. Wouldn’t take long to find anyone in this little town. Shoot, I think if a person stood in one spot for a bit, why, he’d most likely meet up with the person he’s looking for in no time at all.”

As if on cue, an early model red Honda Accord pulled in beside the one gas pump. A trim brunette slipped out of the car, pulled the gas cap off, and started filling the tank. Coppery highlights glinted in the sun, catching and holding Sloan’s attention.

Luke’s smile grew warmer when he saw the young woman and he turned to greet her. “Miss Cally, you enjoying your summer vacation?”

Cally looked up from the pump and her heart-shaped face lit up in recognition. “Oh, hi, Mr. Dobbs. I’m relaxing, but I miss my students. And how are you and Lena? Are the kids—?”

Noticing Sloan, she stopped in mid-sentence, eyebrows jumping up, emphasizing the brilliant blue orbs beneath them. Her next words came haltingly out of her mouth, as if they traveled through water to reach his ears. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were with someone.”

Sloan’s gaze locked with hers and an electric shock ran through his body. Heat scorched through him, stunning his brain into inaction for several minutes. She jumped when he did and he knew she’d felt a similar jolt. Transfixed, he stared into her startled eyes, unable and unwilling to let go of their tenuous hold.

He knew her. Yes, he definitely knew her. Or was she someone he should know?

Puzzlement rippled through him, causing the words forming in his mind to jumble together. But how could he know her? He’d never visited Lawson before today. Even more alarming was the knowledge that he

wanted her, though not only in a sexual way—damn, how he'd love to lie between her legs, right now, right here—but in his gut, in his spirit. Rob's words came back to him and he realized he needed to be with her.

Troubled by these strange ideas, he willed his tongue to speak, fighting to ignore the odd impressions. He had to keep his thoughts trained on his main goal. After a couple of failed attempts, he forced what he hoped was an affable expression on his face, and stretched out his hand to her. "H-hello. I'm Sloan Janson."

Without a sound, without an acknowledgement of any kind, Cally whipped around, pulled out the gas pump and slammed it into its holder before jumping into her car. Sloan gaped as her car squealed out of the parking lot, leaving behind gas fumes and dust. What had happened? He'd never gotten a reaction like that from anyone before.

Simultaneous emotions of nervousness, excitement, and elation rushed through him, socking him in the gut. Basking in the warmth continuing to course through his body, he turned to Luke, hoping for an explanation. But judging from the older man's expression, he couldn't expect much help.

Luke scratched his chin with a perplexed expression on his face. "Well, ain't that something? I ain't never seen Miss Cally act so strange before."

The sheriff has the hots for her prime suspect. What's a girl to do?

Too Good to be True

© 2007 Marie-Nicole Ryan

Sheriff Rilla Devane has sworn to serve and protect, just as her father did before he was murdered. An influx of party drugs has killed two teenagers, but she has a suspect: handsome, rich newcomer Mackenzie Callahan, a published author seeking small-town atmosphere. To build her case, she moves closer to Mackenzie and his dangerous brand of seductive charm. She'll risk everything for her investigation, even when it means letting her guard down and falling for her suspect.

Mac Callahan lives and breathes for undercover work. But his last mission ended in near disaster, and he has one last chance to prove his value to the DEA. Taking sexy Sheriff Rilla to bed might ruin his career—or lead him to the love of his life.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Too Good to be True*:

“Let’s impress this crowd with our terpsichorean prowess.”

She scowled and muttered, “Just because you pretend you’re a writer, you don’t have to talk like one around me.”

“Come on.” He stood and held out his hand, palm up.

“You’re almost as smooth as Rob Wyler.” She smirked and placed her hand in his.

Mmm. Warm and strong.

“I’ll show you smooth.” He pulled her to his chest and took off in an easy one-two, one-two-three swaying glide around the small dance floor.

Her body was warm against his chest. "You're pretty good at this," he whispered in her ear.

"You're not so bad yourself." She gazed into his eyes. "I must say I'm surprised."

"Why? Haven't you found me skilful in other physical endeavors?"

"Have I complained?"

He laughed. "No, you haven't at that."

The music continued and he drew Rilla closer. Her body molded to his...and felt damned good. "Dare I say it? Your beeper hasn't gone off once tonight."

Her eyes widened. Placing an elegant finger to her lips, she shushed him. "You've done it now, but maybe not. This isn't a real date."

"It isn't?" Mac nuzzled her neck. "Hmm, sure feels like one."

She gave a small shake of her head. "No, it's a pretend date so we could backup Kit."

He turned to leave the dance floor. "Well, that's it. Ready to leave?"

She laughed, a low sensual growl, and tugged on his hand. "Oh, no, you don't. The music's still playing."

She slipped her arms around his waist and slid her hands into the back pockets of his jeans, cupped his ass and pressed against his dick.

"This is feeling less like pretend," he said. Pretend, hell—she was teasing him and having a great time. His dick was hard as a rock, and if she kept it up...

But damn, he loved this playful side of her. He couldn't help but wonder if they'd met under different circumstances...

Her head went back, revealing the long column of her neck. She laughed then emitted a delicious giggle which sent a searing jolt straight to his groin. Did she have any clue how she affected him? "You're having too much fun."

"Is that even possible?" Her eyes glittered with amusement.

Possible? He swung her around and headed for the door. "Let's find out."

The Porsche was parked along the side of the roadhouse in the shadows. They made it to the car.

Barely.

He backed her against the passenger door. His lips fastened on hers and she welcomed his kiss. He eased his hands under her halter top while he kissed her neck and blew a soft puff of air into her ear.

Skin—God—so soft. Her nipples hardened under his touch. She arched against him and moaned. She gazed up at him, her dark eyes glazed with heat. Could she possibly want him as much as he wanted her?

“Mac, we can’t. Not here.” Her breath was warm on his neck. God. He needed her so much. More than any woman he’d ever known. He pulled down her halter top and lightly raked her brown nipples with his teeth, pulled at them and sucked.

Again she moaned, a sound of desperation...for more?

“Lift your skirt.” He fumbled with his zipper. His dick sprang free, ready for battle. And make no mistake about it, making love to Rilla was like a battle between two warriors.

Her skirt shielded their bodies, but if anyone saw them, there’d be no doubt what was happening. Underneath the full skirt, her slim thighs parted.

Thank God. No panty hose. She wore another one of those scraps of lace she loved. He ripped it off.

He dipped a finger between her thighs and slid into her warm, honeyed slit, rubbing her sensitive clit with his thumb.

Her body shook and trembled against his. She gasped ragged breaths against his chest, and whose pounding heart was whose? Why couldn’t he have four hands? So many sweet places he wanted to touch and so little time.

His lips fastened on her mouth again. She opened to him, her hot tongue battling his for possession. He slid another finger inside her slit and she started moving against them.

“No, wait.” He removed his hand and adjusted his stance for a better position and access.

“No.” Her voice rasped in his ear.

“This is better,” he promised and nudged the head of his cock up and down her outer lips then thrust into her wet warmth.

A low moan ripped from her.

“All right?”

“Yes,” she hissed and trembled as he tried to bury himself deep within her. He cupped her ass cheeks and impaled her securely her onto his straining cock. Keeping her light weight cradled, he moved her up and down. Her inner muscles clenched around his dick so fiercely he nearly lost control.

“Easy, girl. Easy.” He panted and tried to slow her bucking pace.

“No. Not easy.” She clung to his jacket and wrapped her legs around his waist, forcing his cock even deeper inside. “I don’t want it easy.”

Exquisite pressure grew in his balls until he exploded in waves of hot release. He pumped into her over and over, unwilling to leave the blistering heat of her sweet body.

Her head whipped back as she gave a long, low moan. Her body vibrated under his hands. God. What made this woman so hot, so in tune with his needs?

Her climax took her. She stiffened and her teeth fastened on his neck, her nails digging into his shoulders as she rocked against him.

He slid a free hand under her halter and pinched her nipples, then nipped the silken skin of her neck. Another low moan, more of a groan.

Her muscles rhythmically gripped his dick even tighter as she milked him of every last drop of cum.

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