

Hot off the PRESSES

An erotic romance novel by

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Prologue

Enough was enough. The party roared around her. Samantha's duty was done. It was time to blow this pop stand and get rid of this ridiculous costume. Athena, warrior princess. Right. She felt more like Olive Oyl, melting wimp.

She stepped off the ridiculously high bar stool where she'd been holed up for the last hour and wobbled dangerously on the four-inch spiked high-heeled boots that were part of her costume.

Great, she was tipsy. Just what she needed when she had what could be a career-breaking meeting with her new boss bright and early tomorrow morning.

Samantha giggled, then slapped her palm over her mouth. Maybe he was sitting all alone in some fancy apartment the paper had rented for him, getting tipsy over the thought of meeting her as well.

Hah, that was likely. Not!

She should call him up and get the firing over with immediately. She started to walk away, then whirled.

"Mustn't forget my purse," she muttered.

There was only one thing that would have her sitting mostly alone at a bar on a late summer Sunday night: friendship. Two of her favorite people in the world, Lani and Henry Thompson, were celebrating their wedding anniversary with this party. Lani was the best sports writer at *The Buffalo Planet*; Samantha was the sports editor, and Henry worked on the copy desk.

She looked over her shoulder and focused on the wildly

spinning mirrorball. The bar was decorated like a 1970s disco in honor of the year Lani and Henry married. It only took a few moments staring at the thing before Samantha began to feel a little dizzy. Instead, she picked out the two people who were responsible for her being here tonight.

The happy couple was rocking down the house as the band spun out a dizzying beat, while friends and family were laughing and having a great time. Samantha was starting to feel completely out of place. It was bad enough she was dressed in this ridiculous Athena costume, but it was worse to be the only single in a crowd of couples. She took one last sip of the glass of G and T she'd ordered, then decided she'd been here long enough.

She then turned and ran into a solid wall of male flesh wearing a green and black kilt and black Scottish jacket with a black and green sash tied from his right shoulder to his waist. A white *Phantom of the Opera* type mask covered most of his face so she had no idea if he was someone she knew.

"Hello there." His voice was like cream over fruit.

Samantha felt the excitement bead on her skin. "Oh, hello. Sorry for nearly knocking you flat." In the dim lights of the club, she had an impression of bold strength and overwhelming heat as her hand rested against his wide chest. She started to pull away her hands, which were enjoying the feel of the tight muscles underneath the fabric, when he pulled her closer and swirled her onto the dance floor.

"You can make it up to me by giving me this dance," he said, pulling her into his embrace. She felt the heat of him as their bodies melded and moved into the slow dance the band started playing. The kilt provided little barrier and she could feel the strength of him as their hips brushed, then separated. It was an incredible turn on and she could feel an answering excitement

building deep inside her.

"I was just getting ready to leave," she began. She sounded breathless, as if she'd just ran a marathon.

"I don't think so," he said, his lips and eyes so close to her face they blotted out everything in the background. His voice was meant for long, dark, sultry, passionate nights. Samantha shivered.

"Too cold?" he asked. His lips then took hers in a kiss that stunned and aroused her in one heartbeat. He tasted of dark chocolate and hot rum. Was it possible to get drunk on one kiss?

Before she could do more than blink, he had maneuvered them from the dance floor, out the club's back door, and onto the starlit deck. Samantha shivered a little more, not from the cold, but from the shaft of desire that shot through her.

"Are you Lani's friend or Henry's?" The question was an attempt to regain control, as she still couldn't figure out who he was. Her only points of reference were his voice and his deep, blue eyes, and she knew she'd never before heard the voice. How could a woman forget a sound that nearly made her melt and her pussy cream like she was in perpetual heat? *Maybe he's in radio or television*, she thought.

"Not hardly," he answered her question.

"Oh. This is a private party," she said.

His grin caused a slash of white to flash across his face. "I know. I thought we could make it a little more private. Unless, of course, you really want to return."

Samantha was torn. She had never been a gambler. There was no question staying on this secluded deck with this man, who exuded danger like other men did aftershave, could be the biggest gamble of her life.

Tomorrow was a big day for her. Her new publisher was coming to town, and she had a meeting scheduled with him first

thing. But tonight was not tomorrow, and yesterday had been her thirtieth birthday.

She looked in his eyes, opened her mouth to tell him no, but asked instead, "How private can you make it?"

He took her lips in a kiss that spun wildly out of control. She gasped, and he took immediate advantage, sweeping his tongue inside her mouth, dueling with her own tongue, and spinning her deeper into a well of desire.

When the kiss finally ended, she was breathless. She opened her eyes and saw what could only be her own desire reflected back from his.

"Say no now," he said. His voice was like bitter chocolate and boiling rum now. Her nipples responded in a rush, and she felt answering warmth spreading through to her core. Her clit was starting to swell and her legs were weakening.

"I..."

"No? Yes?" The high summer moonlight was reflected off the glassy blue-black surface of nearby Lake Erie and cast its shadow over him. In the light, his face was like chiseled oak and there was a dangerous tension in his eyes. Samantha knew the smart thing to do was run away as fast as she could. But she was tired of being smart. She was tired of being safe.

"Yes," she finally murmured, hiding her face in his chest. She thought she heard a grunt of satisfaction, but when she raised her head to look at him, he was moving them away from the pier toward the street where a limousine was waiting. He helped her inside the back seat, then climbed in after her and shut the door. Still in a daze, she heard him command, "Drive. I don't care where."

Before she could think about being embarrassed, he engaged the privacy window and pulled her into his arms. She didn't know or care if the car was moving yet. She did know he

was touching her, moving her as fast as a speeding meteor from desire to ecstasy.

She'd thought she was tipsy earlier; now, she was drunk—not on any wine or alcohol, but purely on the feelings he aroused with unwavering intensity every place he touched her. She wanted to shake her head, but couldn't move as his long, hard body pressed her down against the limo seat. His kilt and her flimsy mini warrior dress left no doubt to his desire or hers. She felt his iron-hard cock pressed solidly against her mound and could only wish there were no cloth barriers between them.

He nibbled his way up her stretched neck and paused just before taking her lips.

"Tell me no now," he offered again. "Because very soon, I won't be able to stop."

Samantha paused. This was her chance...should she gamble or play it safe?

She shifted slightly and merged their lips. Long, breathless moments later, they parted.

"Do you have protection?" she whispered, the only sane thought remaining in her mind.

He grinned devilishly and opened his palm. A small square foil package appeared magically.

"Let the games begin," Samantha said.

He grinned again and leaned back. His hands began to push aside his kilt when she stopped him.

"No," she said. "I've not had this particular thrill before. Let me."

She pushed up his kilt while he did the same for her, and licked her lips at the sight of his bare cock rising to the occasion. It was awesome, the knob already glistening in the passing streetlights with a drop of pre-come.

"Oh my. I always wondered what you guys wore

underneath those kilts," she murmured.

"I don't know about other guys," he said. He started to put the condom on but her hands stroking reverently up and down the length of his shaft stopped his movement.

"This is definitely my pleasure." She unwrapped the foil and using her mouth and fingers, rolled it gently into place. He leaned against back against the seat and let her play.

Samantha had only done this twice before, both times with her ex-fiancé, and since then she had never worked up the nerve to try it again. But it seemed nerves weren't part of the equation tonight. When he flexed his hips enticingly as she lingered over stretching the condom into place, she realized she felt wanton and powerful. She was Athena now.

She looked up at him. Seeing only his incredible eyes added an extra punch to this whole night. He was her slave, bound to do whatever she wanted. She could stay in control, or make him see only to her pleasure. She decided on the latter.

"Well, masked man, the next move is completely yours," she said.

He moved like greased lightning, pulling her astride his hips. One of her legs bent at the knee, her foot lying along side his thigh, while the other dangled over his leg and the seat. She was wide open and for a few moments felt vulnerable, but the vulnerability was fleeting as she felt his sheathed cock pressing against her pussy lips. He gathered himself and thrust home with one long push of his hips.

"God," Samantha screamed when she felt his pulsing tip deep inside her. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

* * *

Later, when his limousine dropped her off at her car, Samantha staggered as she fitted her key in the lock. She couldn't believe she'd just had sex in the back of a car with a

stranger. God, she must have been drunk. Or crazy.

Samantha knew it was probably a little bit of both. The main thing she had to focus on was putting it behind her. It would always just remain her birthday secret. Now, she'd go home, clean up, get a couple of hours of sleep, and get ready for her future.

Whatever that may hold.

Chapter 1

Samantha was turning her car into the parking lot on Michigan Avenue, carefully balancing a steaming cup of cappuccino with her left hand, when a man walked right in front of her, his attention on his newspaper. The cappuccino flew out of her hand as she slammed on the brakes, and though she managed to keep her leg from getting burned she could do nothing about the liquid spreading over her new skirt.

Slamming her car into park, she lowered her window and yelled, "Are you crazy? I could have killed you!"

She looked into a stormy pair of eyes and bit off another angry retort. Those eyes were eerily familiar, and for a second she was in the backseat of a limo doing things with a stranger she'd never done with her most intimate partners. But before she could get past her tingling embarrassment, the man shrugged and continued walking across Michigan Avenue.

She looked down at her skirt, then at the dashboard clock. Five minutes until the meeting that could change her future. She had two choices: she could make the ten-minute trek back home to change, thus being at least forty-five minutes late for the meeting with her new boss, or she could go to back-up plan B.

Parking her car in her designated spot, she rummaged in the athletic bag she kept in the back seat. *There they are*, she thought triumphantly, pulling out a pair of black stretch pants.

She remembered the edicts from her Aunt Louise. *Samantha, a lady can never go wrong with basic black.*

"Aunt Weezie, I hope you know what you're talking about," she muttered. Of course, since Weezie hadn't worn anything other than high heels, nylons, and dresses since before World War II, the stretch pants would have been decidedly *de trop* as a wardrobe alternative. Samantha shrugged. Thank goodness for durable clothes and mix-n-match accessorizing.

Clutching the pants, her bulging briefcase, her own copy of *The Planet*, and her now empty cup, she hurried across the street to *The Planet's* five-story brick building. She'd dash into the first floor ladies room, make the quick change, and still have time to get up to the new publisher's office before it was too late.

Lani Thompson was going out as she was coming in.

"Hey boss, I sent you a message. Something big is going on with the Gladiators this morning," Lani said, referring to the city's professional football team. "I'm heading out there now. I snagged Joe for some pictures just in case."

"Good. Any idea what this could be?" Samantha asked.

"Either they're going to announce the deal to renew the stadium lease or they going to restructure the contract on Smith."

Samantha chewed on her bottom lip. "Okay. Give me a call as soon as possible when you find out what it is. I'll want to get graphics working on a chart. If it's the lease option, then they may want this story for page one."

"Okay. Hey boss, I hate to mention it, but did you know you have something on your skirt?"

Samantha sighed. "Yes. Some bozo walked in front of me while I was pulling into the parking lot. I spilled my coffee all over everything."

Lani laughed. "And this on the day when you have your big meeting with the new publisher?"

"Yeah. Just my luck."

"Hey, don't worry, I heard he's a great-looking guy, and

single, too. We thought he might stop by the party last night, but I didn't see him. Shelia in features swears she saw him come in late. Since she was two sheets to the wind I don't trust her info."

There was that niggling feeling again. Samantha tried to refocus on business. Lani was a great reporter, one of the best Samantha had ever worked with. Her matronly figure and wide smile invited people from top star athletes to the men and women who made millions behind the scenes in the sports entertainment business to divulge all their secrets. Samantha swore if they lined up Lani's sources they would go around the world. Twice.

"Now, if you told me the reason you disappeared like a ghost in the wind was because some man swept you off your feet, that would make my day."

Samantha laughed. "If only you knew."

Lani waited for a moment, but when Samantha didn't volunteer any more details, she switched topics. "Hey, did you get a chance to meet Henry's cousin?"

Samantha sighed. As good a reporter and writer as she was, Lani was also a hopeless romantic. She read sports pages and romance novels with equal fervor. Underneath the driven, hard-bitten reporter's exterior was a compulsive matchmaker.

"Lani, we've talked about this before. You know this business and marriage don't mix."

"Hah. Tell that to my Henry. We've been together for nearly thirty years." Lani and Henry had met when they were covering a high school basketball game for opposing papers in the days when Buffalo had been a two-newspaper town. Henry had won Lani's heart by offering to give her tips on how to cover the game. It wasn't quite as trite as inviting her to see his etchings, but almost. "Anyway, I'm not talking about mixing business and pleasure. I'm talking about mixing pleasure with

more pleasure. Frankly, boss, I'm getting worried about you."

"Don't worry about me. Besides, Henry is one of a kind. And unless you've got a clone somewhere for him, the rest of us will just have to struggle along—alone with our careers."

Lani laughed. "A clone for Henry? You've got to be kidding. Anyway, I'd better run. Don't want the *Niagara Falls Sentinel* to beat me to the punch."

"Okay. Call me as soon as you get anything."

"Sure. And good luck with your meeting. Too bad about the stained skirt because that outfit is a killer. Maybe you can reschedule so at least you can go home and change."

Samantha sighed and waved off Lani. Well, at least she'd have something to report in her meeting with the new publisher.

She went inside the large public restroom, pulled off her skirt, and surveyed the damage to the wool again. She wondered if running a little cold water on the spot would help, but where would she keep a wet garment? It could be at least an hour before she could leave again and get her skirt to the cleaners.

Shrugging off that thought, she put the skirt aside and pulled on her stretch pants, looking at herself critically in the mirror. Well, maybe it was a little more casual than she liked, but it worked. Fortunately, the red and yellow tunic she wore was mid-thigh length, so it hid the way the pants flowed a little too faithfully over her most obvious asset. Her three-inch black pumps were a little overkill with the pants, but that couldn't be helped. She turned and viewed her appearance from the back and nearly sighed. No matter how many hours she worked on trimming the inches, more than a few stubbornly clung to her hips. She swore she'd done enough crunches to circle around the world, but her stomach stubbornly held onto that little annoying swell.

Facing forward, she took a deep breath. Attitude, it was all

about attitude. That's what had catapulted her through the layers of the male-dominated sports journalism field in record time. She knew her business and she was good at it. A take-charge, no-nonsense attitude was the key.

Feeling her confidence return, she grabbed her skirt and headed up to the third floor. There she found a clerk who was willing to call the cleaners to pick up her skirt. Then Samantha stopped at her desk, quickly checked her messages and made sure there were no major problems needing her attention before her meeting.

The Planet produced seven editions seven days a week. Four were delivered before six each morning, and three hit the street before two in the afternoon. Samantha's sports staff consisted of nine copyeditors and layout specialists, twelve reporters, and two full-time columnists. Her job was to manage all of them and coordinate the coverage for the professional football, hockey, lacrosse, and soccer teams, four major university athletic programs, a minor league baseball franchise, and nearly two hundred high school teams. It was rarely boring and, though she had two assistants to help her with the management of the a.m. and p.m. desk shifts, she averaged sixty hours of work each week. Her staff was a unique assortment of personalities who worked hard, complained incessantly, and were worth their weight in gold. She wouldn't trade them or her job for anything.

"Samantha," John Fletcher's voice stopped her cold. John was one of her morning copy editors; he was at his desk every morning at five and was the biggest nitpicker in the world. He was also slower than a union plumber working for top-scale.

"Yes, John, what's up? I'm running late for a meeting with the new publisher."

"Oh. Do you think they're going to try to cut the staff?"

John was also on the editorial union's negotiating team.

"Oh, I don't think so. Even though the contract is running out in six weeks, we've never had to go that far. But what did you want?"

"You've really got to do something about Lani."

Samantha almost sighed. Lani was a wonderful reporter, but she had a wicked sense of humor and was always pulling practical jokes on her fellow sports staff members. Most took it with a cheerful shrug. John, who sadly had no sense of humor, took exception whenever his turn came. "What happened now?"

"Look what she posted on the bulletin board!" He held up a wicked caricature of himself. Obviously, Lani had enlisted the aid of the paper's multi-talented political cartoonist. The caricature was wielding a military-style whip and screeching "Give me who, what, when, where and why! And I want it yesterday!"

Samantha bit the inside of her cheek to keep her chuckle from escaping. The words were classic John taunts to the sports reporters.

"Oh. Well, really, there is no proof that Lani did this. I mean there are literally dozens of suspects."

"Come on, Samantha. We both know this is Lani's work. She probably bribed Lou Grisham to do the drawing for her."

Samantha refrained from saying that all Lani had to do was ask. Lou would have been happy to help if it meant having fun at John's expense.

She looked again at the picture. It was a dead-ringer for John, but it wouldn't do to laugh at it, or him.

"I'll make some inquiries about this. But not now, okay? I really am running late for that meeting."

John's frown deepened. "I heard the new publisher is a bean counter. No news background. Probably helps that his daddy is

the paper's new owner."

"Oh, I'm sure that isn't the case." Samantha wished she felt as confident as she was acting. "Don't worry about this, though. I'll get to the bottom of it as soon as possible."

She stuffed the offending flyer into her nearly overflowing purse and started around the corner to the stairs and elevators. Putting John and staff hijinks out of her mind, she pushed the call button, then moved forward as the doors opened and slammed into a man reading a sheath of papers as he was exiting the elevator.

"You," Samantha said, recognizing him as the man she nearly ran down just a few minutes ago. "I see you still haven't learned to look where you're walking."

"Hello." The man's gaze was warmer than it should be and her body reacted fiercely to it. Those eyes were penetrating, and she felt as if he could almost see through her skin to her insides. She had a moment's memory of the man whose dick had filled her to bursting last night.

Was it possible? Could it be him? The eyes were the same. He was about the same build...

His next words snapped her from her introspection.

"You're Samantha Cruise, aren't you?"

"Yes. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm running late." She stepped inside the elevator and pushed the button for the fifth floor.

The man stepped back into the elevator just as the doors were closing. "Sorry," he said. "That was the wrong floor."

Idiot, Samantha thought. Who gets off at the wrong floor in a five-story building?

"I've been following your sports coverage for quite awhile now. You've got some good reporters here."

"Yes. They work hard and are very talented," Samantha

replied. The elevator was taking an inordinate amount of time to climb two floors. At this rate, she could have walked all the way from the first floor and still beat it.

"But it does seem that you give a lot of effort to covering the Gladiators."

Samantha laughed and gave the man a quick but thorough glance. He was wearing a long-sleeved pale pink shirt and navy pants that she bet, from the tailored fit of them, cost more than she made in a year. His dark hair was short and curly, framing his head like a cherubic angel.

Angel or devil? Her masked lover had had hair like that. She almost reached over to touch this man's hair, but she jerked her hand away before she made a fool of herself.

What had happened to forgetting about last night? What had happened to putting it completely out of her mind?

She shook her head lightly in an attempt to get rid of her disturbing thoughts. Then she saw the smirk on his face. It was almost as if he could read her mind.

Like the man from last night, she knew intuitively that this man was no angel. There were lines around his eyes that spoke of either a lot of laughter or spending a lot of time looking into the sun. She'd bet on the sun part as his tan was the deep lasting kind, not one from a bottle or available to most Western New York natives who spent too much of their year indoors.

It wasn't just the tint of his skin that gave him the devilish spin, but the stubborn tilt of his chin that spoke of arrogance and stubbornness. It came to her in a flash. He's in sales, she mused. He had the look of a hungry barracuda.

And he was the man who made her scream in ecstasy just last night.

"Oh my God," she whispered, and closed her eyes. What a nightmare. What did she do now? How could she get out of this

elevator?

When she felt the heat of his body pressing against her, her eyes flew open. She saw humor and desire in his.

"I believe you muttered those words once or twice last night," he said, "right about the time I was sucking your clit deep in my mouth."

"What are you doing here?" she stammered. "How did you find me?"

He laughed. The sound sent shivers down her back.

"It wasn't hard. As you said, everyone at the party was connected to *The Planet*."

She gulped, trying to ignore the fact he had maneuvered her so that her back was literally against the wall. As embarrassed as she was at being found by this man, she was also aware that her body was already starting to betray her as her once dormant libido was now revving into high gear.

His hand moved slowly across her shoulder and down her arm, his fingers just brushing her breasts. Damn if she didn't feel a tingle starting in her nipples as if they were reaching, searching for his touch.

Why was she acting this way? Why was she so turned on by some slimy salesman?

His head lowered towards hers, blocking out the fluorescent lighting of the elevator. She was like a deer trapped in headlights, unable to move, unable to think.

His breath brushed across her skin, his chuckle ran across every nerve ending in her body.

"So, Athena, how about we take an early lunch and pick up where we left off last night?"

It was the smug superiority in his eyes that finally snapped her out of the sexual trance.

"I'm not going to discuss last night. You got what you

wanted, so did I. That's all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got work to do."

The muscle in his jaw ticked. "Well, at least you didn't try to blame it on the fact you were drunk."

Samantha bit her tongue. She was so rattled she hadn't even thought of that. Now it was too late.

"Okay, so you don't want to talk about last night. What should we discuss?" he asked. "Your decision to cover the Gladiators as if they were World Champions?"

Samantha stiffened. It was one thing to meet face-to-face with her masked lover, but it was another for him to question her business decisions. There was no question now that he had to be one of the numerous salesmen who worked for the paper. They were always mouthy, always trying to tell the editorial people how to do their jobs. She hated sitting in on meetings when the sales director was there.

Good God, how could she have ever thought him attractive last night? Biting her lip against telling him what she really thought, she finally answered his question.

"Haven't lived here long, have you?" she commented. She was pleased with the amount of controlled disdain that came through in her voice. Of course, he was probably too thick-headed to get it.

"No. Today's my first day. I just moved here about a week or so ago. But I've been reading the paper for much longer."

Samantha laughed. "Well, if you're still around at the end of the football season, we'll talk. I bet you won't think we've been giving the Gladiators too much play then."

The elevator finally reached the fifth floor and the doors slowly opened. She strode forward, took a left, then a hard right into the publisher's office. The man was following her. She was about to give him the complete brush-off when Millie Johanssen,

who had been secretary to the previous publisher, jumped up from behind her desk and rushed forward.

"Mr. Boscoe, I just called down to the second floor to find you. Hello, Samantha. Mr. Boscoe, there's a problem with your appointment with the mayor. He wanted to reschedule. He'll be here in a half hour."

Samantha closed her eyes. *Mr. Boscoe*, Millie had said.

Mr. Kurt Boscoe. Her new publisher.

She had just brushed off her new publisher.

Mr. Kurt Boscoe was her new publisher and her amazing masked lover.

Could her day get any worse?

Chapter 2

Samantha sat in a chair in front of Boscoe's desk, waiting for him to return. She had reviewed all the options, and knew there was only one way for her to handle this situation.

"Okay. Now that's taken care of, we can get down to business," he said, closing his office door and moving to sit behind his desk. Samantha knew what he was trying to do. He was putting himself in the position of power. If the situation was reversed and she was the publisher, she would have done the same thing. Even knowing it ahead of time didn't diminish the effectiveness of the move. Whether she was intimidated or not didn't change the fact that she had been all over him like a drenching rain last night.

What should she do, quit? Or act as if there was nothing unusual about last night? Maybe he'd be a gentleman. No, he'd already proven his leanings in the elevator. Well, it wouldn't be the first time she'd waded into a situation with nothing more than her will propping her up. She could control this interview if she started now. If she didn't, she'd either quit or get fired.

"I'm sorry for my earlier remarks. I didn't realize who you were," she said.

He leaned back in his chair, putting his hands behind his head. His movements pulled his shirt tightly across his wide, well-muscled chest and highlighted his long arms. Samantha found her gaze drawn to the sight and quickly lowered her glance. Remembering how it had felt when those arms had been

wrapped around her hips, holding her pussy to his mouth as he drove her to another orgasm was enough to send her blood boiling through her body again. She tightened her control again. *Focus on the now.*

"Don't worry about it. Call me Kurt, please. You don't mind if I call you Samantha?"

His voice had just a hint of the south in it. Not the Deep South like Georgia or Alabama, but not northern either. She wondered briefly where he grew up. According to the newsroom grapevine, he'd worked at all of his father's media holdings, which were worldwide. She also knew his mother was reportedly from the south, so perhaps that's where he'd grown up and the accent had remained.

At her nod, he continued. "Just out of curiosity, which remarks are you taking back?"

Samantha sighed. Caught. She wasn't really interested in retracting any of them, but she also knew the way her face was flaming that lying wasn't going to be successful either.

"That's okay, I really have to stop pulling your chain," Kurt said. "Your face is just so expressive, I couldn't resist."

"Okay then, I'm not going to take any of them back," Samantha said. At Kurt's laugh, she relaxed. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, as long as she kept her mind from remembering how he'd felt thrusting inside of her. As long as she kept him from noticing that her nipples were getting hard just watching the way he stretched and moved in his chair. "I do want to apologize for being late. Our accident in the parking lot necessitated a bit of a quick change."

Kurt nodded. "I want to apologize for that. I should have been looking where I was walking. It's a bad habit of mine. Some day I'm going to get killed."

Samantha wisely didn't comment.

"And don't worry about being late. I had a problem come up with an ad. That's what I was doing on the second floor."

He paused, shifting his thoughts, and looked down at the sheet of paper on his desk. Samantha had developed the ability to read upside down when she was a young reporter, but the sheet he was looking at was too far from her to get a good look at today. She leaned forward in her chair.

"Now that the pleasantries are over, let's get on with the reason I wanted to speak to you," Kurt said. "I don't know if you had a chance to go over the financial data I e-mailed to all the department heads last week."

"Briefly," Samantha replied.

"Well, that's okay. Most of it doesn't apply to editorial."

"But some did." Her voice was flat. Every time a new paper pusher came into this office, they all cried about money. It was one of the aspects of her job that made Samantha's eyes cross with boredom. In the newspaper business, it was particularly unpleasant because many experts believed, with the instant accessibility of the Internet, that printed newspapers were becoming dinosaurs. The fact that his father was the paper's new owner didn't make any difference. Samantha already knew he was going to be just like all the others.

"That's right," he said. "We're going to have to cut your budget by twenty-five percent next year."

Samantha sat back, rocked. "Twenty-five percent? Twenty-five percent?"

"Yes. Here're the numbers I've drawn up." He stood and handed her the sheet of paper she'd been trying to read. "I'd really like to get it up to thirty-five but I don't know if it's possible."

"That's not possible," she said, stunned. She couldn't believe he was telling her she had to cut one-quarter of her

budget—a budget that was already half the industry standard. She'd expected to make some cuts—she'd gotten that far in the dry, monotonous report he'd sent around—but never had she dreamed he would be unreasonable. "I can't do that. The only way to cut that much would be to fire people. We can't do that because of the contract with the Guild."

"Not under the contract we have now." He moved from behind his desk to the front, sitting on the corner. She noticed the way his pants pulled across his groin, enhancing the bulge of his cock. "But I will be meeting with the guild bargaining team later this week. I think we're going to see some changes in our staff size for next year. Even if the staff size remains the same, it doesn't mean the way it's set up does."

"You mean cuts by attrition and retirements?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, but even that isn't going to bring your budget within the range it needs to be."

"Well, I don't know any other way to cut budget unless we stop traveling with the Gladiators and River Rats."

Silence met what she'd said as a joke.

"You've got to be kidding."

"No," he said. "You're right, that is the only way at this point to cut twenty-five percent of your budget. And, I think if you look at the results of our latest market survey, you'll see there's merit in my plan."

He handed her a set of papers stapled at one corner. She looked at them derisively, and threw them back on his desk.

"I don't care what this says. I know our readers. I know the people of Western New York. This is not a viable option."

"It's the only option. The sports department spent in excess of one hundred thousand dollars last year on travel alone. Well in excess of that two years ago, nearly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. This newspaper can't sustain losses like that

when we continue to drop our circulation numbers and the advertising base."

"Two years ago the River Rats went to the Stanley Cup Championship. That was an extra two and a half months of games and travel. You don't get to pick and choose where and when those games are, you know. There is no way to get our people on cheap flights when they only have twenty-four hours notice of where the next game will be played," Samantha said. "The year before that, the Gladiators went to the Super Bowl. Those are rare events."

"Yes, but already this year you've spent close to one hundred thousand," he said. "We've still got three months left in the fiscal year. Are you telling me your department is going to stay under a hundred thousand in travel this year?"

"Probably not, but let me tell you this: if you think circulation and the advertising is falling off now, then make me pull back on our Gladiators coverage and readers will revolt."

"Perhaps, in the short term, but in the long term we'll be fine. We are, after all, their only choice in town." He looked at his watch. "Look, we're running long here, and I've got another appointment in five minutes. Why don't we meet for dinner tonight and discuss this more?"

"No thank you, sir. I prefer not to invite indigestion." Samantha stood. "I seriously suggest that you rethink this plan. Not only is it not viable, I know, in the long term, it could spell disaster for this paper. I've been here for a long time now, I know our readers. We can't take this away from them and survive. They won't stand for it."

She left and managed, barely, to keep from slamming the door behind her. She was pleased with her control over her emotions when she nodded courteously to Millie. She knew Boscoe was watching her, having moved from behind his desk to

stand in his doorway, and she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her do what she wanted—which was to kick something viciously.

She started back down to the third floor, then detoured to the cafeteria pleased that the trembling in her hand as she poured herself a cup of coffee was barely noticeable. She still needed to cool off, though, so she headed to the balcony that looked out over the Marina and the newly constructed hockey arena. Only then could she think clearly enough to solve the problem she now faced. How she could keep her job and the staff that was like family to her without losing her integrity? Because if she did what Boscoe had requested, *The Planet's* sports pages would be a joke. That wasn't the way she did things. Not ever before, not ever in the future.

The sad thing was that part of her wished that he were a different kind of man. She wished the fantasy lover, the man who had given her a level of pleasure she'd never known, would have been equally intuitive when it came to the business. Then he would have been a hero of epic proportions.

But, like most things in life, what Samantha knew was that this man wasn't a hero in any proportion.

And she hated the part of her that mourned for the loss of her fantasy lover.

* * *

Kurt walked back to his desk, resisting the urge to follow Samantha. He'd expected to meet someone more masculine today—the kind of woman who'd be comfortable swilling back drinks with the good-old boys, who still populated the world of sports—instead of the stunning warrior princess from last night who had literally taken his breath away.

But his fantasy lover and the sports editor of his new newspaper were one and the same. As feisty of a lover she'd

been, she was equally feisty professionally. He almost drooled at the thought of going to war with her in both arenas.

She was a little thing despite the three-inch stiletto heels she wore, barely reaching his shoulder. He had the best experience to know that she was soft and rounded in all the right places. Her long black hair, secured today with a demure clip, had been an erotic fantasy come true when it had caressed his heated groin last night.

Today, she'd tried gamely to put a professional face on the fact they had been closer than most engaged couples. Well, he wasn't about to let that happen.

Some people looked at him, saw his easy-going Tennessee charm and the fact that his father was owner of one of the largest media groups in the world, and expected a pushover. It was a mistake he'd taken advantage of since the beginning of his climb to the top in this business. Anyone who knew his father knew he didn't suffer fools gladly. Kurt knew this was his last chance. If he didn't turn *The Planet* into the cash cow his father expected it would become, he would never be given a seat on the Board of Directors. Kurt was determined to do whatever he had to, however he had to do it, to make sure no one doubted his abilities again. He was going to make sure everyone—including his father—knew he wasn't a pushover anymore.

Samantha Cruise was the one going to be pushed over—onto her back and taking his nine hard inches as often as he could make it happen. The way he saw it, he'd get what he wanted from his father, and this woman, and have a helluva time doing it.

"Well, we'll just have to see how our personal little game will play out," he muttered to himself. "And this is one I don't intend to lose."

He walked back to his office door and watched as Samantha

exited the cafeteria and headed for the balcony and the bank of elevators. There was a new game afoot. It would require some shuffling of priorities, but that was okay. That's what he loved about the newspaper business. There was always something new.

Well, he'd found something new all right— the thrill of the chase. As he watched the way Samantha Cruise's butt swayed enticingly in those wonderful black leggings, he almost licked his lips.

"Yes, let the game begin," he said softly, before turning to Millie and adding, "let me know when Mayor Anderstone arrives. In the meantime, can you get me the personnel file on Miss Cruise?"

Chapter 3

Samantha ran her hand through her hair and settled in at a table in a crowded section of the Anchor Bar with the latest edition of *The Planet*. This wasn't a place most would consider for quiet contemplation, but strangely it was a place she often went to think.

Famous for its Buffalo-style chicken wings, the Anchor had been the spot in downtown for famous and regular folks to enjoy the spicy, fried food delicacy that had become synonymous with Buffalo eating. Samantha figured each order meant an extra thirty minutes on the treadmill for her, but the wings' spicy, lip-smacking taste was worth it.

She waited for her order while she ran through the options facing her. She couldn't believe that Boscoe actually expected her to cut twenty-five percent from her budget. It wasn't possible. She thought again of the time and effort they'd expended today to keep on top of the fast-paced action happening out at Gladiator Stadium.

Lani had been right in her predictions about the press conference. The team had announced signing a new forty-year lease with the county and city governments. Basically, the agreement gave the Gladiators the use of the stadium free of taxes or rent. The team would pay taxes on the sale of food and beverages during the games and on any team merchandise sold on game day, and all other sales revenue would be tax-free.

It was a huge story. It guaranteed the Gladiators would be

hanging around the area for at least the time of the lease, but it also meant that the sluggish county and city economies would be unable to capitalize on the Gladiators' revenue. It had taken a lot of guts for the politicians to make the agreement given how bad times were, but it also was just one more piece of evidence on how critical sports teams were to the area.

It was childish, she knew, but Samantha hoped Boscoe would read the story and choke on his coffee.

"Hello there. Fancy meeting you here."

"Think of the devil and he usually shows up," Samantha groaned, setting down her paper. She looked up into the depths of his eyes; they were almost blue-green now, like a soft sexy blanket, ready to wrap her up and warm her from the inside out. The kick of desire was instant, but her ability to shut down all her nerves took a little longer. Still, she was proud of the nonchalant sound of her voice when she asked, "Slumming?"

"No, I've been hearing all about this place. Since you turned down my dinner invitation, I thought I'd just stop in and grab a takeout order before returning to the paper."

He stood for long humming seconds. Samantha felt churlish with him standing there expectantly. She also didn't know if she could handle him sitting across from her at the small table. Since he arrived her heartbeat had sped and her nerves were sending joyous chants to the core of her. She could feel a tingle deep in her womb and had only managed to keep from squirming as she felt her body kick into high arousal gear. She wished devoutly that they were alone, because her body was urging her to jump him right here and right now. She'd push him back against one of the small tables and settle over him, like jumping on a high-bred stallion. She would unzip those wonderfully tailored navy chinos and free his beautiful cock before sliding it in her pussy as far as it would go. She bit her bottom lip against the feelings

racing through her.

Just because she was feeling uncomfortable seeing him didn't mean she was going to let him know how much he affected her. Finally, she sighed and motioned to the empty seat beside her.

Focus on the food, she told herself.

"Sit down. We might as well eat together. Rookies," she joked. "You can't eat the Anchor's wings at your desk. Unless you want the grease and sauce to stay there for the rest of your natural life, that is."

She didn't miss his grin as he settled in the chair and knew intuitively she'd been set up. "Who told you I'd be here?"

Boscoe just grinned. "Just because I'm not a journalist doesn't mean I don't know how to protect a source."

"Huh. Don't worry. I can get the information from other places," Samantha said. She relaxed and leaned back in her chair. Maybe, just maybe, she could keep this on a strictly business footing.

Tables were spaced just wide enough for waitresses to deliver platters loaded down with the famous chicken wings, except when the restaurant was crowded. Tonight was not the exception. Kurt moved his chair in closer to keep from getting an elbow in the head every time someone walked by them. The only problem was the one way he could move put him a little too close for comfort to Samantha. Every time he shifted even slightly, her mind brought forth too many vivid pictures of their encounter inside his limousine.

"This is probably old hat for you, huh?" he asked.

For a moment Samantha didn't follow his question. She was so caught up in the memory of his body moving on hers and enticing clean smell of him—baby powder and something else that tickled her nose and wiped out the layers of fried food and

beer permeating the restaurant—that she wasn't paying close attention to his words. This immediate effect he had on her, along with the humor dancing in his wonderful eyes, sent something careening through her that wasn't entirely comfortable.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean darting in here for a quick meal and then heading back to the newsroom."

"How do you know I'm going back tonight?" Samantha asked.

"I called the sports department to talk to you. Your assistant told me you'd be back tonight. Don't you think you're taking dedication a little too far?"

"No. Not when we're working on something as big as the story we broke this afternoon on the Gladiators." Samantha pointed to the front page of the sports section. "When I left, graphics was working on a chart that breaks down the agreement and compares it to agreements reached in other cities. I want to take a quick look at it before we run it for the sunrise editions."

Kurt nodded. "Ah yes, the agreement. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's great. The Gladiators are such a part of this region that having them stay here for another forty years is crucial."

"Yeah, but at what cost? When I saw this story, I had a meeting with Joe Masterson," Kurt said, naming the top editorial columnist. "I wanted to find out what the paper's stand on it was going to be."

"Let me guess, you think the deal's bad."

"That's right. First and foremost, I'm a businessman. And, as a businessman, this deal stinks for everyone except the Gladiators. *The Planet* is an important part of this community.

We employ more people than the Gladiators, and our people live and spend their money here, but I don't see the city politicians lining up to make us that kind of sweetheart deal. I think taxpayers have the right to demand the same kind of common sense thinking from their government."

Samantha laughed. "Boy, you really are a rookie. You should talk to some of the politicians before you get on your high horse. If you called any one of them, they'd tell you that if they played hardball with the Gladiators, it would be political suicide come election time."

Kurt leaned back a bit in his chair while their waitress delivered their drinks. Samantha waited until the waitress left then leaned forward, unintentionally getting closer to him. She wanted to make sure he could hear her over the noisy diners, but she also didn't want to shout at him.

"Look, I don't know where you came here from," she began. It was a bit of a lie, as she knew exactly where he was from. She'd done her homework after talking to him this afternoon. Just a couple of quick Internet searches had found his resume along with a couple of cheesecake photos of his numerous 'dates'. "But around here, politicians don't do two things—let the snow plow drivers strike or send the Buffalo Gladiators looking for another place to play."

Kurt took another drink. "Well, maybe they should—at least on the part of the Gladiators. I can understand how the snow plow drivers might hold a larger shovel, so to speak."

"Well, there's a lot of people in this city who would say the Gladiators are even more important than the snow plows," Samantha replied.

Kurt laughed. "That's exactly what Joe said."

Samantha started to press her point further, but paused when the waitress brought two large plates covered with inverted

bowls for the discarded chicken bones. The wings were perfect—gleaming with hot sauce, piled high, and served with celery sticks and blue cheese dressing for dipping. "Here you go," she said. "Two orders—suicide. Enjoy."

The fumes from the wings were already tickling her nostrils. She wondered if the high and mighty Kurt Boscoe knew what was waiting for him. She risked looking at him.

He had tucked the large white napkin into his shirt collar. He sat the bowl to one side, sniffed appreciatively, then grabbed a wing and dunked it like a donut into the blue cheese and dug in.

She gave him full points when he made it about one-third of the way through his order before the perspiration started beading on his upper lip. And if he seemed to drink his soft drink quickly, as well as the glass of water the waitress had left, it was no more quickly than she herself was doing.

When they finally ate their fill and sat back, he smiled at her.

"I haven't had anything that spicy since I had tamales down on the Rio Grande. I was afraid my throat would never be the same after that," Kurt said. "This was just as good."

Samantha sighed. It had been her one quest to find someone who liked spicy food just as much as she did. It looked like Kurt Boscoe had passed the first test.

"This is just the first course," she joked.

The measuring look in his eyes told Samantha he was aware that she'd just issued a challenge. It also told her he was up to whatever she wanted to offer.

"So, what's next?" his quietly voiced question seemed to ask about more than just food.

Samantha managed to overcome the urge to ask him if he would go out with her tomorrow night. She had to remember not

only what he stood for now, but her ironclad rule regarding mixing business and pleasure. As he signed the credit card slip on the bill, she watched the efficient movement of his hand and noticed the way the hair peeked out from the turned-up cuffs of his shirt.

Tearing her gaze from his hand, she looked at her watch. "I'd better get back to the newsroom. They'll need my okay on the graphic to get the color shot."

Kurt stood as she gathered her jacket, purse, and briefcase. "Perhaps we can continue this discussion about the Gladiators tomorrow night," he said. "I've heard about this nice place up in Williamsville. It doesn't have the reputation the Anchor Bar does, but I understand the chef there is excellent."

Samantha stopped pulling on her coat and looked him straight in the eye. "Why?"

Kurt smiled. "Why do you think?"

"I don't know, but somehow I don't think it's because you're going to tell me that you've changed your mind about cutting my budget."

"No, that's business. And I don't change my mind about business decisions," he said, reaching for her hand. "But asking you to have dinner with me has nothing to do with business."

Samantha scratched a non-existent itch under her bottom lip as they left the restaurant.

"There can be nothing but business between us. It's a rule I've had since I've been in this business, and it isn't one I break." When she tried to pull her hand from his, his hold tightened for a moment, then he released her. They were standing beside her car.

"Haven't you heard the axiom that rules are made to be broken?" He leaned closer to her and she leaned back against her door. He placed one hand on the rooftop beside her head, while

the other one played with her bangs. He was close enough to her that she could feel her breasts start to tingle.

He smiled and leaned closer. Now his hips were brushing hers. When she felt his erection stirring she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. She felt his lips brush against her forehead then whisper across her eyebrows. "Break it with me, Samantha."

"That's not a philosophy I follow," she gasped, willing herself not to lean further into his embrace. When she felt his kiss at the corner of her lips, she groaned. He took advantage and nibbled gently on her lips before kissing her fully. She was quickly going down for the count.

When their lips finally parted, she gasped, "Please, I can't do this. I won't."

There was a humming few seconds when Samantha didn't know if he would release her. She didn't know what she would do if he didn't. Worse, she didn't know what she'd feel if he did.

Finally, he moved away and she was able to slide into her car. She thought she heard him murmur something as she shut the door. She knew he stood and watched her back out of the parking lot and drive away before he left his position. It was only as she was driving the few blocks back to *The Planet* that it dawned on her his words had been, "I think you can. I think you will."

Chapter 4

The bright fluorescent newsroom lights combined with the glow of over a hundred computer terminals to give the third floor a perpetual eeriness. Like hospitals, police stations, and casinos—there was no difference between day or night, week or month at a newspaper. In fact, the newsroom décor was so androgynous many first-time visitors were shocked to see row after row of desks, some piled high with file folders, old newspapers, magazines, and cups and mugs; others spartan. Although the desks were lined up like those in a large insurance office, they were manned in shifts with reporters and editors sharing desks for the morning and afternoon cycles. Someone was staffing the newsroom from three a.m. until two a.m. every single day of every single year.

Yet, no matter how long she'd been in the business or at how many different papers, Samantha was always amazed at the phone system. At *The Planet*, each had a different tone so their users would be able to tell their tones from the others, which was necessary because it seemed a phone, somewhere on the floor, rang constantly. Samantha had been in the newsroom early in the morning and late at night. She had never been there when at least one phone wasn't ringing.

Unfortunately the building's third floor, where the newsroom or editorial department was contained, was sadly bereft of windows. Along one windowed wall, the space had been divided into offices that were more like cubicles. The

editorial columnists and political cartoonist shared the largest of these cubicles, while the rest of the space was divided among the Managing Editor, her two assistant Managing Editors, the secretary those three shared, and the technical director.

The sports department took up roughly one-third of the entire floor. Unlike the other departments, it was a mishmash of desks, clustered in L-shaped groups of threes. Three of the desks held multiple computers and phones in order for the editors to design and edit the actual pages.

In an attempt to give the area its own charm and ambience, one of the long retired columnists had glued a miniature basketball goal to one of the file cabinets, along with a poster of a pro basketball player. Samantha had no doubt there were mock games played on slow nights while her editors were waiting for games to be completed and stories to be filed. There was also a Chinese calendar on another file cabinet—from the year 1959 that no one ever bothered to replace.

Samantha's own space was smack in the middle of the department and was enclosed by three half walls, a ridiculous decorating frill if she'd ever seen one. One of the walls was a distressing turned-around gray metal bookcase. On the front side, it was so crammed full of books they stuck out at all angles, causing a hazardous situation for anyone who attempted to remove one of them. The back of the cabinet was her third wall.

The man who'd been the sports editor before her had been nicknamed the Little General, so he'd probably had the walls erected thinking they gave him the privacy to wheel and deal his way to the top. There was no privacy in the newsroom. Though she hated the setup, every time Samantha started to place the work order to remove the walls, she'd get busy and forget about it. Now, it would probably cause an employee riot if she removed them, so she just lived with it.

As she moved through the newsroom no heads turned, but Samantha was aware that every antenna was raised, checking for the slightest hint of new information. She felt a little like a mouse in a house full of cats. By the time she reached her cubicle, she knew the office grapevine had already circulated her morning chat with the publisher.

She put her purse down on the chair next to her desk, then moved over to the pagination station where her night assistant sports editor was laying out the morning edition.

"Hi, Mike. Did you get the graphic yet?"

Mike Jones was a sports journalist cut from a different mold. If any reporter needed to know a statistic from any of the Buffalo professional teams, past or present, they could call him at home or the office, and he could quote them from memory. He also was able to edit copy, keeping the writers' flair, but making sure all the facts were straight, with the precision and speed of an emergency room surgeon.

If *The Planet's* sophisticated computer equipment broke down, Mike could roll up his sleeves and single-handedly put out the entire newspaper the old fashioned way without missing a single deadline. Samantha loved him like a brother and would give him anything he wanted, as long as he agreed to stay in charge of her night shift.

"Oh hey, boss, or as the boys like to call you now, Champ."

Samantha grimaced. "Champ?"

"Well, sure. Anyone who goes into the monster's cave and gives him the old verbal one-two is a real hero down here. What'd he want to do, move our deadlines up?"

Samantha smiled. *Well, at least they don't know the complete truth. That would cause morale to dip to an all-time low.*

"Let's just say we had a slight difference of opinion," she

said instead of answering his question directly. She was aware that the rewrites —editors who were assigned to take raw information that was phoned in and turn it into stories, copy editors, and even the clerks answering the phones had their radar on high alert. Anything said now would be passed along the grapevine with dizzying speed.

"Yeah. That's not quite the way we heard it down here," Mike said pausing dramatically as if hoping she'd divulge more info. When she remained quiet, he shrugged philosophically, then moved back to the business of tomorrow's edition. "Here's what they came up with in graphics. I think it looks pretty sharp. But we have a problem. They made it four columns wide. It's nearly nine and a half inches deep."

Samantha perused the copy closely. It was a perfect chart and the graphics department had used pictures of the team's owner along with the mayor and county officials. There were drop-in quotes in a fancy type font to make the package look good, as well as hold the pertinent information.

"What does that do to the rest of our section?" she asked.

"That makes it tight. We're expecting about 70 inches of copy from Lani and the other reporters on this story alone. And we've got two reporters and a photographer out covering high school games. He's shooting black and white, so that's an advantage."

Samantha nodded. A big part of her job was making sure the paper looked good. On a normal news day that meant she scheduled her staff to cover local events. Then they had to present them in an attractive way that would make them pleasing to an average reader's eye. Today, however, was not a normal news day.

She pursed her lips as she squinted over Mike's shoulder to look at the computer screen where the picture of his front-page

layout was displayed. It was desktop publishing taken to the highest level.

"Okay, so we have about one hundred ten inches on the package alone, right?"

"That's right," Mike agreed. "And our news hole tonight is only about five hundred inches."

Samantha thought quickly. On any given day, they needed about two hundred twenty-five inches for agate type alone. Agate was the smallest type in the paper, and it was used in the sports pages for box scores and summaries of everything from the pro sports to all the high school and amateur teams *The Planet* covered. So with two items alone—the stadium story with graphic elements and the agate type—she'd just shot over half her space for the day.

"Okay, we're going to kill the feature on the college boxer going to the Olympics," she decided, thinking as she talked of all her different alternatives. "That'll free up, what? About one hundred inches with art and everything, right?"

Mike nodded. He manipulated the mouse, hovered the pointer over the story in question, and said, "You sure? I could probably make this work if we cut it in half and jumped it to the scoreboard."

Samantha shook her head. "No. I can ask for extra space for Wednesday. I'll send a memo upstairs right now. There's no hurry for that feature, it'll hold another day."

"You're the boss," he said. One click and the story, art, and everything disappeared from the page. He turned slightly and looked over his shoulder at his slot man, Tom Picarski. "Tom, put the boxer story back in the sports basket. It's a hold for Wednesday."

Tom nodded, his fingers barely pausing as they moved rapidly over the keyboard. Tom was probably the fastest typist

Samantha had on her staff; he did it all using only two fingers, and he never said two words when one was enough. His skill on the job was legendary. He could deal with panicking reporters, merge dozens of wire reports into one seamless story, and listen to a radio broadcast of a game at the same time.

Samantha looked back at the copy of the graphic she still held in her hand. There was something missing here. She narrowed her eyes in thought. That's why it took a couple of seconds for the change in the newsroom atmosphere to reach her.

She looked up quickly, just in time to hear Mike's muttered, "Look at that, would you? I believe the big dog has come down to play in the pound."

He was right. Kurt stood in the middle of the newsroom, still wearing his coral long-sleeved shirt. He looked strong, relaxed, and heart-breakingly sexy—a fact all the women in the room had already noticed. Samantha saw more than one hand fluff hair or smooth down a line of clothing.

For a moment, Samantha didn't know what to do. Her body was responding as if he was a smorgasbord, and she had been on a month-long fast. Her mind was a mass of screaming-meemies. *Good God, what is he doing here?*

He nodded once to the night Managing Editor, who was hurrying toward him, and turned away to head over to her.

"Ms. Cruise, I wonder if I might have a moment of your time," he said.

Samantha felt the eyes and worse, the ears, of everyone working the floor zoom to sonar levels. She was about to be the source of even more grapevine activity. She thought she might die of embarrassment. Another part of her was so excited she wanted to lie right down on the floor and mate like a couple of minks.

"Now isn't really a good time, Mr. Boscoe," she replied.

"I'll be happy to meet you first thing in the morning, however."

Kurt's eyes narrowed. "No, that won't work. This is important or I wouldn't bother you."

Samantha tried not to release the sigh working through her throat. She knew Kurt wasn't happy with the brush-off. But darn it, what the heck did he think he was doing following her here like this? Now? In front of just about her entire staff?

"Here or upstairs?" she asked.

"Since your time is so precious, we can do it here," he said. He handed her a sheet of paper that she hadn't noticed he was holding. "We had a late ad come in. We've added a page to your section for tomorrow. We also had to move some things around. They're almost finished with the copy downstairs, but it will still be about fifteen minutes before the changes show up on the electronic pages. I thought you might want to know about this change ahead of time."

Samantha felt like an idiot. Knowing Kurt expected and deserved her respect and a civil answer, she nodded. "Thank you. I'm surprised you're involved with this. Usually, the advertising director just calls me himself."

"I've told everyone I want to be informed of all changes, especially when they involve changes to the ad count. I was still in the building finishing up some paperwork, and there was a slight problem at the Gregory house tonight. I told Greg just to stay at home. I'd handle it."

"Oh." Samantha felt even more foolish. It was obvious he had come back to the paper after dinner, just like she had. She was also grateful he hadn't mentioned their shared dinner in front of her staff. "Thanks again. We can use the extra space."

Kurt nodded, turned on his heel, and left the third floor. She felt a momentary pang, wondering if she should follow and try to apologize. Then, realizing people were still watching her closely,

she turned back to Mike and Tom, who quickly went back to typing as if he hadn't been listening to the entire conversation.

"Okay. You guys hear the good news? We've got about eighty more inches to work with." She rubbed her hands together. "Let's take a look at this stuff. Maybe we can still run that Olympic story tonight after all."

* * *

Three and a half hours later, Samantha hitched her heavy briefcase on her shoulder and pressed the button for the freight elevator. For security's sake, it was the only elevator working at this time of night. It led to the mailroom, allowing management to keep only one entrance to the paper open. To open the door, employees had to swipe their identification badges through a lock. There was also a guard at the door twenty-four/seven. Television cameras monitored each floor and the front and back parking lots. There was also supposed to be a guard patrolling the lots after dark.

In truth, the security was still a joke. There were huge loading docks where the papers came off the conveyer belts and were loaded directly onto the big trucks. Anyone determined to get into the building could probably get in at any time.

The Planet had always taken a tough stand on the issues, but in the years Samantha had worked there no one had physically attempted to intimidate its staff. Most people were content with angry letters, e-mail, or phone calls when they didn't like the slant or tone of a story or editorial. It was just part of the business.

But Samantha wasn't thinking about any of that as she waited for the freight elevator to reach the third floor. It was more what she was trying not to think about—Kurt.

She glanced down at the spoils—the first copies of the paper to come off the press—pleased with the way the sports

front looked. They had managed to give the stadium story the play it deserved and still do a good job with the Olympic feature. It was kind of thrilling to see the fruition of her ideas come to life on paper. Sometimes she hit a home run and sometimes she completely struck out, but this edition was definitely a home run.

Her dealings with Kurt had certainly fallen in the other category, however.

She chewed on her bottom lip. She really had to come up with some way to apologize to him. She hoped she'd have a little time to think it over. It seemed that just seeing him caused several circuits in her brain to misfire. That had to be the only reason why she seemed to act the way she did.

Well, she promised herself, she'd go home tonight and rehearse everything she wanted to say to him. And practice it, if necessary, to be certain all the right words came out in the right places.

The elevator groaned a little, showing the effects of years and years of carrying tons and tons of newsprint from floor to floor. As the heavy doors laboriously opened, Samantha knew she wasn't going to have the chance to rehearse anything.

"Evening Ms. Cruise."

Cold. Freezer cold. Samantha ignored the pang in her heart, wishing she could go back in time a few hours.

"Mr. Boscoe." Tit for tat. Or a good offense is worth more than a good defense.

He returned to scanning his paper. She noticed he had her section on top.

"I want to thank you for coming down personally tonight and telling me about the added space."

He nodded briefly, but she saw his cheek muscle twitch. He wasn't going to make this easy.

"Look, I'm sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I would

like to make it up to you."

Finally, he looked at her. She almost took a step back at the desire she saw blazing there. "What do you have in mind?"

Samantha chewed on her lip. *How about we pick up where we left off Sunday night?*

His top lip tilted slightly as if he could read her mind.

"Well, how about dinner? My treat," she said. That seemed to be the safest option open to her. She ignored the taunt of *chicken* that was rolling through her mind.

He tilted his head as if considering. "No. We tried the restaurant bit tonight. You said it gave you indigestion."

Samantha frowned. "Well, I guess I could have you over to my place. I'm not a great cook, but I do have a spot on my balcony where I have a small grill. I could probably make a steak that wouldn't kill you."

I'm an idiot. Before she could renege on her offer, he spoke.

"Wow, with such ringing confidence, I don't know if I should risk it or not," he said. "But what the heck, I'm a gambling man. I wouldn't be in the newspaper business if I weren't. Shall I come around seven? Tomorrow?"

"That sounds fine," she agreed. She bit her lip a bit, wondering what she should do or say next.

He moved a little closer to her. Her nerves, which had been calming down a bit, went back into overdrive.

"Don't you think we can come up with something a little less formal?" he asked. "For after?"

She moved slightly away, but came up against the hard steel wall of the elevator. "I don't know what you mean," she stammered.

He chuckled. The sound sent warm fingers of sensation down her spine and her pussy started to quiver.

He trailed a finger down her jaw line across her cheek

before coming to rest lightly against the corner of her lips. She closed her eyes against the urge to take that finger into her mouth, sucking on it and mimicking sucking something else deep inside her.

"Lady," he whispered, "do you know what you do to me? How much you turn me on just by being?"

"No," she whispered in return. The quivering in her pussy had become full aching quakes now. Incredibly she felt her cream began to edge its way down into her canal. Why was she suddenly acting like a mare in heat when she hadn't even been tempted by any man in longer than she cared to admit?

When his finger moved from the corner of her mouth to the dip on her top lip, her tongue slipped out on her moan. On its own volition, her tongue bathed his finger, delving in the little gap between his nail and the skin. Her eyes flew open at the sound of his slight groan.

She had only a second to see the glittering flame his eyes had become before his mouth captured hers in a kiss that spun wildly out of control.

Tongues mating in fierce anticipation, Samantha thought of nothing but the taste and feel of him. She could taste just a touch of the hot sauce from the wings, along with the freshness of the wintergreen mint the waitress had left on their table. His lips were firm and full and moved with just the right amount of aggression as he took from her mouth, as if he were content to stay there forever.

His tongue was smooth as it coaxed hers into a dance that mimicked their lovemaking in the car. She felt as if he was trying to pull her soul out from her through their mated mouths.

She felt his body move even closer to her and in some dim part of her still functioning brain, Sam knew he had touched the elevator's control panel, probably stopping it. But, before she

could protest, his hand was back around her waist, pulling her fully against him. She felt his erection through his pants and her leggings.

His fingers moved down her back over the curve of her hip and abdomen, then up to her breasts. He caressed first one than the other, gently and then with increasing strength. She could feel her nipples hardening and threw back her head whether in protest or supplication, she didn't know or care. He didn't stop touching her, just zeroed in on her nipples, moving his fingers in smaller and smaller circles, then leaving them all together to cup the weight of her breasts in each hand. The movements, careless yet with an instinctive rhythm, nearly drove her mad. She broke the kiss to moan and he swept his lips down her neck, nipping at the cord of muscle there before returning his attention to her nipples and plucking first one, then the other between his thumb and forefinger. The motion, with her bra and tunic on, shouldn't have been erotic. It was absolutely mind blowing.

The metallic buzz of the elevator's panic system broke through their passion. She pulled away and looked at him dazedly.

He grinned unrepentantly and pushed the button, allowing the elevator to continue its downward movement. "That'll just have to hold both of us until tomorrow," he said.

Samantha knew she had lost another round. How had she gotten into such a mess? How was she going to salvage this situation?

Chapter 5

The next day, Samantha alternated between staring at the walls, wondering what she should wear that night, and wanting to bang her head against one of her Plexiglas walls.

He's my boss, she told herself.

He's the best-looking man I've met in months.

I've always had a hard, fast rule about office romances, she reminded herself.

Romance, hell, this is lust, pure and simple, and I'm not the type to be controlled by simple passion.

I was rude. I need to keep my wits if I'm going to convince I know what's best for The Planet.

He was condescending and trying to get my goat.

He's new in town and this is just a friendly dinner.

Yeah, right. So that's a good reason why I'm ready to throw off all my clothes, and his, every time I'm in his presence for more than a few minutes?

"Samantha? Boss?" Samantha started when she realized Lani was standing at her desk looking at her quizzically.

"Oh, sorry, Lani. I didn't see you come in, or apparently hear your question. What do you need?"

"Wow, you must have been thinking about something important. I've been standing here for a couple of minutes." Lani stood loose-hipped with a casual nonchalance that was as much a part of her as her easy smile.

"Yeah, well, you've got it easy. All you have to do is worry

about getting those high-paid athletes and owners to talk to you. We middle managers have to deal with much weightier issues."

Lani flopped down in the battered armchair that took up a good portion of Samantha's cubicle. Samantha had found the chair in the basement of the building; it had probably been a cast-off from some redecoration in the publisher's office years ago, but she didn't care. She'd had some of the guys in maintenance bring it up to the third floor, aired it out, and squeezed it in her tiny office. As popular as the chair was with her staff, she was glad she'd done it.

"Hmm. Would one of those weightier issues happen to be a run-in with Super Publisher?"

"Super Publisher? Oh, you mean Kurt? Mr. Boscoe, that is?"

"Yeah. Mr. Boscoe. The clerk island ladies have tagged him Super Publisher because he looks like Ben Affleck and has those Paul Newman eyes. That makes him super in any woman's book."

Samantha lowered her head. She knew from the heat rushing up her neck that she was blushing, and the last thing Lani needed to see was her embarrassment at talk of Kurt's looks.

"But the big gossip is that you and SP, I mean Mr. Boscoe, were seen walking to the parking lot together last night. Reports are you left in separate cars, though. Care to give the inquiring newsroom minds the scoop?"

"Uh, are you thinking of switching to the features department, Lani?"

Her top reporter grinned unrepentantly. "You know, freedom of information and all that. So, what gives? Are you two making like friends?"

Samantha bit her lip. "No. He's my boss. You know how I

feel about that."

"Hey, but it isn't like he's really your boss. I mean, most publishers don't get involved with the day-to-day stuff."

"This publisher will," Samantha muttered.

"I'm sorry," Lani said. "I didn't hear what you said."

Samantha shook her head. "Nothing important. What do you think is going to be the backlash of the county coming through with the deal for the Gladiators?"

Lani looked at her sharply and, after a moment, took Samantha's hint and switched the subject. The next few minutes they discussed the possible things that could happen due to yesterday's news and follow-up stories Lani was working. Then Samantha rushed into the first of her afternoon meetings. Since it was Thursday, she had the normal page one meeting, where all the department heads met with the managing editor and discussed the banger stories they would be running in the next day's paper. The page one meeting usually lasted fifteen to twenty minutes and was more of a chance for the ME to comment on possible art choices and headlines.

Although she usually gave in to all of Samantha's requests, the ME was known for her no-nonsense, hard news attitude. She hated features, or fluff pieces as she called them, on the front page, and never missed the opportunity to tell her editors of her preferences. Although it didn't constitute an order from on high, each editor listened intently.

A large part of today's meeting was spent on technical issues.

"Okay. Final item on the agenda today," Jordan Murray said. "They are having trouble with the presses again."

Amid the good-natured groans, features editor Slayter Mogliny muttered, "What, they ran out of bailing twine again?"

There were a few twitters from his assistant and the weekly

magazine editor. Everyone else glared at him. The press *The Planet* was using had been purchased in 1948 and was the joke of the industry. There was a new press system coming at the end of the year, if it didn't get sunk or stalled in transit from Western Europe, but until then the press room staff was robbing Peter to pay Paul in an attempt to keep one press running.

Mogliny was Samantha's least favorite person in the entire editorial department. First, he didn't have the slightest clue about deadline pressure since all his pages were done in advance and off deadline; second, he constantly whined about the quality of photo reproduction. Since Mogliny had started his career as a photographer, whining was to be expected. Mogliny was also a snake in the grass and would bite anyone on the ankle if he thought it would make his life at *The Planet* better.

"They're having problems with the main press, so we're going to have to do the AM run on the small one," said Murray. "That means they need a greater lead time to hit the streets."

"How much greater?" Samantha and Dave Raedke, the copy desk chief, asked simultaneously. Dave winked at Samantha, telling her silently they were the only ones in the room whose staff would be directly influenced by the latest problem. Dave had the same feelings about Mogliny that Sam did, and they had shared many confidences about the features editor over the years.

"Mel down in the press room says at least an hour on the first edition. That's off the floor time," Murray said, meaning the time when all pages had to be down from editorial, through the filming process, and onto the press. She held up her hand to stall the protests spilling from Samantha's lips. "But, the good news is, once the negatives are on the web, we can hold for as long as you want. So we've pushed back the final sunrise edition to two o'clock."

Samantha nodded, thinking quickly. She would have to

juggle the schedule slightly, but she thought she could give Mike the help he needed.

"And," Murray said, keeping the people who were getting ready to leave the conference table in place, "we're probably going to have to do the same thing the next two nights as well."

Now that's an even bigger problem, Samantha thought. The Sunday edition was the largest paper. If they had to be "off the floor" at ten o'clock Saturday night, it would mean mayhem.

"We've got the Bisons in the minor league playoffs in Las Vegas Saturday," Samantha said.

"What time do they start?" Murray asked.

Samantha quickly flipped through her mental calendar. "First pitch is scheduled for four-thirty Vegas time. That's seven-thirty here. Figure about three hours for the game and it will be getting over around ten-thirty."

"Plug for first, but then go back for an immediate hook-on as soon as you get the score," Murray ordered. She looked at Dave. "Can you tell your people to move some of your pages earlier to clear the way for sports?"

"Sure, unless something breaks on the international front, it shouldn't be a problem."

Samantha smiled and winked at Dave. "I owe you, buddy," she said quietly.

He grinned back. "Oh, I'll be sure you pay up."

Samantha laughed, knowing the next beer at the watering hole would be on her.

As they were leaving, Murray called out one more little piece of advice. "Oh, and kids, word has come down from upstairs. No more overtime. Zip. Nada. Make sure all your people realize that if the schedules have to be adjusted, do it. But there will be no overtime paid without prior approval from the publisher's office."

Samantha left and immediately checked her schedules. The no overtime was a problem, but one she could handle with a couple of quick time changes. She e-mailed the people it would effect and even followed up with a couple of short phone calls just to make sure they got the messages.

By the time she was finished, she realized it was nearly five and she had only two hours to prepare for her date with Kurt.

She dashed out of the office and across the street, and jumped in her car. As she drove home, she dialed up her favorite deli/meat market, B&B's, and asked for the proprietor.

"Jo-Jo, this is Samantha Cruise. Sorry to bother you, but I'm running a little behind. Is my order ready?"

"Yes, Miss Cruise. I've got two filet mignons. I took the liberty of marinating them in our special sauce, so they should be extra tender. Were you planning on grilling them tonight?"

"Yes."

"These are my best cuts, Miss Cruise. So don't you go over-cooking them, you hear?"

"Yes, Jo-Jo," she intoned carefully smiling despite her anxiety.

Jo-Jo Hanratty was sixty if he was a day, and operated the B&B Butcher Shop with his younger brother Jimmy and their wives, Barbara and Carly. Not only did they have the best cuts of meats in all of Buffalo, but Barbara and Carly also cooked and sold some of the best side dishes in the region. Samantha, who rarely cooked if she could avoid it, was a regular customer.

The Hanrattys were also the biggest sports fans Samantha had encountered in all of Western New York. Jo-Jo and his brother had collectibles they could have made a mint on had they ever decided to go into a side business. She enjoyed nothing more than getting in a spirited debate over this or that aspect of the games and teams with the family. Once started, the debate

was also guaranteed to go on for quite a while, as the Hanratty's were quite opinionated.

"Jo-Jo, I'm wondering if you have anything else special tonight?"

"Ah, this is for a special date, is it not?"

"Well," Samantha hedged. It was a little uncomfortable that everyone seemed to be showing a great interest in her social life. Perhaps if she'd had a social life a little more often, people wouldn't show so much interest. That was what she'd work on now. She figured it'd do her good to get out more. Kurt was just like any other date.

Right. Perhaps she could convince herself of that if she said it about two thousand more times before he came to her house. "I'd classify it more as an important business dinner."

"Oh. Well, if it's important I think Babs may have some twice-baked potatoes she's just taking from the oven. They are stuffed with crabmeat and aged Parmesan cheese."

Samantha's mouth watered at the thought. "Great. Could you add one of those to my order as well?"

"Certainly. And Carly made some of her special brownies. We boxed up a couple of those as well for you."

Samantha groaned. "Jo-Jo, if you weren't married I'd take you away and never let you go."

"Oh, you go on now, Miss Cruise. You're such a kidder. Why, I'm old enough to be your daddy."

"Just because there's snow on the mountain doesn't mean there isn't fire in the belly," Samantha said.

Jo-Jo laughed. "You'd best be careful, missy, if my Babs hears you talking like that, we'd have to sweep you up off the ground."

Samantha laughed again. "You're right. And if there's one woman I don't want mad at me, it's the woman who can make

those delicious dishes."

Samantha could hear a noise in the background, and suddenly Babs' strident voice was on the line.

"Now, Missy Samantha, don't let this old rounder get you off the track. I also whipped up a nice salad for you. You young people need your greens."

"Yes ma'am," Samantha said. Babs Hanratty mothered every single regular customer that came into her store, it didn't matter how young or old. While Samantha might tease and flirt with Jo-Jo and Jimmy, Babs was like a mother to her.

"Now, who is this young man you're having dinner with? Jo-Jo says he's from the paper?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's the new publisher."

"Is he single then?"

Samantha bit back a chuckle. Babs didn't miss a chance to probe into her social life. "Yes, I think so. I really haven't checked. This is a business dinner. We have to talk about some changes that are happening at the paper."

There was a pause and Samantha rushed to fill it, wanting to stave off any further questions.

"I'm just pulling off the Kensington Expressway now. I'll be at the shop in about seven minutes."

* * *

One hour later, Samantha rummaged through her closet. Thankfully, the shop had been packed when she arrived and she'd been able to avoid any more questions about her dinner tonight. The food she'd purchased had looked delectable, and she was sure it tasted just as good. So at least they would eat well.

But, Samantha chided herself on the nerves roiling through her stomach. She'd showered, washed and blown dry her hair, and put on her makeup. Now, she was trying to find just the right

outfit.

She scowled from the inside of her closet to the heap of discarded clothes now lying on her bed. When her cat, Zip, jumped up in the middle of them, Samantha didn't even bother to deny the accusing look Zip sent her.

"I know, I know, this is completely silly," she said to Zip. "It's just dinner, for goodness sakes, with my boss. It'd be no different if we went to the cafeteria at *The Planet*. I'm acting like I'm having dinner with the president or something."

Zip just stared at Samantha with her large green eyes and didn't reply.

Samantha scratched her head. "Okay. I'm usually not so wishy-washy. Let's just pick something and go from there, it's—oh, my God, it's nearly seven o'clock. What happened to all my extra time?"

Samantha reached in her closet and pulled the next thing she came to off the hanger—a pair of black silk lounging pants with a yellow spaghetti-strapped blouse. She added a single strand of pearls and spritzed on some of her favorite perfume. It was the best she could do. At least the pants and blouse were comfortable as well as flattering.

She was just finished dressing when her doorbell rang. Running from her room, as she put on her shoes, she told herself to calm down. She skidded to a stop as her feet slid on the shiny hardwood floor of her hallway, took one last glance at the mirror that stood over her hall table, expelled a deep breath, and opened the door.

She promptly lost the ability to breathe.

He looked wonderful in his dark suit, with his tie loosened and his jacket unbuttoned. The striped vest he wore fit perfectly, and the white crispness of his shirt against his tanned skin combined to make him something meant to just wallow in for

awhile.

He smiled at her and held out a single long stemmed yellow rose. "Hope you're not allergic or anything," he said, when she accepted it.

"No. It's beautiful. Thank you. Please come in."

"I brought some wine. Red to go with the beef," he added as he walked into her apartment. "I hope you didn't change your mind about the steaks?"

"No. Did you come straight here after work?"

"Yeah. Did you hear about the presses?"

"Yes, I suppose I shouldn't tell you this, but there is a pool running on whether or not the new presses will arrive on time."

Kurt laughed. "I'd be more surprised if you told me there wasn't one. What're the odds at now?"

"Well, the guys in the composing room say it's two to one against."

"Maybe I'll head down there tomorrow and put in my bet," Kurt said. "Wow, what a great place. How did you find it?"

Samantha looked around at her wide view as Kurt moved from the hall into her living room. Her apartment was on the second floor in a one hundred-year-old house that looked out over Delaware Park and the Buffalo Zoo. Delaware Park was the largest park in Buffalo and part of the Olmsted Park System. Developed in the second half of the nineteenth century by the well-known landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vauz, it was part of the oldest coordinated system of public parks and parkways in the United States. Although the city of Buffalo had fallen on tough times recently, its ability to keep up the park system, and its crown jewel, was one of its most promising feats. Samantha loved living near Delaware Park.

"Yes, I like it. Actually, one of our reporters got a raise and

took the Washington politics beat. I jumped on this apartment when she moved out."

She moved to stand beside him and they both basked in the dying sunlight as it bathed the region.

"This is really great," he said. "I have almost the exact same view from my place. Or I will in about three weeks."

Samantha suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her building had been for sale all summer long. She'd even taken a long, strong look at her finances in an attempt to buy the place just so she wouldn't have to move, but she hadn't been quite able to pull it off.

"You bought this place?" she asked.

"Yeah. I close on it in three weeks. I got lucky when I found it. I've never owned a house before, I've always been a renter. Frankly, I was surprised to learn you were living here and hadn't made an offer yourself. This is a great investment and a wonderful house."

Boss and landlord, Samantha thought. This is completely unacceptable.

Aloud she said, "I'll find somewhere else to live as soon as possible."

He turned away from watching the view and looked at her intently. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I can't live in a house you own." Her pulse speeded a little at the thought of him being downstairs—all day and night long.

"Again, why? Would you move out if any man owned this house?"

"Of course not. The last owner was a man."

"So, all that's going to change is whom you send the rent to, and I certainly know you can afford the rent here. Even if I have to raise it."

"Raise the rent? You're going to raise the rent?" Samantha

heard the raising inflection in her voice. She was losing control. She never lost control, but this man was making her lose control without even trying.

"I didn't say I was raising the rent," he said, then held up his hand when she started to respond. "I'm sorry, I really can't help myself. You are so ready to go on attack that it's just too much fun to resist."

"You like seeing me angry?" She didn't know whether to feel insulted or even angrier.

"No. But I do enjoy arguing with you. In fact, I've never enjoyed arguing with anyone else to this extent. Over anything."

"Is that a compliment?" she asked.

Kurt looked at her so long she wondered if he was going to answer. She saw the kind of desire in his eyes that made every nerve inside her peak like a flower rising to meet the sun. "Yes. It is."

Samantha's nerves rose again. She really didn't know what to do. She was drawn to him in a way she'd never been drawn to a man before. The sex of Sunday night had been a mind and body altering experience. She didn't kid herself however. That wasn't the kind of thing long-standing relationships were built on. She wasn't interested in long-term, Sam told herself. She also didn't know if she could be the type of person she had tried be Sunday night. The only certainty in her mind at this point was that she couldn't be either kind of person with her boss.

The thing she was beginning to fear was that he'd make her break all her rules. She didn't know if her fear was of him or herself.

The light was just dying when he said, "I can tell I've upset you. I'm sorry. Would you like me to leave?"

Samantha started to say yes, but that would be a lie. She also knew if he stayed she'd be agreeing to more than dinner, she

knew by the way the nerves deep inside her were pulsating in response to the way he was looking at her. His desire was like a banked fire in his eyes.

"I should say yes. I should want you out of my apartment this minute."

He reached out a hand and touched her hair, then her cheek. She felt herself weakening at his touch. When his fingers caressed the line of her jaw, then edged slowly downward resting against the wildly beating pulse point at the base of her neck, she closed her eyes against the rush of sensation.

"But do you? Want me to leave?" His voice was like a brush of silk, cool against her hot senses.

She felt her body lean as if being pulled by a magnet to the opposite pole, but jerked back in the nick of time. Seconds longer and she would have been resting fully in his arms. As it was, he was so close to her she could see flecks of black in his blue eyes.

"Yes." She wimped out or she would have followed the screaming of her body down a path she already knew was lined with pleasure. "No."

He moved, as if her words were the only thing he had been waiting for. She was wrapped in his arms and could feel the heat radiating off him as if he was a furnace running full bore in the height of summer. Their lips melded, tongues dueling in a furious race.

Samantha let her body do the talking and it was screaming at her.

More of his delicious taste, skin against skin; it was an aphrodisiac she was afraid she would never have her fill of. She tasted cool mint with just the right amount of musky man as her mouth and tongue raced over every exposed inch of him.

Soon, though, just his face and neck weren't enough. She

had to have more. She began tracing her hands over his chest, sliding under one button and popping it free, then a second and a third until she could slide several fingers inside his shirt. His chest was hard, hot muscle, silky strong with just enough crisp hair in which to tangle her fingers.

When he pulled slightly away, she cried out her frustration.

"Just. A. Moment." He was as out of breath as she, thank God. "We've both got too many clothes on."

She couldn't smile at the desperation she heard in his voice, because she was just as desperate. She fumbled with her blouse. It shouldn't have been hard to remove. All she had to do was lower the two thin straps and it would fall right off her, but she couldn't make her thumb and fingers work together. Especially when he picked her up and took her breast, still encased in the clingy silk, and suckled her into his mouth.

"Oh, God," She cried as the wave of desire shook her, and wrapped her legs around his waist. She could feel the ridge of his hard penis as it brushed against her pants and wondered why she hadn't removed them first. Then, she lost all the ability to think as he moved to her other breast and suckled there, while rubbing and pinching the nipple he had just brought to stunning arousal. The feel of wet silk, his hand and mouth on her, was all it took to send her over the edge. She wrapped both arms around his neck as tightly as possible and held on.

She floated slowly down to earth, realizing she didn't know if she could unwrap her arms or legs. It was then she noticed he had stopped moving his hands and mouth on her. She absently wondered if she'd smothered him but knew from the hard ridge that was still prodding her stomach that he was far from dead. Mildly interested but still replete from her orgasm, she flexed her hips once, then twice, sliding up a little so that the ridge was now resting at her crotch.

He grunted and the world whirled on her. Suddenly she was lying on her back on her leather sofa. He stood over her, magnificent in the dying sunlight shining through her large living room windows. He unbuckled and unzipped his pants. She noticed the small stain, slightly darker than the material, and had no doubt that at some point he'd had some reaction to their lovemaking.

As his zipper slid down and his skin was slowly revealed she caught her breath. She'd seen him in the limo, but she'd been too drunk and too excited to notice too much. Now, she could revel in every inch exposed to her.

His penis was thick and jutting from a thick bed of black hair around his groin. The knob was leaking come steadily, and she licked her lips in anticipation of tasting him once again.

"Not this time," he murmured as he finished stripping. He reached down and tugged off her pants. His smile grew wide when he saw the thong panties she was wearing.

"You are just a bundle of surprises," he said, removing her panties and blouse. "But that will have to wait for another time."

He worked his way back down her body with his mouth and hands, kissing, biting, and licking all her key spots, including some she would have never thought as erogenous zones. By the time he reached her pussy, she was nearly weeping her desire. Her clit was swollen, and she could feel her juices beginning to seep out her hole.

"Please," she begged. "Eat me."

"Not this time," he countered. "This time when we come, I'm going to be so deep inside you that you'll think I'm going to split you in two."

His shirt hung open on him, and for a second Samantha wanted to freeze this picture of him in her mind for all time. He moved and spread her legs, bending them at the knees, placing

one on the back of the couch the other dangling off the edge.

She was open so wide she felt he could see to her womb. As he started forward, resting one of his knees on the couch, she took a deep breath. He was so huge she wondered if indeed she'd be able to take him all. Knowing she'd surely die if she couldn't.

"Shit," he said. "Don't move."

He backed away and picked up his pants. She saw him reach in the pocket and remove a condom. He quickly sheathed himself and moved forward again.

Again he stopped and just looked at her. Samantha wanted to grab his cock and pull him into her. She'd ride him like a jackhammer if necessary, but she really couldn't wait another minute.

"You really are gorgeous," he whispered as he eased forward, the tip of his cock rubbing against her outer lips, then slipping into her slit before sliding slowly home. She thrust upward just as he thrust down and felt as if her world were splitting in two. It was so perfect, so intense, it took everything she had to remain conscious.

He didn't give her time to relax or revel in the fill of him stretching her insides, but started pounding against her, his balls slapping against her pelvis, his penis moving inside her like a well-oiled piston.

In. Out.

In. Out.

Samantha never wanted it to end. She didn't know if she'd survive if it didn't soon.

She closed her eyes as her consciousness began to gray. Every nerve she had was throbbing to the pulse of his body.

Every beat of her heart mirrored the thrust of his body.

Every breath she took began and ended with him.

Just when she knew she could take no more, when breathing

no longer mattered, he spoke his words a quiet ricochet in her ears and through her mind.

"Come for me. Come for us."

Samantha obeyed and jumped over the edge with a scream of ecstasy. His exhalant shout as he reached his climax echoed through her apartment.

Chapter 6

It was completely dark by the time they made it to the kitchen, and Samantha started dinner. It should have felt strange cooking for him wearing only his shirt, and him just in his pants without shoes or socks. How could she feel shy after what they'd just shared?

Besides that, Kurt was an excellent helper. He set the table and didn't even tease her when she removed the food from its deli containers and put it on her own serving plates.

He even sensed Zip's inclination to sniff all the food containers when they were empty and left one on the kitchen floor for her, earning her purring approval.

As they sat down to eat, Samantha realized she had never enjoyed the getting dinner process more. Kurt laughed when she told him so.

"I know what you mean. Every couple of months I go on a healthy diet kick," he said, as they relaxed over their after-dinner wine. "I think I'm going to do more of my own cooking, try to cut down on the high fat food."

Samantha leaned her elbows on the table. "I do the same thing. But it never works out, does it?"

Kurt laughed. "Are you kidding? I usually only last about seventy-two hours."

"That's twenty-four more than I make it. I tell myself it's just because I hate to cook for one person."

"What's the real reason?"

Kurt's eyes twinkled. It made such an appealing picture that Samantha almost lost her train of thought. The Kurt who'd just spent the last few hours making her mindless with desire was sexy in a dangerous way. This Kurt was cute and appealing.

"Well, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I'm an absolute flop in the kitchen."

"Don't tell me you can't boil water," Kurt said.

"Well, of course I can boil water. It's just that I usually get caught up doing something else and forget I put it on the stove," Samantha paused and let Kurt's chuckle wash over her. It was so smooth, so full of life that it warmed her all the way to her soul.

"Ah, busy minds equal busy hands," he said.

"And what about you. What's your excuse?" she asked.

"What can I say? My momma raised me to be the perfect southern gentleman. I can't cook, but I also don't think less of you because you can't cook, either."

"Ah, not only a southern gentleman but a modern one as well."

They moved from the table into Samantha's living room. The lights of the park and the city were twinkling to life. Samantha felt a calm come over her, realizing she was content with her spot in the world and in this town. She told herself that wasn't because her body had just been truly and well loved, because she knew this wasn't about love. It had been about sex. Nothing else was allowed.

"What made a southern gentleman like you want to come to Buffalo?" she asked, looking over at Kurt. He stood bathed in the outside lights and looked exactly like what he was, a strong, confident, secure man whose world was his oyster. His skin glistened in the low glow of the lights inside her apartment, while the lights from outside highlighted the silver glints in his hair. Her body, which shouldn't even be thinking about such

things after the vigorous workout they'd shared, hummed back to life.

"Oh, lots of things. But how about the reputedly mild weather?"

Samantha laughed. "Yes. The Chamber of Commerce has been working long and hard on that one. Which commercial did you fall for? The one that says we don't get the snow, just the headlines? Or, perhaps it was the one that says we have more sunny days than most other cities in the nation?"

Kurt pretended to consider. "Actually, it was the one about the great food festivals."

"Ah, there's the Taste of Buffalo in the summer and the great Chicken Wing Ding. They always said the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. I guess the Chamber of Commerce decided to give that one a try, too."

"What can I say? I'm a simple man with simple desires." He moved and sat beside her on the couch. His gaze caressed her face, her neck, the bare spot of skin showing in opening of his shirt, and across her breasts, which tingled in awareness and finally on her legs. She took a deep breath and, in the name of sanity, moved from the couch to the chair beside it.

Samantha laughed. "No really, what brought you here? Your family owns several newspapers. Weren't there other openings in warmer climates?"

His sigh was lighthearted. "Determined to talk, huh?"

She laughed. "Yes. You may be ready for another go around, but I need some rest."

As her nipple pebbled in response to his heated gaze and in direct opposition to her words, he laughed.

"Okay. We can talk. Sure, I could have gone to another paper, but what's the challenge in that?"

"Is that what you're seeking? A challenge?"

"Absolutely. Don't you think we all need that?" He moved from the opposite end of the couch to the end closest to her. She could smell him, soap and man. Along with the lingering scent of him that was in his shirt wrapped around her, it took everything inside her to keep from narrowing the distance between them and picking up where they'd left off before dinner. "This town needs a strong paper. This paper needs a strong leader. I can give them both."

Samantha shook her head, and when some locks of hair fell across her chin, she reached to brush them away. He was quicker, and moved forward, walking on his knees so that he kneeled in front of her. All it took was one touch of his hand against her face and she was lost.

Their lips met and melded. He pulled the shirt off her, undid his pants then pulled her with him onto the floor. They moved together in tandem and before Samantha knew it they were reaching the summit and falling over again.

* * *

The next few days were a blur of activity for Samantha. There were no big breaking stories, but simply putting out the best daily sports section she and her staff could manage gave her a thrill. This was the part of the newspaper world that drew Samantha back each day.

When she was in journalism school, she remembered a hard-bitten political reporter coming to speak to her class. He'd said in passing that the world of a daily newspaper was like playing "Beat The Clock" every single day and starting from scratch. With nearly a decade of experience, she'd only change his comment slightly. Being at a big city newspaper was like playing "Beat the Clock" seven times a day, seven times a week. Even though she enjoyed the pace and the challenge of her job, Samantha knew that part of her mind was elsewhere at this point.

It had been three days since her dinner with Kurt. Three days since she had seen or heard from him. Three days since they'd spent each other in every physical way possible.

She should be happy. Her hormones, which had been dead for quite some time BK, *Before Kurt*, were satisfied. Or, they should have been. Instead, it was like they were a sleeping giant, newly awakened and ravenous. A hundred times a day she thought about calling him or even going up to his office for a quickie.

That would have made the office gossips break all records.

Even though she managed to do her job, and she hoped, with no one knowing the turmoil going on inside of her, she also knew she was driving herself crazy.

Neither could she stop thinking about him at home either despite the fact that she hadn't seen hide or hair of him there. She knew he was planning a lot of changes to the first floor but he couldn't do the remodeling until after he closed on the house in a little more than two weeks.

Now, as she sat at her desk just before leaving for the day, she chewed on her fingernail. Maybe she should wander up to the fifth floor. She could always say she was just getting a cup of coffee or tea.

Stop it, she chided herself, *just go on with your life. You got along fine for thirty years without him. You can get along for three days.*

Shaking off the introspection, she turned back to the spreadsheet on her computer terminal. She double-checked the expense voucher totals with the number on her calculator, saw that she hadn't made a typo, put her initials on the bottom, then sent it via inter-office e-mail to payroll. Per the new procedures Kurt had instituted, he would get an automatic copy for his records. Samantha had no idea if he viewed his e-mail every day,

or only when he was in the office.

Today was Friday. Barring any major problems, she had the rest of tonight and all of tomorrow off. Sunday was a home football game. Although technically she wouldn't be working—the sports editor didn't actually cover any events—she would be at the stadium, arriving a little bit before the one o'clock kickoff. The paper's photographers would already be on the field, ready to catch all the color and pageantry of the game. Her writers and columnists would be in the pressbox with their portable computers, ready to report every kick, run, pass and tackle.

Her job was to make certain everything went smoothly for her people to do their jobs behind the scenes. Sometimes that meant soothing an irate owner or team manager for a previously reported story or column. Sometimes that meant keeping her sometimes volatile and always competitive staff focused on the task at hand.

It was thrilling. It was irritating. It was challenging. She wouldn't trade it for anything.

But for tonight and tomorrow, her time was her own. She smiled a little as she thought about what she would do.

Her mother would tell her the first thing on her list should be cleaning her apartment. But, although she was her mother's daughter in many ways, worrying about a clean house was not one of them. As long as the dust remained bunnies and not elephants, they made perfect toys for Zip.

Since it was a perfect early evening, the lure of the park was always a welcome thought. She could take a jog or simply enjoy walking around the zoo. When she stopped at the light in front of the entrance to the zoo and watched as a family walked across the street intent on that very pleasure, Samantha felt a little pain in the region of her heart. Maybe the jog was the better idea today.

She parked in her spot behind her building and was about to climb the steps to the front door when she noticed that it was held open with a brick. She frowned.

The door was one of the automatic locking ones insuring the only people who could get in had a key.

She had a feeling she was about to get her first glimpse of Kurt. A few seconds later, a new compact SUV pulled up and Kurt hopped out. He popped the back hatch open and walked around to open the passenger doors.

"Hi there. Want to grab a box or two?"

He looked good. No, she thought again, he looked great. Wearing khaki shorts and a red T-shirt that molded his chest and flat stomach faithfully, his bare legs and arms were tanned, muscular, and covered lightly with dark hair. On his feet were a pair of scruffy-looking sneakers and white athletic socks that bagged down around the ankles. It was a perfect combination of healthy little boy and mature man. She felt like drooling.

"Moving in today?" Samantha was proud of how calm she sounded, given the way her heart was racing. She walked over to his car and picked up a small box. He stacked several and lifted them with ease, the muscles in his forearms flexing effortlessly. She knew what they felt like flexed and at rest—flexed when he'd been holding his weight on his arms as his hips pistoned in and out of her, resting when they'd been wrapped around her waist.

She hastily averted her eyes, looking at the box in her hands, instead of going with what her libido was crying for and jumping him on the sidewalk.

"Yeah. Since the owner has already moved out, we put it in the contract for me to move in early. Of course, I can't do any work until we actually close, but at least I can start living here. I'm planning on moving a few things in tonight. I'll do the rest

tomorrow. I didn't want to have to pay for moving and storage, so I sold everything before I left Kansas City."

Kurt's eyes twinkled. Samantha was drawn to them like a magnet's north and south poles. She stopped herself short from leaning into him and seeing if the smile that was crossing his lips would taste as good as it looked. Licking suddenly dry lips she said, "Is this everything then?"

"Gosh no. Even living in an apartment I managed to gather a lot of junk," he tilted his head toward his car. "This is my second trip from the apartment here. And I've still got a couple to go."

"I could help if you'd like. I don't have anything important planned tonight."

Why did I say that?

"That'd be great. To pay you back, I'll buy your dinner."

Samantha winced, then nodded. Kurt didn't see either as he was moving toward the door. "Let me put these down and then I'll take the box you've got. You can go get into something that won't get grunged up, if you'd like, before I really put you to work."

Samantha followed him up the steps, into the house, and into the large apartment that took up the entire first floor. "You know, I think I may have been suckered."

"Don't think that. At least not until you hear the kicker."

She looked around at the apartment. Gone was the old-fashioned, heavy furniture that the previous owners had favored. In its place were boxes and boxes sitting all around on the freshly waxed and polished wood floors. She could see in her mind what changes she'd make if this was her house. She'd put new energy efficient windows in place of the old-fashioned wooden windows that were on the large front room to showcase the view of the park but keep the Victorian flavor of the house.

The walls would be painted a fresh cream color that would be a perfect foil for the dark wood molding and intricate trim work that was in abundance throughout the apartment.

"What kicker?" she asked absently managing to hide her sigh at what would never be hers now. "Are you planning on staying here tonight?"

Kurt stood and stroked his chin. "Let's see, two questions at once. I can tell you were a reporter before you became an editor."

Samantha blushed. "Well, yes. And sorry, it's really none of my business."

"Don't apologize. I don't blame you. It does look like it's missing something, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Like chairs, tables, and lights."

"Not to mention a bed." He laughed again. "I don't own any furniture of my own. Check that. I don't have any furniture. That's being rectified tomorrow morning. The furniture store promised to bring everything at eight. Want to take any bets on what time they'll actually get here?"

Samantha laughed. "That depends. Are you a habitually early riser or do you like to sleep in on Saturday's."

Again his eyes gleamed, but the light there was much deeper than a twinkle. "It all depends on my incentive for sleeping in."

She placed her index finger against her bottom lip, hoping he couldn't tell she was starting to feel her wetness dampening her panties. This whole conversation was turning into a double entendre. "I'm betting you're an early riser."

"Oh yeah," he said softly. "Especially when I have a beautiful woman lying with me."

Samantha couldn't hold his gaze. She looked back out the windows. She could feel him staring at her and did her best not

to squirm.

When he spoke again, he was much closer to her. In fact, she could feel his breath brush the tendrils of hair on her neck. "Now, what would you like to collect for your winnings?"

A kiss.

She felt his lips at her neck and barely managed to shiver. It was if he'd read her thoughts. She wasn't ready for this. She needed some space.

Just as his hands settled at her waist, she pulled away, smiling slightly.

"I'll go get changed. Then we'll get busy."

She ran up the stairs and changed her clothes, opting for a pair of worn but comfortable jeans and a jersey-type T-shirt. On her feet she wore her favorite sneakers. Not wanting to take the time to mess with her hair, she simply left it in the French twist she favored for work.

She ran back down the stairs and found the SUV empty and Kurt just re-locking his apartment door.

"Wow, that was quick," Kurt said. She felt his gaze move over her and saw his wonderful smile again. It warmed her from the inside out. Not that she needed any warming after that near embrace in his apartment.

"What?" she asked.

"You look good. No, great," he said. "Too good to be doing manual labor."

She blushed a little. "Hey, just because I prefer to use my brain to make my way in the world, doesn't mean I can't get down and do the everyday stuff with the best of them."

"Oh, I don't doubt that you're great at anything you attempt," his voice sounded sincere. "I'm thinking though I should feed you before I put you to work."

"Well, I'm definitely going to demand food for payment,

but I'm not really hungry," she said. "Are you?"

"No. Actually I wanted to make at least one more trip tonight."

"Okay. Then let's hit it." She headed for the truck then stopped. "Wait a minute. I forgot. What about that kicker you were talking about before?"

"Darn." He snapped his fingers in chagrin. "I thought you had forgotten about that."

"Not likely. Spill the beans."

"You sure you wouldn't rather have a surprise?" he asked. "You know, surprises add spice to life."

"Nada."

"Okay. Just remember you've already promised to help me. It would be unsportsmanlike to renege now."

Samantha clapped her hand to her forehead in mock dismay. "Now I know I'm in trouble."

Kurt laughed. The sound sent little ripples of pleasure down Samantha's spine. Vaguely she wondered how he did that. No other man's laughter affected her quite that way.

"It's just that some of my stuff isn't exactly packed away yet," he said, taking her hand and pulling her again to his car. He opened the passenger door and helped her inside.

"Define exactly."

He grinned.

"Answer this. Is any of the stuff you still have at your apartment packed in boxes?"

"What is it coaches like to say? No comment?"

Samantha groaned. "You didn't need help moving, you wanted help packing."

"Well, that might be technically correct, but..."

"But nothing, I've been suckered," Samantha tried to keep the smile from spreading across her face. She could feel one side

of her mouth twitching, though.

"Remember you promised to help even though I hadn't given you all the details."

"I know, I know. I'm not going to renege. But, you have to realize how much I truly hate packing. Why do you think most of my stuff is still at my parents' even though I've lived here for years?"

Kurt grinned. "Well, just think of this as practice." He closed the door, walked around the front of his truck, and got in the drivers' side. "In case you ever decide to go get all your old stuff and move it here."

"That won't happen," Samantha assured him. "Besides, I was serious the other night. Since you now own this place I really should move."

He took his eyes off the heavy traffic that was Parkside Avenue on an early fall Friday night. "Are you serious about this?"

Samantha sighed. "Yes. I think I have to be."

Kurt was quiet as he took advantage of a break in traffic, made a left out of their driveway and turned onto the expressway that skirted the western edge of the park. He took the first exit to get to Military Road, weaving around the urban streets of the city's Elmwood District finally stopping at a large utilitarian apartment building.

Samantha looked around at the houses that surrounded his building. Although this section of Military was largely commercial, it was still considered one of the more hip addresses in the city.

"You didn't like living here?" she asked.

"It was okay. I didn't like paying rent," he said, pulling smoothly into a spot right in front of his building. That was a handy trick considering that most of the residences on this street

didn't have driveways or off-street parking. "Not when housing is so reasonable in this area. Also there is the parking problem."

Samantha nodded. He was right about the price. Housing was reasonable in all of Western New York. The Elmwood and Parkside Districts of Buffalo were the exceptions. Both were considered premium not only because of their location, but because most of the houses were in the grand manor of the 1901 Exposition. Some of the houses were on the historic rolls, but even the family homes garnered top prices.

Their house was a prime example of the Parkside real estate market. Since Samantha had been trying to crunch her budget for months to make the numbers work out, she knew exactly how much Kurt had purchased it for.

Their house. The phrase rang in Samantha's mind with a resonance she didn't want to focus on. It wasn't their house. It was his house. Now.

"I agree. I have been thinking of buying a house myself," she said.

"So what's been holding you back?"

"Well, mostly it's a matter of money," she admitted. "I want to have a large enough down payment so that I don't have to pay all the fees. And I also want to be able to fix things should they need fixing up."

"Are you a weekend warrior?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I asked if you were a weekend warrior. You know, like to do home repair on your weekends?"

Samantha laughed. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't know which end of a hammer you're supposed to use. That's why I said I'd need money. I'd hire all the work done."

"Oh," he said. "You know, I'm kind of handy. I could probably teach you some things if you'd like. Just so you

wouldn't be dependent on someone you hire for everything. Once you get your own place, I mean."

"I don't think we'll really have that much time, do you?"

"Well, it depends how close you are to finding your house," he answered.

"Well, to be honest, I was going to buy the house I was living in."

Kurt smiled. "I could sell it to you. With a slight markup, of course."

"Of course. You know what I make. If I couldn't afford the previous owners' price, how could I afford yours? With a markup, of course?"

"I'm sure we could come to some kind of an arrangement?" He waggled his eyebrows in such a comical fashion Samantha laughed out loud as he led her up the sidewalk to his building.

"Yeah, right. You've got me packing up your stuff for a lousy dinner. I can't imagine what your price would be for a house."

Now the look he gave her was anything but comical. "You're slandering my dinner when I haven't even told you what it is? That's not very obliging." He paused. "And I'm sure we could work out some kind of deal between us."

Samantha shrugged. "I think you'll find that I'm not normally obliging. At least not without good cause."

Kurt laughed. "I love it. That's the perfect response for the hard-bitten sports editor of a major newspaper. A woman who has to keep all the balls rolling when most of the staff and the world around her expects her to fail miserably."

Samantha sobered.

"Is that how you see me? Hard, driven?"

He paused while unlocking his door. "No, I was just teasing. Not that I think being hard or driven are character flaws."

Samantha smiled, but she knew it wouldn't be reflected in her eyes. "I hear a 'but' in there."

He shrugged. "I really shouldn't say anything. I don't know you well enough."

"But you know my type?"

"Yes. I've been in the business a long time. It takes a certain level of intensity, focus, and determination to become a sports editor at a paper this size. You have that level and more."

He opened the door and stepped inside. She stayed in the hall. "You think that intensity and determination is unattractive in a woman?"

"Not at all." She could tell by his stance, his sudden focus on her that he realized how serious she was taking this discussion. "I'm just saying I'm not surprised you have reached this point."

"For a woman?"

"Samantha, don't put words in my mouth. I'm not insulting you. Believe me, I know just exactly what kind of woman you are."

She stilled. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm just saying I don't know how you can run so hot and cold all the time. It's a wonder you can manage your department."

"Hot and cold?" Her anger was almost blinding. "You think I'm hot and cold? What the hell does that mean?"

"Don't be naïve. One minute you're all over me like white on rice. The next you're acting like a vestal virgin." He moved to the front door.

"White on rice? Vestal virgin? That's insulting."

"I don't mean it to be. I'm just trying to tell you that you don't have to play the tease with me," he said. "I like what I see. I certainly am attracted, so why play all these games? Let's just

enjoy each other. You wash my back, I'll wash yours. And anything else you'd like washed."

"I think I want to pass. Not only on helping you pack but on dinner as well," she said. "Will you call me a cab?"

He sighed. "Don't be unreasonable. Let's talk this out."

She shook her head and battled back tears that were ridiculously brimming in her eyes. "Thank you, no. But if you'd rather get to work, I'll call a cab."

She turned to head back down the stairs. "Samantha, come on. Don't be like this. We have the start of a good thing going. Don't blow it trying to be something you aren't."

She shook her head and ran lightly down the stairs. She couldn't wait for him to take her home or to call a cab. She ran down his walkway and down the street to Military. Luckily, she saw a cab cruising around the corner and hailed it. She got in, gave her address, and turned just in time to see him standing and staring after her.

She had known this was going to be trouble. She should have listened to her instincts.

Chapter 7

Kurt had made some phenomenal mistakes his life. Never like the one he'd made Friday night, though.

He sat in his new home and looked around at the boxes scattered everywhere. He should be excited. He should be so busy he had no time to think. His new furniture was here and he should be busy making this his new home.

Instead, he stood in the nearly dark house and nursed a drink. He looked across the street at the darkened park and wondered again what Samantha was doing.

When he'd returned Friday night with the last load of his stuff, the lights in her upstairs apartment had been off.

He wasn't proud, but he'd checked to see if her car was there. It wasn't.

He told himself he was just worried that she had gotten home safe. Then, he'd berated himself for being worried. After all, he'd seen her get into the cab himself. She'd lived in Buffalo much longer than him. How much trouble could she get in just going the half-mile between the two places? And why was he worrying about it now? It was over. Had been over for nearly forty-eight hours. *Get over it*, he ordered himself.

He started to turn back to his unpacking when he heard a sound. It was quiet, hardly more than a murmur, but he was almost running across the room to the door. He pulled it open, swearing a little when one of the still-unpacked boxes impeded its progress. He tugged hard and the box slid the needed distance

across the wood floor to allow him to open the door.

She stood in the half-light of the hall and he swallowed hard to clear the constriction in his throat.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he replied.

Their eyes met and held. Soon, much too soon for him to see what he wanted...no, *needed* to see, she looked away.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," she said. "This door has a bad habit of slamming if you let it go too soon."

"You didn't," he replied, "disturb me, I mean. I was just doing some unpacking."

"Oh." She looked like she was going to say something else. He was disappointed when she remained silent.

"Well, sorry to bother you," she said finally and started up the steps.

"Wait." He knew he sounded desperate, but he didn't care. When she stopped on the second step, he walked over and reached for her hand, holding on for dear life. The feel of her skin against his warmed him inside and out. She resisted, but only briefly, and when she didn't pull away entirely, he counted it a huge victory.

Now, how to begin? "I'll fix the door. Are there any other problems that need fixing around here?"

Great, just brilliant strategy, Boscoe, he thought. He held his breath, waiting for her to give him his walking papers.

* * *

Samantha looked at Kurt and wondered what it was about this man that made him so attractive to her. He made her want to toss her top rule—mixing business and pleasure—out the window without a second thought. Worse, now that he was touching her, she felt her heartbeat speed up and her skin dampen with the perspiration of desire.

It would have been tough to ignore the way he attracted her when she only had to worry about meeting him at the office. Now, he was invading her personal life as well.

Being his tenant should be every nightmare come true. As she had trudged through apartment after apartment in the real estate listings in the paper, she came to a realization: she didn't want to leave. She told herself that was because the available apartments were not as nice as hers, that the rents were too high and she should be trying to find something to buy instead of another rental.

The truth, which she'd finally admitted when she had been sitting in the press box at the end of the football game this afternoon, had nothing to do with the apartments and everything to do with her landlord.

She'd been so mad, so hurt when he'd said she was inconsistent. When she'd finally calmed down, about three that morning, she'd realized he'd been right and wrong. If she had any gumption, any courage, she'd prove to him just how wrong he'd been.

Courage, there was root of the whole problem. She lacked courage. Kurt didn't know her. Well, they both knew each other in the most intimate physical terms, but physical was only half the battle. He didn't know her personally. She didn't know him, either.

She also knew that although this mess with Kurt had started on her birthday when she wanted to prove something to herself, the need to find something different in her life had started long before.

She had never considered herself a sensualist. Kurt had opened a side to her life she never dreamed possible. Despite her fears, it was a side she really wanted to explore more. She owed it to herself to discover if the woman she became around him

was an anomaly, or a part of her that had been buried her entire adult life.

She vowed that she would be just like a man. Just like Kurt. She would explore this new side of herself with no strings attached. If Kurt was a willing partner, so be it. Why cut off her nose to spite her face, so to speak? She didn't have the time or the energy to go hunting for another man. He was here. He surely wouldn't be bothered by her work since it would only benefit him. There was also the fact they were combustible in the bedroom. Would the sensual new woman let a little thing like professional concerns rob her of an adept and stunning lover?

Now, she had to figure out how to tell him without making it seem she was desperate. Men had been doing this for centuries. Thankfully, never before to her, but what the heck, she was a modern, motivated woman. How hard could it be? She'd just say, "Baby, let's make love."

No, not love. Sex. This was simply about sex. It was all he wanted, and it was all she needed. Maybe, though, she could get him to ask.

"Please don't fix the door or anything on my account," she said.

"I don't mind. I want everything to be perfect."

She looked at him for several long seconds.

"I've been looking for apartments," she said, prolonging the moment when she'd ask him to come upstairs with her. "Unfortunately it seems I've picked the worst time of the year to look."

She thought she heard him sigh. After a moment, when he spoke, she was certain she'd imagined it.

"Well, there's no reason to hurry," he said. "After all, it could work out just fine that I'm your landlord now."

"But..." Samantha began.

"No, let me finish. You know as well as I do that if you take anything that's available you're going to regret it, right? What about Zip? How's she going to feel if you move into someplace that's not appropriate, and then you have to move right away again? Cats are very territorial, you know."

"I know." Samantha winced and dipped her chin, acceding his point. She wondered if he even realized he still held her hand. She couldn't help thinking about how it felt, their fingers and palms fitting together so easily. Their hands entwined made her remember how it had felt when their entire bodies had been entwined. She felt a thrumming of desire curl through her.

"Also, think of it this way. You were going to buy this place, right?"

She felt hope rising and falling. When was he going to get off apartments and on to the important stuff?

"Buying is a sound notion. It makes financial sense, it's an investment and it gives you a nice tax deduction."

"I know all that," Samantha replied.

"Why would you want to move to another rental unit when you should be concentrating on finding a good place of your own? That's not a wise business strategy."

She chewed a moment on her index and thumbnails. She hoped she looked pensive. In fact, she was trying to hold back her laugh. This was going so much better than she expected. He was giving her a way to stay without having to ask. Now all she had to do was change the subject from the boring house hunt to the more important matter of their relationship.

"I'll consider it," she said. "Now..."

"You should more than consider it. You've got a stable job, a good income—I should know—and ties to the community. There's no reason to still be renting."

Samantha laughed. "Are you sure you came up through the

ranks in sales?"

"Why?" Kurt seemed perplexed at the sudden change of topic.

"Because you're trying to convince me to take money out of your pocket. You're now my landlord. Convincing me to buy my own house is leaving you with an empty rental unit. That's not a very good sales strategy."

Kurt smiled. "I just want you to be happy. If I had my way, you'd be my tenant forever, but since you seem adamant about moving, you might as well do something smart."

Samantha threw up her hands. "There's a flaw in this reasoning somewhere. Either I'm too tired after looking at dozens of terrible apartments yesterday and the Bills game this afternoon, or something, but I can't figure it out."

"Does that mean you agree? That we should start house hunting?" She thought he looked a little bit like Zippy after she had a bowl full of cream.

"Where's the 'we' come in? I can look for a house myself."

Kurt placed his other hand over their joined ones. The desire that had been simmering inside her kicked up another notch.

"Sure you can, but if you go with someone else, they can deflect all the agent speak so you can concentrate on finding the perfect place for you."

"Look, I really don't want to talk about this now."

"Oh. Okay," he said. She didn't know if he realized it, but his fingers were playing with hers. It was a delicious little movement of skin against skin that was ridiculously arousing. She wondered how he'd react if she took one of his hands to her mouth and started kissing those fingers.

"Samantha, I want to apologize for what I said Friday about you running hot and cold," he said.

She took a deep breath. Now they were at the root of the problem. It was time to let him know what she had decided.

"I accept your apology," she said, "but it isn't necessary now. What you said is the truth. Since I met you, I have been running hot and cold. I wasn't ready to hear it when you said it, but after thinking about it Saturday and today, I know you're right. After the way we first met, too..."

"Which was amazing," he said.

"Yeah, but it was totally unlike me," she replied.

He drew her closer to him. She could feel his body heat and smell his desire. "I don't care. That night was absolutely amazing. I wouldn't change a thing about it. When I said you ran hot and cold, I didn't mean it in a bad way. Most women I know run hot and cold. They like to tease a man into wanting them."

She shook her head. What he thought was another example of how different they were. She was probably trying to tilt windmills in keeping a relationship with him going. One hand was holding both of hers. The other was stroking along the inside of her elbow, sending little pulses throughout her body.

"I've never been like most women, though," she said. She had to explain before she jumped his bones. "I've never played those games. When we met at the party, well, I was having something of a bad day. It was my birthday."

He stilled. "Happy belated birthday."

"Thank you. Anyway, I was feeling a little low, feeling like I'd been missing everything in life. I wanted to just let go."

"You should have said something sooner. Not that I minded because when you let go, lady, it's something to behold."

Samantha laughed. "You see. That's only happened with you. But now you've created a monster. I can't go back to the way I was before."

The line between his eyebrows furrowed. "So what does

that mean?"

"It means I want to be your lover," she said, holding her breath. "No strings attached."

The silence that met her bald statement of the facts was deafening.

"Wow," he finally said.

"Well, that's the one answer I absolutely didn't expect," Samantha replied. "But it's also pretty telling."

She started to head upstairs.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"To my apartment. Obviously you need some time to think about my offer."

* * *

"So, Zip," she said later in her room as she lay on the bed and talked to her cat. "Talk about putting your foot in your mouth. I really did it this time."

Zip just stared.

"I mean of all the completely uncouth ways to do it, I had to blurt it out standing on the stairs. I should have asked him to dinner, or to come up here with me. I could have turned on some music, fixed him a drink. That would have been setting the stage. Instead, I just blurt it out. What an idiot."

Zip rolled over on her side and fell asleep, showing what she thought of Samantha's problems. Samantha groaned and pulled a pillow over her head. Was nothing going to go right with this man?

Suddenly a knock exploded against her door, scaring Zip under the bed and sending Sam's heart racing.

She jumped up and raced into the living room. When she opened the door, Kurt pulled her into his arms and kissed her senseless.

When they finally broke the kiss, he walked her back a few

steps and slammed the door with his foot.

"I hope that's a yes," she gasped just before he took her lips again.

They worked their way to her couch, hands pulling off shirts and blouses, pants, and underclothes. Finally they stood naked. His cock was standing full and proud. He shuddered in reaction when she touched one finger to its head, then ran her hand down its shaft to where it met the bed of springy black hair on his groin.

She fell to her knees and looked up at him. He was so lean, so masculine with cleanly defined muscles rippling under his toned, brown skin that she felt as if she could look at him forever and never tire of the sight. She cupped his sack and brought her face closer to him. His musk was like a drug and she was low on a fix.

Bringing her face closer to him, she ran her tongue over the crease between his testicles. She then pulled first one, then the other, into her mouth. She felt him thrust his hips forward and heard his moan. She kept up the sucking motion for a few seconds, then blew lightly across him as she released his sack from her mouth. Then she traced her tongue slowly up the tender cord of skin between his sac and his cock. When she reached the base, she replaced her mouth with her hand, wrapping it around his surging length.

"Oh, God, Samantha," he moaned. "Take me."

She let her fingers play in his slit, rubbing the drop of pre-come around the head with light motions. She felt powerful in that moment, and the feeling was heady. She knew this man would let her do whatever she wanted for as long as she wanted.

Right now, what she wanted was Kurt, every hard, hot, and handsome inch of him. With one last gentle caress over his length, she put her hand against his chest and pushed. He fell

against the couch. She crawled from the floor and straddled his hips. When her outer lips brushed across him, he shivered. She rose on her knees and leaned forward, nipping gently at his tiny nipples. He groaned and flexed his hips upward, sliding the tip of his cock just inside her pussy, but she didn't want him there yet. There was too much glorious hard flesh to be explored. She tensed her pelvic muscles, holding him still and keeping her inner canal closed to him.

"Samantha," he moaned. "Please."

She laughed. It sounded low almost sultry to her and for a moment she didn't recognize the sound as coming from her.

She tongued her way across his chest from one nipple to the other, thinking only of how his skin felt like hard satin and tasted like a delicious meal. She moved slowly, lingering over him, following the line of his hair as it moved its way down from its pectorals, over his abs, and down to his cock. *Mustn't get sidetracked there*, she thought dreamily, working her way back up his chest.

The muscles in his forearms and biceps were quivering, as if begging for her touch. She obliged, massaging first with her hands, then her mouth. When she tongued the crease on the front of his elbow, he shivered in delight and she laughed again at the feeling running through her.

But, it wasn't just humor, for she was quivering as well. Her pussy lips were twitching and it was taking more and more of her concentration to keep him locked in place. Inside her, but oh so not inside her. Her clit was swollen nearly twice its normal size, and she could feel the juices from her womb clamoring for release as the nerves deep inside her pulsed with excitement.

Finally, when she knew she couldn't stand it any more, when sweat had joined her saliva in bathing his entire body, she allowed herself to sink fully down on his cock.

Her vision grayed at the feeling of him stretching her canal and thrusting so deep inside her. His hands, which had been fisted into the material covering the couch cushions the entire time, moved and grabbed her hips pulling her so tight against him that her clit could feel the hair around his groin. The light scrape of it against nerves that were screaming for release was all it took to send her over the edge. She ground herself against him and felt her climax begin deep inside her. She groaned and met his lips for a mind-altering kiss. She felt his cock grow even larger, then release his seed in waves of ecstasy.

As she lay on his chest, she felt his hand moving slowly up her back as they caught their breath.

What a way to begin our affair.

Chapter 8

Samantha was studying the choices the photo editor had decreed would work with the upcoming Sunday center spread when the phone at her elbow rang.

She marked her place in the stack of laser printed proofs and picked up the handset.

"Hello," she said.

"Samantha, am I catching you on deadline?" Her mother rarely called at work, but when she did, she always asked the same question. To Samantha's mother her job in journalism was an anomaly. Her parents were dairy farmers. Her grandparents had been dairy farmers. Her brother was a dairy farmer. Her sisters had married farmers.

She had been the first person in her family to attend a liberal arts college and her parents had been thrilled when, as a freshman, she announced that she wanted to be a lawyer. The only thing better, especially in her mother's mind, would have been doctor...or marrying one.

They had been shocked and surprised when she suddenly announced midway through her freshman year that she was going to be a newspaper journalist.

Although they were proud she was a sports editor, they were pretty clueless about what she did and how she did it. Though she had painstakingly showed them around the newsroom, composing room, and pressroom, explaining each stage of the publishing process to them, the whole idea of putting

out a daily newspaper was like living in another world to them.

Her mother, especially, thought *The Planet*—thus Samantha—was under a constant minute-by-minute deadline. She'd given up trying to explain.

"Hi, Mom. No, this is fine. What's going on?"

"Oh, dear, you know how it is. Nothing ever changes when you're retired. We're just waiting to be able to bounce our grandchildren on our knees."

Samantha winced. Maybe she should start lying and telling her mother she was on deadline. At least it would stop these increasingly frequent phone calls. Of course, she could tell her mother the truth. She could almost see her mother's face if she told her what she and Kurt had done Sunday in her apartment.

"Mother, you know I don't have time for children with my career."

"That didn't stop your sister-in-law Beth. She had her career and a family, too," her mother replied.

"Beth was the manager at a department store. That's a little different than being a sports editor."

"I know that." Samantha could almost see her mother waving her hand in dismissal. It was a habit when she thought one of her kids was trying to get her to change the subject.

"You can't tell me every editor at *The Planet* is single. Why, just last month that nice features editor came and talked to our ladies auxiliary. After he was done, he showed everyone pictures of his new baby."

"Is that the reason you called?" Samantha was ready to hang up. Although she wasn't on deadline, she simply didn't have time for an argument with her mother over something like this.

"Of course not. I just want you to be happy. In order for that to happen you have to stop spending all of your time at the paper and get out and meet young people. Why, by the time I was your

age, I had already had two children."

Samantha sighed. As proud as her parents were of her career, her mother was beginning to sound like a hammer hitting an anvil on the subject of her all-work-no-play lifestyle, even though that lifestyle had changed drastically over the last two weekends. Maybe she should tell her mother about Kurt. She could just leave out the details.

"Mom, please don't start," Samantha began. "Besides, you've got Tom and Beth, Daniel and Denise all have kids. How many grandchildren do you need?"

"Now, now, dear. You know I am only teasing. Somewhat. Like your father says you can never have too much money or too many grandchildren. Anyway, your father and I do worry about the long hours you put in there. You're young and in the prime of your life. You need to have some time to relax. Why, just the other day I saw Mrs. Bishop at the market. You'll never believe what happened to Cindy."

Samantha sighed and rolled her head from one side of her shoulders to the other to relieve the pressure that was building in her neck. Her mother delighted in telling her stories about childhood friends, their ups and downs, always managing to bring the subject around to grandchildren or husbands and wives. It seemed, at least according to her mother, that Samantha was the only single person left on the earth.

Again, she thought about Kurt. What would her mother would think about the fact that he was her landlord, her boss, and had appointed himself her own personal real estate agent. He'd found the perfect house for her to look at, according to the inter-office memo he'd sent her just a few moments ago. She'd been ready to cancel it—she wasn't really interested—but now it was the perfect excuse to keep from going out to the farm early. Wonder what her mother would say if she told her she had a date

to look at houses with a man who had given her more orgasms than she'd had in all her other relationships combined?

She giggled at the thought.

"I'm sorry, dear, did I say something funny?"

Her mother's words brought her back to the present.

"Uh, no, Mom. It's just that I'm a little distracted at the moment. I've got a meeting and it's about to start. I didn't say anything before because I did have a few minutes..." Samantha trailed off, hoping her mother would graciously accept the defeat.

"Well, that's okay. Your father said I was bothering you. I probably shouldn't call you at work, but you get home so late, that I can't stay awake."

"No, Mom, I've told you to call me whenever you want. It isn't a problem. Was there anything else you wanted to tell me?"

"I just wanted to see if you were coming for dinner Sunday."

"Sure. What time would you like me to come? Around one?"

"Certainly. We can wait until then. Or, you can always come Saturday night. Your father and I are going to the Rotarian's banquet. You know there are some nice young men who just joined our club. It would be the perfect chance for you to meet some of them."

Samantha winced. Her mother never gave up.

"Uh, I'd love to, but I've got an appointment to look at a house Sunday morning. I don't know how long it will take."

"A house? Why that's wonderful," her mother exclaimed. "But does that mean you've given up trying to buy the house your apartment is in?"

"Yes. Someone else bought it."

"Oh. I'm sorry, dear. An older couple?"

"Uh no. Actually it's the new publisher at *The Planet*."

"Really?"

Samantha heard the interest climb a notch in her mother's voice. *Time to hit the road, girl.*

"Uh, Mom, I've really got to go. The meeting's about to start."

"All right, dear. See you Sunday."

Samantha hung up, knowing that Sunday she was in for the grilling of her life. For a moment, she wished she could find a way, any way to avoid dinner with her parents.

* * *

Samantha looked at the house on Buffalo's Riverside District and tried not to release the sigh. This was simply unacceptable.

She looked over as Kurt's realtor, Joe O'Hara, and Kurt stood talking to the home's current owner. Was this really the only type of house and neighborhood she could afford on her budget? If so, she was definitely better off renting.

The house was old, which was what she had wanted. So, she couldn't blame the realtor about that, but rather than the stately old neighborhoods that surrounded Delaware Park, this neighborhood was definitely on the decline.

She looked around at the varying states of disrepair the houses on each side of the one she had finished walking through showed. She knew you couldn't control how your neighbors kept up their properties, but she also knew that signs of disrepair showed a lack of disposable income. How could something that was supposed to be an investment maintain that promise when the rest of the neighborhood was sliding?

She shuddered when she looked at the house itself. Joe not only had helped Kurt push through the deal on their house, but he was a good friend of Kurt's from college. Joe had seemed so

upbeat when they had picked him up this morning. He said he'd found the perfect place, that it only needed a few minor upgrades. Well, Samantha was no handyman or inspector, but she had been able to tell at first glance that the wiring was shot, the plumbing was ancient, and the kitchen floor had a decided slant to it.

She watched as Kurt and Joe walked down the driveway toward Samantha. She felt a little tingle inside every time she saw Kurt. She was seriously beginning to think she might be addicted to sex because all she could seriously think about when she was in his presence was jumping his bones.

"Well," Joe said. "What'd you think?"

For a moment Sam was befuddled, thinking Joe was asking her about jumping Kurt. That's what raging hormones did to a girl.

"This absolutely won't do," Samantha said, nodding at the house. "If this is what the other two houses that you wanted me to see are like, then I think I need to get a new realtor."

Joe looked pained. Kurt looked considering.

"It wasn't that bad," he said, leading them to his car.

"Huh. Maybe if I was Samantha Villa," she said after they were inside and headed back to Niagara Street, the main cross street that would take them out of the Riverside section. "Or had a couple of hundred thousand dollars for renovations."

"I don't think it would take that much," Kurt said. "Probably fifty or sixty thousand tops. It really does have great bones, though. There wasn't a crack anywhere in the foundation."

"Yeah? What about the roof? Didn't you see the water spots on the bedroom ceiling?" she asked as she looked broodingly out the passenger side window. She had to look out the window. If she didn't, she would look at the way Kurt's jeans faithfully

molded his package. She could just imagine reaching across the console between their seats, undoing his button fly and...

"That very well could be decades old," he said. *The house. He's talking about the house.* "Didn't you say the roof was only four or five years old, Joe?"

"Uh, yes. That's what's on the listing."

Samantha looked at Kurt's face and rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to argue with you guys." She twisted and looked in the back at Joe. She thought she saw him exchange a strange look in the rearview mirror with Kurt. "Tell the truth now. Are the other houses today like this?"

She didn't have to be an investigative reporter to read Joe's face.

"Well, you can just cross them off the list. If this is the best I can get for the money I have, then I'm better off renting. Are these the only listings you could find in the city?"

"Oh, no. But Kurt said you wanted something on the north side."

Samantha smiled the way she would at a particularly dense reader complaining about one of the stories published in her sports section. "No. I wanted something in either the Parkside or Elmwood Districts, and I'm not married to buying a city property. I'll also look in any of the northern suburbs."

Joe smiled brightly and pulled out a PDA. "Oh, well, that will broaden the field greatly. You want two or three bedrooms, right?"

"That's right. I'd like a guest room and I'd like to have something small for a home office. And I want one and a half baths."

"Is off-street parking a must?"

Samantha nodded. "Absolutely. In fact, if I have to give up the third bedroom in order to get the off-street parking, I'll do it.

I don't want to get caught in a snow removal emergency situation having to find somewhere in a hurry to park my car."

Buffalo, which averaged over a hundred inches of snow a year—and usually at least one whopper storm each season—was good about getting the snowplows running. But, when there was a snow emergency, all cars that could normally park on the streets in the city had to be moved.

Joe wrote quickly with his stylus on the PDA screen. It was amazing how quickly he took notes on the small computer.

"Okay. Give me a few days and I'll give you a call. I think we can come up with something much better than this. I'll e-mail you the listings and see if any pique your interest."

Samantha felt a burgeoning hope. "Great. I'll look for them."

She turned to Kurt and saw his frown.

"What?" she asked.

"You want to move to the suburbs?"

"I didn't say that. I said I would be willing to look at houses there if I can't find something in my price range in the city."

"Yeah, but there's no hurry, right? You wouldn't want to jump into something that's not right for you."

"Yeah, but after thinking about what you said earlier this week, I decided you're right. Why wait? Rent's just money that could be working for me."

She looked away. She was afraid he'd be able to tell she wasn't telling the whole truth if he looked in her eyes. She absolutely didn't want Joe to figure out that she wasn't about to move until she was able to conquer her addiction to having sex with her landlord.

A little while later when they reached their house, Joe left them, promising again to e-mail Samantha some more listings later in the week.

She looked at her watch. "Oh, shoot. It's later than I thought. I've got to get moving."

She headed up the driveway to get her car.

"Hey, where are you going in such a hurry?" Kurt called.

"I've got to go. I'm going to my parents' for lunch." For a moment, just a moment, Samantha felt a pang. He was trying to help her find a house and he was alone. Her mother always made enough to feed an army.

She turned to ask him if he'd like to join him and noticed that he had followed her.

"What?" she asked.

"I just thought we might as well share a ride," he said. "But you can drive if you'd like."

"Share a ride?" Samantha was beginning to get an idea. No, her mother wouldn't have done something as bold as calling her boss. *Would she?*

And Kurt certainly wouldn't be inviting himself to join her. *Would he?*

"Yes," he said. "Since I'm going the same place as you are, it would be silly to take two cars. And anyway, even though your mother gave me directions, I'd probably feel better if I had an expert navigator."

"My mother called and invited you to dinner?"

It may have been formed as a question but in Samantha's mind it was a statement.

"Yes. She called Thursday. Invited me, my wife, and even my family. When I told her it was just me, she insisted I come today."

He started back to his car. "I thought it was very kind of her to invite me. Since we work together and live together, so to speak. Shall I drive or will you?"

For a moment Samantha couldn't speak. She absolutely

couldn't come up with a single thought in her head to reply. Then, so many ran through her mind that she could hardly separate them. First, there was embarrassment, then anger; embarrassment that her mother would call her boss, anger that she didn't tell Samantha she was going to do it.

Finally, there was resignation. Now was not the time to fight this battle.

"I'll drive," she said, clipping off the words. *And when we get there, Mother and I are going to have a long, long talk.*

* * *

A little over two hours later, Samantha was finally alone with her mother in the kitchen.

"Mom, why in the world did you call Kurt and ask him to lunch?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

Samantha wasn't fooled. She'd never really understood why her mother hadn't taken on a career as an actress, because when she wanted to, like now, she could play the befuddled-little-woman-having-a-senior-moment with the acumen of an Academy Award nominee.

"You know exactly what I mean." Samantha gave her mother her sternest look. "Can you imagine how embarrassing it was to find out he was invited here just as I was leaving the house?"

"Oh, dear. He didn't tell you before that?"

"Mother, come on. I've seen you pull this act countless times with Grandma and Dad's brother's and sisters when you're trying to wiggle out of something. I know you're not an airhead or having a senior moment. What was your goal with this hair-brained idea?"

Samantha had to give her mother credit for her acting skills again. She went from befuddled to indignant in a blink.

"I don't like your tone of voice, young lady," her mother said. "I raised you better than that. I was simply trying to be neighborly. He's a long way away from his family, them being in the south and all. I just thought it was the thing to do. After all, the man is your boss and now your landlord. What's the harm in inviting him to dinner? It can help your career."

Samantha nearly groaned. "You know how I feel about mixing business and pleasure, Mother."

If you knew just how we'd been mixing business and pleasure, you'd be mortified to the roots of your colored hair.

"Oh, pooh. That's a bunch of hogwash. How are you supposed to meet anyone other than newspaper people when you spend all your days, and nights I might add, at that *Planet*." Her mother made a huffing sound. "You know, Samantha, I am very proud of what you've accomplished, but you're not getting any younger. Aren't you lonely? Aren't you looking for something other than just curling up with a newspaper every night?"

Samantha got an immediate mental picture of curling up in front of a fire with Kurt, watching night fall over her city while he made her come with an intensity only he could give her. She didn't think that's what her mother had in mind.

Her mother smiled knowingly. Samantha shook her head in warning, and to clear it of the erotic pictures free-falling through her mind.

"That is not the point. I've told you how important it is that I maintain an air of respect and rapport with my staff. If I show favoritism, then that breeds discontent, and *that* breeds unending problems. My staff is running at top-speed now, I don't want to mess that up."

"Darling, we're not talking about you getting married. And even if we were, he's not a part of your staff. He's the boss."

Samantha rubbed her hand on her forehead. "That's worse."

"Nonsense," her mother was unperturbed. "Your father was my boss at the dairy after the war. Do you think that mattered?"

Samantha groaned.

"Excuse me, ladies," said Kurt, having just come in from the sliding glass door that led to the deck and the backyard to stand behind Samantha. She widened her eyes at her mother, then shook her head quickly, hoping her mother would understand this conversation was over.

"Oh, Kurt, I'm sorry, did you need something else?" Her mother rounded the built-in bar and moved toward where he stood.

Samantha turned and looked at Kurt and felt a little thrill. He was cool and assured and looked good enough to eat. Bad thing to think when her mother was standing right there. He just grinned at her while holding a plate and some of her father's grilling utensils.

Samantha swore she thought she heard her mother adopt a southern accent. Kurt smiled at her over the top of her mother's head. She could see in his delicious eyes that he picked up her mother's change in accent and urged her to share the joke with him.

"No ma'am," he drawled, adding a layer of southern Georgia or Alabama to his drawl. Samantha rolled her eyes at him, earning her another quick smile. She had to turn her head and hide her laugh behind a cough. "Your husband and I just discovered these dirty dishes on the back of the grill. I was just bringing them inside to get cleaned up."

"Oh, you shouldn't have taken the trouble of bringing them inside. Don is always leaving these things lying around. I was just planning to go out and check for them myself."

She took the dishes from Kurt, smiled blindingly, and nodded to her daughter. "Why don't you and Sam go on out and

sit on the deck? It's such a beautiful afternoon. I'll bring you'all some iced tea out in just a few minutes."

"And fiddle-dee-dee, we wouldn't want a gentleman such as you to actually have to do any chores, now would we?" Samantha tittered in wicked imitation of a movie Southern Belle. Kurt's low chuckle sent trickles of delight down her spine.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand and pulling her outside. "You can show me the barns and stuff. I don't think I've ever actually been on a dairy farm before. At least that way, she can't be spying out the kitchen window at us."

"You don't know my mother," Samantha said as they walked down the steps of the deck, across the yard, and through a gate that led up a short incline to the barn.

"No. But she isn't that much different than my mother. All mothers want their children to be happy. And in their minds, that means in a steady, stable relationship."

"Marriage?" Samantha hoped he couldn't tell just how interested she was in his answer. He took her hand to help her across a deep rut that had formed in the pasture. It seemed their hands fit together perfectly.

"Yeah, old-fashioned, I know, but that's how our mothers think."

Samantha tried to control the rapid beating of her heart and hoped he wouldn't notice she was suddenly out of breath.

"It must be their generation," she finally managed.

She thought she heard him say something like "Not just their generation." Before she could ask, though, he changed the subject.

"Does your father handle all this work himself?" he asked as they looked over the milking stalls that lined the large industrial barn.

Samantha laughed. "Not anymore. Although with all the

advances in the milking machines, one person can handle it in a pinch."

"Who helps him?"

"My brother manages the business end of things now. He has a couple of part-time workers and one full-timer to help with things. He, his wife, and kids are on a short vacation to Disney World."

"You grew up here?"

"Yes. I know, it's hard to imagine a city girl like me on a dairy farm."

Kurt tilted his head. The clouds chose that moment to move, allowing the sun's rays to pour through the open barn door, hitting his dark curly hair. Its black color seemed to latch onto the sunlight and turn it even darker than normal, but the light didn't obscure the look in his eyes as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

It wasn't the first time she'd been kissed in a barn. She had been raised here and getting your first kiss in the fresh, sweet smelling hay was almost a rite of passage for a young girl. It *was* the first time she'd been kissed by Kurt here.

It was the memory of his taste that had her smiling in the middle of doing something mundane. It was the feel of his arms wrapped around her so tightly she felt like nothing could ever hurt her again that caused her to try and find him in the middle of a dream. It was the sound of his heart beating strongly underneath her hand that filled her with such complete emotion she had never known could exist.

The barn smelled of animals, leather, rope, and fresh hay...his arousal and hers. All the smells combined to make an irresistible aphrodisiac.

She already knew he was different from her other lovers. She also knew that she couldn't let their talk of families and love

blind her to what Kurt wanted from her. She had to remember this was about sex. Sex only.

When his tongue dueled with hers and she felt the gentle tracing of his fingers over her breast, she smiled. Thunderous, pulsating sex to be sure.

He broke the kiss just as his fingers gently pinched her hard nipple through her blouse. She flexed her hips against his and felt the length and breadth of his arousal against her.

"God, Samantha," he moaned. "I need you. Now. Is there someplace we can go?"

She smiled again and took his hand. She led him up a sturdy set of stairs to the loft, pulling a clean blanket off the wall as they went. The loft door was open, allowing them a view of the house and incredible blue sky of the early afternoon. There was no paper here, no hustle and bustle of their lives in Buffalo. Just the low sighs of animals and birds settling in for their afternoon naps. Inside, Samantha felt the thudding of her heart as she contemplated what they would share this afternoon.

She spread the blanket over a bed of loose hay, then began to undress. Kurt's eyes gleamed and he began removing his own clothes.

When they both were naked, she placed her hand over his heart. His hand covered hers and she closed her eyes letting the sensation wash over her.

She started to move her hand, slowly, gently, letting her fingertips do the walking and be the receptors of all the different textures that were Kurt. First, she moved from the middle of his sternum outward over his well defined pectoral muscle. She smiled, her eyes still closed, when she felt the slight quiver there and heard his lightly expelled breath. Her fingers lanced over his tiny, hardening nipple and her grin grew as she felt the immediate response. His hand left hers and began an exploration

of his own, mimicking her movements on his body. Her breasts were swollen and her nipples almost weeping for his touch. The graze of his fingertips over her skin heightened her desire. Time was suspended. There was no need to hurry. Kurt seemed to sense that as much as she.

Each touch led to a seductive sigh for more pleasure, for a buildup of more desire humming through their veins.

A touch of her fingertips across the ridges of his abdomen brought a shiver to his body. A dip of his finger into her belly button caused the breath to back up in her lungs.

Lips returned repeatedly to meld together as breathing became secondary to feeling and being together.

Finally when she was certain there was no more to learn, taste, touch, or feel, he slipped inside her as their bodies floated over the edge of ultimate fulfillment together.

Perhaps it was self-preservation, perhaps it was fear, but Samantha knew that not telling him at that moment that she loved him was the hardest thing she'd done in her entire life.

It's just sex, she reminded herself when she could muster the strength for coherent thought. *It's just sex...*

"Samantha, dinner's ready." Her mother's call from just outside the barn ended their afterglow. In the next instant his pager buzzed. He released her, found his pants and the pager in the pocket, and looked at the message.

"I've got to go," he said, then turned, pulling on his clothes.

She hurriedly did the same and rushed outside with him, knowing things had changed and wondering how she was going to handle it.

Chapter 9

Tom Piecarski caught Samantha just as she was about to step onto the elevator. "Hey boss, there's a call for you from the man upstairs. I told him I thought you'd left the building but he said it was important."

"Okay, Tom. Tell him I'll be right there."

Samantha sighed. It was the Monday after *the* Sunday, and it had been a horrible day. Samantha didn't want to blame that on the fact that she had replayed yesterday's lovemaking over and over in her head. She wouldn't allow herself such an easy out, even though she hadn't slept a wink and had watched dawn break over the city while Zip slept blissfully on the bed.

She'd arrived at the paper early, hoping only to put the whole incident out of her mind, and had been completely unsuccessful. All day long, every time she started to think about one thing, something else horned in— Kurt. Today had not been a day for wandering thoughts.

Samantha went back to her office, set her bulging briefcase on the chair, squared her shoulders, and picked up the phone, pushing in the blinking button on the line where Kurt was holding.

"Samantha Cruise," she said.

"I'm glad I caught you before you left the building," Kurt's voice sent a thrill down her spine that she tried to ignore. "I thought maybe we could have dinner."

"Uh, no. Tonight wouldn't be a good time," she stalled. *Not*

when I can't stop thinking about the way we made love.

"I heard you had some problems today. Did the union representative give you any trouble?" Kurt asked, changing the subject.

Samantha shook her head, then realizing he couldn't see that, said, "No, not really. There wasn't anything they could cause trouble about. I could just kill the photographer, though."

"Is this something we need to get involved in?" Kurt asked, implying bringing upper management into the fray.

"No," Samantha said. "Did you hear the whole story?"

"Just the highlights. I was thinking you could fill me in over dinner."

Samantha hesitated.

"Please," Kurt's voice had softened. The sound reminded her of yesterday when they had been walking through the pasture. "Dinner and whatever. We can go anywhere you like. I know of a nice quiet place where we can just talk. It's not far from the house."

Samantha was wavering. She wanted to be with him, how could she not? She was also afraid of what being with him would do to her. He wasn't looking for a commitment, and she didn't want one either. She was the one who wanted no commitment, hot sex. That had been her brilliant plan.

Sunday changed things. How could she continue to see him, be with him, without opening herself up for heartbreak?

"Okay," she finally said. This would be the last time.

"Great. I'll meet you in the parking lot in five minutes?"

Samantha agreed and they hung up. Less than twenty minutes later, they were sitting on a porch of a quaint restaurant that faced the west side of Delaware Park and the Albright Knox Art Museum. The small, beautiful Mirror Lake and the Japanese Garden near them added to the overall beauty of the early fall

night. They were sipping white wine while waiting for their food when she asked Kurt what had happened last night.

"Did you get everything straightened out last night?"

"What? Oh, yes. There was a problem with a double-truck ad. It was a major problem and they couldn't reach any of the top advertising people."

"Oh," Samantha said.

Kurt asked her to tell him what happened with her photographer.

"I got a call this morning from Joe McCarty. He is the best sports photographer on our staff, has won several Associated Press awards for his shots."

Kurt nodded his head. "I saw his file when I was going through the personnel records."

"Well, as good a photographer as he is, the other side of the coin is that he has the disposition and social graces of a rhinoceros."

Kurt laughed. "Well, it kind of goes hand-in-hand, doesn't it? Photographers and weird personalities?"

Samantha didn't quite feel like laughing yet. "Yeah, but this was too much. Sunday night after the Bisons' playoff game, a new security guard at the ballpark questioned McCarty's right to walk across the infield on his way to the back parking lot and his car. One thing led to another and the two men got in a tussle behind second base."

Kurt bit his lip. Samantha felt the answering humor of it inside her and bit the corner of her mouth to keep from laughing as well.

"It took two other security guards and a local television cameraman, after he had filmed the whole incident for posterity, to break up the fight. This was as the park's underground sprinkling system kicked on. It's apparently on a timer, you see."

"So you got five grown men wrestling in the infield while the sprinkling system is going off all around them?"

Samantha laughed aloud. "Yes. I saw some of the pictures on the news at noon today. It was pretty funny."

Kurt laughed, too. "I hope no one was hurt."

"Nothing more than their pride. Although, after McCarty's wife gets a hold of him tonight and learns he's been suspended without pay for ten days, that may change."

Kurt looked surprised.

"Well, despite the fact that Joe is six-six and weighs nearly three hundred pounds and his wife Betty is about five-two and one hundred pounds soaking wet, she'll bring him in line in a heartbeat."

Samantha sobered as she thought about the tension in the meetings between her, the Managing Editor, and the newsroom union representative. With the contract running out, and negotiations starting up between the union and the newspaper management, there had been a lot of tension in the conference room that had nothing to do with the problem on the table. It had not been the best way to spend a day.

"So, the upshot is I lose the best sports photographer on staff for ten days, and during the busiest week of the fall."

Kurt took a sip of his wine. "I'm sure you'll work everything out. Is that the only thing that made your day long?"

Samantha jerked her attention away from watching the way his hand moved on the wineglass, remembering the feel of her hand in his, the way his fingers stroked her skin and fed the flames of her desire.

"What? Oh, no," she said, looking down at the table and silverware, not wanting him to see the truth in her eyes. "We learned Sunday's Gladiators kickoff was changed from an afternoon start to a night game. They changed the time because

it's going to be the nationally televised game on cable."

"Well, I'm sure everyone will still manage to get the work done in time to make deadline," he said.

"It'll be tougher without McCarty. You wouldn't be willing to hold the presses for us, would you?" Samantha held up her hand. "No, don't answer that. I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to use this," she waved her hand, encompassing the table, them and the restaurant, "to get special treatment."

Kurt took her hand in his. "Why? Why does asking for and maybe getting special treatment bother you so much? No one has to know."

"I'll know," Samantha tugged briefly to take her hand from his grasp. Her heart wasn't in it and she was secretly glad when he didn't release it. "This is exactly why office relationships don't work."

Kurt shook his head. "Samantha, Samantha, you're getting worked up for nothing. I convinced you to come out with me tonight using the lure of talking about work. Why would you think I wouldn't want to talk about it now that we are here?"

"It's just not right. You're my boss."

"Is that all I am?" he asked.

Samantha was saved from having to answer that question by the arrival of the waiter and their food. As they ate, she managed to steer the conversation away from *The Planet* and away from work. Before she knew it, they were driving home. She could see his truck's lights in her rearview mirror and it gave her a sense of security when they pulled into the driveway together and walked in the front door.

When he kissed her at her door, it took everything inside her to keep from melting, not only from his touch but also from her principals. She could see by the look in his eyes he was surprised when she didn't invite him in. She also knew she was a being

chicken for not addressing the real problem, but chicken she was. She stood with her back to the door when he finally went back downstairs and released the breath she'd been holding. She'd become a coward. Athena Warrior Wimp should be her name.

* * *

Kurt moved mechanically through his graduated pre-programmed workout on his stair climber. His mind was on anything but the exercise. What had he been thinking Sunday afternoon?

His plan had been simple. He would lure Samantha in slowly, keeping things friendly and on a low boil. As long as they both realized that this was about sex, great sex, with no ties and no commitments everything would be just dandy.

Then he'd gone to meet her family. He'd thought it would be a hoot. Samantha's family, a little dinner, a little teasing, a little chance to show her they didn't have to be just about *The Planet*.

Then there had been all that talk about marriage and familial expectations. Then there was the loft.

Okay, so what if sex in a loft with a beautiful woman had been one of those fantasies he'd experienced while sweating his way through puberty? He could handle it. After all, he was known all over as the guy who wouldn't say no to sex anywhere, anytime.

Somewhere the line between his fantasies and his theory on free sex between consenting adults blurred. When had great fantasy sex with Samantha turned into making love with Samantha? When had the thought of making Samantha his and only his become the reason for everything thing he did? When he'd entered her and his seed had rushed from him like an unstoppable force, his only thought had been a desire to make her realize that she belonged to him. Now and forever.

He hadn't even realized until much later that for the first time he hadn't used a condom with any woman. Instead of the consequences of that mistake scaring the hell out of him, he was almost hoping they'd made a baby. How crazy was that? He wasn't ready for fatherhood. He had never been before.

He didn't have to guess at what Samantha's reaction to that would be. She probably thought him lower than pond scum. Who could blame her? He'd acted like an oaf.

Instead of asking her to stay with him, what had he done? Rushed off and went back to work. Then, he'd not even bothered to tell her how special it had meant, or how wonderful she'd made him feel.

"Idiot," he said aloud. "You know she's skittish on the subject of a relationship between us. Stop thinking about forever. Stop thinking about getting so deep inside her that she'll never be able to get rid of you. Stop thinking about her barefoot and pregnant."

His legs pumped harder as the machine kicked it up a notch as if giving him an answer. As sweat rolled off his face and down his bare neck and arms, he gave his mind a workout similar to the one his body was facing.

"I wanted to have fun. I wanted the Athena Warrior Princess I haven't been able to get out of my mind," he muttered. "I wanted to show her I'm the man she can live all her fantasies with. Hell, I am that man. I wanted to have a great time until one of us gets bored."

The machine, having reached its programming apex, slowly began backing off into the cool-down phase. He ignored muscles whimpering their relief as he took his pulse with two fingers pressed against his wrist. As he and the machine wound to a stop, he stepped off the padded pedals. Moving to a nearby chair, he picked up the hand towel that he had left there along with a

bottle of lukewarm water. After he wiped his face and drank some of the water, he walked over to his living room window. It was just after dawn and he hadn't slept a wink all night. He wished he could lay his insomnia on Samantha but the fact was he had gotten into this mess all by himself.

He needed a better plan of action. So far, he was stumped. Patience, never his strong suit, was not going to work, but things had changed from that moment when their bodies had joined surrounded by fresh smelling hay and the trappings of her family.

He still wanted to be the man of Samantha's fantasies. It was no longer going to be a temporary engagement, though, this was going to be winner take all. For life. He just had to figure out how to make sure two things happened.

He won. And she didn't figure out what he was doing until she was hopelessly tangled in his web.

It should be a piece of cake.

At that moment, his phone rang. Since it was too early even for him to be up and about, his heart raced a little at the thought of the impending emergency—either with his family down in Tennessee or at the paper.

He strode across the room and picked up the phone before it completed its second ring.

"Hello?"

"Kurt, darling, did I wake you?"

"Uh, no. Hi, Mom, what's going on?"

"Nothing dear, I just was thinking about you. Wondering how you're adjusting to your job and everything?" His mother's voice was low and soft with the Eastern Virginia drawl she'd learned in childhood. Just like his father, his mother had made marrying a lot of different people since her divorce nearly two decades ago into an art form.

"Mom, you called before dawn to see how I was doing?"

"Well, yes, dear. I just had a feeling you were awake."

Kurt wasn't a reporter, but he had been in the newspaper business too long not to smell a rat. "Is something wrong, Mother?"

"No, dear. Why would anything be wrong?"

"I don't know. We just talked Saturday night and you never call me this early. Are you okay? Buster?" he asked, naming his mother's current husband.

"Certainly." Now his mother sounded indignant. "Does something have to be wrong for a mother to call her youngest son? If you're so busy in your new home and your new life that you don't have time to talk to your mother, I understand."

"Now, don't go all sappy on me. Just tell me why you called."

"Buster predicted you'd say that." Some of the fuzzy senior citizen was gone from his mother's voice. Kurt started to relax until his mother let a zinger fly. "We understand the tenant in your new house works at the paper with you."

"How did you... never mind," he said. "Yes. She's living here. Temporarily."

"Oh. That's interesting. Is she single?"

"Mother. She works for me."

"So? Is she?"

"Mother, is that really why you called at six in the morning? To find out if my tenant who also happens to be the sports editor at *The Planet* is single?"

"Oh. She's a sports editor? Is she kind of mannish, then?"

"Mother," Kurt ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Not all women in sports are mannish. There are many very feminine women in the business. And no one would ever accuse Samantha of being mannish."

"So she's single and pretty?"

Kurt sighed. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

His mother laughed. "Yes you did, son. So, are you seeing each other?"

"Of course. She's the sports editor of my paper and she lives in my house. We see each other most days."

"Oh, pooh, you know what I mean. Are you dating?"

"Mother, we're both in our thirties. We're not kids in school. We don't date."

"Oh? What do you do?"

Kurt rolled on without acknowledging his mother's low taunt. No way was he touching that with a ten-foot pole. "Because I am in my thirties, I don't have to clear my social life with you. Nor do I kiss and tell."

Kurt shut his eyes. That was not what he wanted to say.

"Goodbye, Mother. I'll talk to you this weekend," he said, hearing her chuckles as he hung up the phone.

He was still feeling a little confused from his conversation with his mother when he opened his apartment door and found Samantha opening the back door leading to the driveway.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he answered, his mood immediately lifting.

She was dressed for work in a red suit with a fitted jacket that managed to look business-like and feminine. The mid-thigh skirt showed off her trim legs all the way down to her small feet, encased in red low-heeled shoes. The red of her dress brought out the highlights in her hair. She looked ready to conquer the world...he already knew she had conquered him. All she would have to do was smile and he'd have her in his arms and in his bed so fast her head would spin.

He'd pull off those modest shoes and begin nibbling on her toes, working his way up her shapely calves and lingering at the

spot on the back of her knee that was so soft and sweet. Then he'd work his way slowly upward until he reached her beautiful muff. There, he'd part her lips and take her small, plump clit into his mouth bringing her, and him, to ecstasy. He didn't care if they stayed there all night.

She was looking at him strangely now, like a small animal hypnotized by a hungry predator. He tried to shake off the sexual urge sending boiling blood through him. *Make nice.*

"I wanted to apologize again for leaving like I did Sunday. I hope your parents weren't too disappointed?"

"Oh, no. They understand. Sort of."

"Yeah, I got the impression they didn't really understand your career choice." He wanted to keep her talking. He wanted to know everything about her, what she thought and what she wanted. Not just about her career and her sexual appetite, but about her life. That was another first for him. The last thing he normally cared about was what made his women tick.

"No. They don't, but that's okay. I never really understood their dedication to the farm, either."

"I don't know much about farming," he said. "Except that it can be a tough life."

"Yes. I understood that. My parents had quite a number of lean years. They tried to stay out of debt as much as they could, but no matter what, they wouldn't let go of the land."

"I guess it's something that can get into a person's blood. That dedication."

"Yes. I think it must have skipped me, though. I was never interested in the land. I was, however, interested in the story behind the farmers' subsidies and income problems. I was ready to win the Pulitzer Prize with my expose in the *Weekly Farmers' Report*."

"So how did the Lois Lane, cub reporter out for the hard

news story, become a sports editor?"

Samantha laughed. "My story did run in the weekly paper and they hired me to be a stringer. Sent me to cover town board meetings, water and sewer board meetings. Basically, I was a secretary, just writing meeting stories."

"Not exactly Pulitzer stuff, huh?"

"Not even close. Then one Friday night, the sports editor got in a bind. He needed someone to fill in for his reporter, whose wife went into labor. The game went into overtime. Not only did my story make the front page, but I took some pictures with my father's old camera. They ran them as well." Samantha shrugged. "After that I was hooked."

"How old were you?" Kurt asked as he held open the back door for her.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe fourteen or fifteen."

He could see her. Young, short and a little chubby, but probably just as intense and focused as she was now. He laughed.

"What about you?"

He looked down at his watch. "I promise I'll tell you my whole life story. But only if you will meet me for lunch today."

He could see her light mood fade. He hoped his disappointment didn't show on his face. He had to keep this light, non-threatening, even though every inch of him was more interested in grabbing her in his arms and chaining her to his bed for the rest of the week. "Hey, I understand if today is no good."

"Oh, no. I could probably make it. Did you want to meet somewhere?"

Easy boy. Don't blow it now.

"Oh, it doesn't have to be anything formal. We could always just meet in front of the building. Then maybe go someplace close to the office."

Again he held his breath. What would she say?

"I've got an idea. It's supposed to be beautiful today. Why don't we go down to the pier on the harbor? There's a little place called The Hatch there. It's short on quality food, but the view more than makes up for it."

He hoped she couldn't see the relief that was rushing through him on his face.

"That sounds like a great plan. Is around one good for you?"

"That should be doable."

Chapter 10

Samantha watched as Kurt wove his way from the food pick-up window through an array of picnic tables over to the table against the deck railing. He looked good today in his light gray linen pants, and white shirt with blue pinstripes. His tie, which had larger gray, blue, and yellow stripes, was tucked into his breast pocket, leaving the top button of his shirt undone and showing his muscular tanned neck and throat.

Samantha then closed her eyes and turned her head away as she remembered the way those muscles had quivered last night when her lips, then teeth, had coursed over them. Even now, being with him like this in the noisy, very public domain, Samantha could feel her body start to wake. She knew it wouldn't take much to convince her to go anywhere remotely private and take from his body again and again.

As much as he physically impacted her, Samantha knew that alone was not the reason she was spending her lunch hour with him. He touched a part of her that she'd begun to believe could never be reached by any other person.

With Kurt she felt like she had someone to share her problems. For once, she wasn't referring to just professional problems. She thought back to Sunday with her family. Although she had a loving, wonderful relationship with them, she'd always felt somehow different. She had felt she had been born a changeling.

Her mother, who had been trying desperately lately to get

her married off, had never understood her dedication to her career. To her mother a job was a job. You did it to collect a weekly paycheck, you didn't put your blood, sweat and tears into it. And you certainly didn't worry about it when you were gone. Those thoughts and concerns were reserved for the important things in life—family and the land.

From the first day Samantha had stepped inside the offices of the small weekly, it was as if there was printer's ink in her veins rather than blood. She had found a home there—a home that was unlike any other she had ever known.

With Kurt, Samantha had found someone who understood that feeling. He seemed to understand that she could be totally wrapped up in her career. He also seemed to be willing to allow her to explore the other side, the side that wanted to experience all a woman could feel.

All she had to do now was make sure she kept her heart intact. She had to remember that she had no illusions. She wanted a whole new life. Now she was determined to get it.

"So, here we go," Kurt said as he reached their small table. "I hope you know I made the ultimate sacrifice for this lunch."

"Oh, what's that? No onions on your dog?"

Kurt laughed. "That's correct. No chili either."

"Hmm. I would be impressed, except I happen to know you have a two-thirty with the mayor and president of the Chamber of Commerce. Wouldn't want to head into that with onion breath and chili stains, now would we?"

Kurt growled, but the twinkle in his eyes told its own story. "I really do have to find out who your source is in my office. You know way too much about the goings on there."

Samantha just grinned and reached for her dog. It had no onions or chili, either. She didn't have any meetings with big wigs, but a girl had to plan ahead for certain things. Slathered

with mustard, catsup and, the cholesterol killer, melted cheese, the hot dog was something meant to be inhaled—slowly. Kurt put down his two dogs on a paper plate she'd snagged along with a large container of fried onion rings that smelled like heaven and pulled two bottles of water out of his pocket.

"Dinner is served, madam."

"Thank you," Samantha replied grandly. They began eating. Whether it was the company, the scenery, or both, Samantha felt like it was the best hot dog she'd ever had in her life.

"You know, I've had dogs at Cooney Island. I've had 'em in Wisconsin where they call them *brats*. I've had them foot long and ones smaller than your index finger. But *this, this* is absolutely the best hot dog I've ever tasted," Kurt said, echoing her thoughts. "This is just what I needed. Thanks for suggesting it."

Samantha felt herself blushing, not from his praise, but the look in his eyes as they met hers. "Thank you," she said, hoping he couldn't hear the tremor in her voice.

She looked out over the Marina to the lake where a group of sailboats had gathered, apparently preparing for an impromptu race. The gulls were crying as they jockeyed for position to gather the best of human food scraps and there were air bubbles from the fish coming to the water's surface for their own food.

Samantha felt his eyes like a gentle caress on her face and sensed when he stopped looking at her and looked out at the view.

"I love this place," she said softly. "Even in the winter when it's so cold and the wind is so harsh that it can take the breath right away from you."

"Do you come here then?"

"Yes. It's so cold that you can't stay out here for more than a few minutes, but it always fills me with a sense of peace. No

matter what's gone wrong with the day, it helps me remember just where everything falls in life."

"Are things so bad for you at *The Planet*?"

Samantha paused a moment then shook her head. "No, of course not. I love my job. I love my staff, although if they ever hear I said that I'll deny it to my last breath."

It seemed that Kurt relaxed a little at her assertion.

"But, you know, when you're dealing with newspaper people you've got your characters. And, well, sometimes they just don't think like normal people do."

"You could say that about anybody in any profession," Kurt said. "When I was Director of Sales in Memphis, you should have seen one of the guys working for me. I swear he wore the worst suits in the world. And the guy was never on time to any meeting I scheduled."

"What did you do?"

"Well, there was nothing I could do about the suits. I mean, all you can do with a dress code is make it neat, unless you want to make people wear a uniform, which isn't great."

Samantha laughed. "I meant about the tardiness?"

"Oh. Every time I scheduled a meeting, I told him it was fifteen minutes earlier than it was really starting."

Samantha thought for a moment. "Did that work?"

"Only for a little while. Then he wised up and just started showing up thirty minutes late."

"Did you fire him?"

"No. He was the top-dollar man in the department. I swear he could have sold fire to the devil."

Samantha laughed. "You see that's what I mean about the people who get into this business. Today I get to work to find that a prank that has been going on for several months has been stepped up a notch or two."

"What prank?"

"Well, you see, I have this copy editor. He's a bit of a nit-picker."

"Isn't that what you want in a good copy editor?"

"Sure, but John Fletcher takes it a little too far. He's that way about everything from the computer he always works at, the chair he sits in, and the order in which he works a story each morning."

Kurt looked perplexed. "Okay, so what's the prank?"

"Well, mostly it was just a few posters placed around the newsrooms. You know, fake want ads and recruiting posters with John's picture on them, having the interns write essays on their work experience at *The Planet* and then e-mail them to him. Just stuff like that."

Kurt chuckled. "Your people are pretty creative, I'll give them that. The best advertising people can come up with is running line ads."

Samantha laughed as well. "Well, that's pretty good too. Today, they went a bit too far."

"What happened?"

"Well, it seems John purchased a special chair for himself. It's his personal chair, you see, the company didn't buy it."

Kurt laughed. "I can sense the trouble on the horizon."

"Well, John's pretty sharp about locking the chair away when he's going to be off for awhile. Or on vacation."

"Okay. Did he forget this weekend or something?"

"No, it seemed he went down to the guard station to argue with the pizza delivery man. John claims the order was bogus, but the delivery guy wasn't taking no for an answer. So John goes down to the first floor, there's no pizza man and the guard doesn't even remembering calling John downstairs."

Kurt bit his bottom lip. Samantha could see he was trying

hard not to laugh. "And when he came back?"

"The chair was gone. Replaced with a two-legged stool."

"Two-legged? I didn't know they made two-legged stools."

Samantha laughed. "I don't think they do. This one should have been a three-legged one, but somewhere in time one of the legs had been busted."

Kurt laughed aloud. "Did you find his chair?"

"Well, yes, it was back before John even got to the ME to tell her of the problem. So he brings Jordan out to show her that it was gone and it was mysteriously back in place."

"What did Murray say?"

Samantha laughed. "Jordan is pretty cool. She knows about Fletcher and his habits. She just told him he really needed to get a hobby, which of course got a big laugh from everyone in the newsroom."

"I'll say it again, you editorial types are much more creative than the advertising types. It must be a riot down there."

"It can be sometimes," Samantha agreed, "but sometimes you just want to get everyone involved together and give them a good shaking. I mean, especially when you get the one-upmanship going on. Which I am sure is next on the agenda."

Kurt nodded. "Yes. They can get to a point where they beat it like a drum. Would it help if I sent a memo down reinforcing *The Planet's* policy on hijinks?"

"Does *The Planet* have a policy on hijinks?" Samantha asked, sounding incredulous.

"No, but that doesn't stop me from sending out the memo."

Samantha laughed. "Boy, that would get everybody in a stir, wouldn't it?"

Kurt laughed too and took her hand in his. She felt the thrill at the contact. She only had a moment's hesitation before she pulled their joined hands against her cheek. The touch of his

warm hand against her skin was like a soothing balm, as was the glitter in his eyes. "It could very well cause a union meeting with management."

"That's definitely one meeting I'd love to sit in on." Kurt's eyes were implying there was more than sitting in on meetings going through his mind. For the first time, Samantha was sorry they had walked the short distance to the Marina from *The Planet*. It would be oh so convenient to get in a car and have a repeat of the night they met.

"It would be nice," Kurt agreed, making her wonder if she'd said her thoughts aloud.

Samantha had dated many men in her life. Perhaps *many* was an overstatement, but she certainly didn't consider herself a wallflower. Never had she felt the way she did when she was with Kurt. Yet, she couldn't even allow herself to say they were dating. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe she had been putting too much emphasis on her career. In truth, Kurt made her want to forget about everything, but being with him. And today, for once, she was just going to do what her heart told her.

"What have you got planned today?" she asked, impetuously.

Kurt seemed taken aback. "Not too much, just a few meetings. Why? Did Joe find you another house to look at?"

"No. It's silly really. I shouldn't have mentioned it." Samantha felt her doubts plaguing her.

"No. Tell me what you're thinking." She looked down to where their hands were still joined. She closed her eyes and took the leap.

"This may get me in trouble with my boss, but I was thinking of playing hooky the rest of the afternoon," she said. "It's a beautiful day and this time of the year, you've got to take these when you get them. Will you join me?"

Kurt looked somber for a moment. When he started to smile, it spread slowly across his generous mouth and didn't stop until it was lighting up his beautiful eyes.

"I'm all yours. What do you have in mind?"

Samantha laughed and started pulling him away from the pier. "Come on. You're not going to get a chance to change your mind."

She led him away and back to her car in *The Planet's* parking lot. Being they were both responsible people, they used their cell phones to report in. That task handled, Samantha turned her car south from the downtown section of Buffalo and headed into the southtowns. She was still toying with moving them to the back seat and having her way with him but she also wanted to little the anticipation build a little. Besides, there was no harm in just having some fun.

Kurt seemed relaxed in the passenger seat and enjoyed the view as they took the southbound Route 5, which the locals called the Skyway.

As they reached the apex, Samantha heard Kurt's sigh as the amazing beauty of Lake Erie unfolded before them. With the sun glittering off the endless blue of the water, it looked like it must have from the beginning of time.

"You know, I bet this road is a bear in the winter, but the view in the fall is certainly something to brag about," he said.

Samantha smiled. "You're right. It is a bear, not only in the winter, but also when the wind is whipping around. They have to close this road fairly often. And it has been a source of constant turmoil for the city government. They want to tear it down and put a tunnel in."

He nodded. "I read the editorials about that. I guess things have to be done in the name of improvement, but it is a shame to waste this view."

As they came down off the Father Baker Bridge into the steel town of Lackawanna, Kurt became even quieter. They passed block after block of vacant mills that had once been the backbone of the region's employment, when the steel and iron forged there had driven the nation. But the mills had been gone since the seventies and the economic hardship their loss had caused was still tragically evident.

Samantha smiled to herself as they passed house after house with really only one thing in common, the effigy to the Gladiators. She hadn't planned this object lesson for Kurt, but she was glad he was seeing it.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"You'll see," she promised as she turned off Route 5 and headed into the downtown section of Lackawanna. Narrow streets arrowed away from the lakefront, providing a setting for a community that was fading but clinging to its survival with bloodied and scrapped fingernails like a man hanging off the edge of a cliff. She turned onto Ridge Road and heard Kurt's exclamation.

"Wow, what a wonderful old church! What is it?"

"It's the Our Lady of Victory Basilica and National Shrine," Samantha said. "The green dome is copper. Weather and time have turned it green from its original color, though."

"They can't refurbish it?"

Samantha laughed. "No. Even if they had the money, I don't think they could do it. We can take a tour of it if you'd like."

"Is this where you were taking me?"

"No, but we're close. I'm taking you to the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens. They're a wonderful respite in the dead of winter, but they're still pretty special this time of the year, too."

Kurt nodded. "I've heard about them, but haven't had the

chance to visit there yet. Do you come here often?"

"Sadly no," Samantha said. "It's one of those things that you take for granted living here, though."

Samantha reached the Botanical Gardens entrance and drove around the main dome. There was a one-way route for cars yielding the right of way to pedestrians and bikers using the trails that surrounded the gardens. They drove past a small, clear pond where several fathers and sons and a few mothers and daughters were trying to coax the few fish living in the water to climb aboard their hooks. The areas were full of people despite the fact that it was a Monday afternoon.

"Doesn't anyone work here?" Kurt asked humorously as they waited for another inline skater to cross the road in front of them before Samantha pulled into a vacant parking spot.

"Yes," Samantha answered him seriously. "People work very hard here, but I think because of our cold, long winters, they also take advantage of every opportunity to get outdoors. Although there are closer places to our house to enjoy the weather today, there are few that are more spectacular."

Kurt was silent. Samantha thought bringing him here was a bad idea.

"We can leave if you'd rather. I mean, I guess looking at a bunch of flowers isn't exactly your idea of a good time, is it?"

"No, this is fine," he said, turning his head and smiling at her. "This must be a wonderful place to come when the snow is flying."

"It is, but the grounds are pretty spectacular now."

They began walking through the grounds. At one point, Kurt took her hand to help her across a small log bridge over a brook. It felt so right when he touched her that she didn't pull away. Instead she leaned into him. His arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her hard against his pelvis. She could feel the

outline of his erection and knew he wanted her. Right here, right now. She looked in his eyes and what she saw was a desire that had everything to do with the heat of need and everything to do with feelings that were much more than simple lust. Unable to look any longer without revealing feelings of her own, she closed her eyes and sank into his kiss.

There seemed to be no hurry. A caress over the pounding pulse evident at his temple warranted a lingering kiss. His lips trailed down her arm to her wrist and hand where her palm became a feast of great bounty.

Lying on top of him, their bodies meeting at every pulse point, lips to lips, chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis, they kissed for what seemed to be an eternity, neither willing or needing anything else.

Nearly an hour later, when the sun was falling low in the sky, they returned to her car holding hands. As she reached to open the door, he stopped, pulled her into his arms and kissed her again.

After the kiss ended, he held the door for her, then jogged lightly around the front of the car and got in the passenger side.

"What now?" he asked, smiling in her eyes.

What now, indeed?

Chapter 11

The days and nights following their playing hooky were special for Samantha. In moments of reflection, she had no pat answer to what made the days special.

They went to work each day in separate cars, sometimes following one another all the way downtown. They entered the building together, along with several dozen other *Planet* employees, and headed up the stairs. He'd give her his delicious smile when she stopped on the third floor on his way to the fifth.

It was normal.

It was ordinary.

It was magical.

If their schedules allowed it, they would share lunch. Most days that wasn't possible, but when it was Samantha spent the rest of the day on an extra adrenaline high. It was truly astounding what amazing sex on a regular basis did for a woman.

As was her way, she worried over the feeling one day when they were wandering around the zoo. Kurt had left her alone to visit the souvenir store to purchase a gift for one of his nieces. While she waited for his return, she thought about their lunches, and even this date. She was seriously getting worried that she had become addicted to sex.

Then she realized, as important as the sex was, there was more. Take for instance, today. *BK*, or *Before Kurt*, Samantha would have laughed if someone told her she would get so much enjoyment out of doing this kind of thing. It was a beautiful fall

Saturday. They were at the zoo. Put the two together and it spelled hordes of families and children. There was running, lots of shouting, and laughter, but it wasn't just other people's laughter. She and Kurt had laughed the entire day as well.

It had started when he said the rhinoceros bore an uncanny resemblance to *The Planet's* Director of Press operations. It then became a game of one-upmanship, each trying to spot one of their co-workers' matches in the animal kingdom. Samantha knew she had never laughed as freely in her life as she did when she was with him.

It wasn't just shared laughter, however. It was the way they touched one another. There was no question sexual need was still there, that in itself was amazing.

She shouldn't be needing him quite so much, though. They had been together in every way almost in every position available to man and womankind. She shouldn't still be salivating at the thought of going home and riding him hard.

Today, there was something else along with the laughter. Maybe it was being around so many families. Mothers, fathers, and children. Samantha shook her head. She wondered briefly if she was having an attack of something.

Samantha didn't have anything against children. In fact, she loved her own nieces and nephews dearly. But, the last place she normally wanted to visit was a place that was a haven for a large number of them that she didn't want to know.

But that was *BK. Before Kurt*.

Like their day at the Botanical Gardens, it seemed the place was immaterial. She barely controlled a chuckle at the thought.

In the days since they had skipped that afternoon's work, they had been to a large old-fashioned apple mill, taken a tour of the ships permanently docked in the marina, and ridden on a cruise of the Niagara and Buffalo Rivers. They'd moved

leisurely on a walking tour of the historical buildings in the city, walked through the Albright Knox art museum and enjoyed a play at the Irish Classical Theatre. They had spent one Saturday shopping for the sublime in the Allentown District, while another had been spent exploring the historic Wilcox Mansion, where Theodore Roosevelt had taken over the job of United States President in 1901 after the assassination of President William McKinley. Now, they were enjoying the sights and sounds of the zoo.

And each time, Samantha swore she'd never enjoyed herself more. It seemed the sun was always shining brightly on them and she was basking in its rays.

Then there was their passion, which was beyond description. Things she had only fantasized about in the past, she found herself willingly trying with Kurt. No position was taboo, no touch forbidden. That was why she was afraid she was becoming addicted to sex.

Even looking at the houses Joe found for her with Kurt at her side was a blast. She enjoyed arguing with him about the amount of work this one would need or the location of that one. She still hadn't found the house for her—at least that's what Kurt and Joe believed—but it was a great way to spend their Sunday mornings.

She turned her head from her unseeing perusal of the big cat display when Kurt stood beside her. "Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

"Yes." He pulled out a large stuffed lion. "She's a sucker for cats. What do you think?"

The toy looked ferocious, but not enough that Samantha thought it would scare a small girl. "I think she'll love it."

"Good, cuz I couldn't decide. So," he stuck his hand into the paper bag and pulled out another stuffed animal—this one a

grinning sea lion balancing a ball on his nose. "I got two."

Samantha laughed. "Well, I think there's one little girl that's getting spoiled by her uncle."

Kurt grinned. "That's what my sister is telling me all the time. But, I figure, hey, that's what an uncle is supposed to do."

Samantha laughed. She could almost see how he'd be with his own children and felt a tug in her heart.

"You know," she said. "I'm kind of surprised you don't have a couple of children of your own."

He put the animals back in the bag, took her hand, and tucked it into the curve of his free arm.

"I never looked for that for myself. I mean, I love my nieces and nephews, but I also knew that I was going to have to move around a lot to get where I wanted to be in my career. Just because my family is in the media, it doesn't mean they let us do whatever we want."

Samantha nodded. "I always felt the same way."

"This business, it's tough," he added.

"Yes. The hours, nights, and weekends."

"Yep. It's only been in the last five years that I wasn't responsible for making sure the presses didn't fall apart," he said.

Samantha laughed. "I've definitely been there. There's been many a night that I started at three in the afternoon and didn't leave the building until three the next morning."

"You almost sound like you miss those days," he said.

"Oh, no, not at all," she said. "Back then, many times it was a victory just to have a paper for the next day."

Kurt laughed. "Sometimes I feel that way now."

"Yeah, but that's just because the new press is stuck out on the Atlantic Ocean somewhere. Once its up and running, you won't have a worry in the world."

Samantha sensed Kurt's hesitation. "Will you?" she asked.

Kurt's momentary frown disappeared. "No. Anyway, how about we take a couple more pictures of those guys over there? I think we should show them to Zip just so she can see what she should be doing."

Samantha started to question him about his hesitation, but then, assuming whatever it was he wasn't ready to talk about it, took his change of topic. Maybe he'd feel relaxed enough later to tell her what was bothering him.

"You've got to be kidding. Zip will take one look at these guys and start laughing. The way she figures it, she's got life all figured out. She sleeps when and where she wants, gets only the best food and never has to brave the Buffalo winter."

* * *

Kurt remembered the afternoon at the zoo as he stood in line waiting to go through the security checkpoint at the Buffalo/Niagara Regional Airport. He'd been summoned to the family's retreat outside of Denver, Colorado for a meeting. He had a bad feeling about what the topic would be.

Ralph Warren Boscoe was a media giant and had currently been ranked as the tenth richest man in the world. He owned newspapers, and television and radio stations all over the world. He had also recently become a major shareholder in a large Internet service provider company. Kurt knew the ISP was where his family's future business focus was heading, as he had pushed for the expansion into the world of the Internet. His father had taken to the idea like a duck to water. Ralph now believed the Internet would soon replace all traditionally produced newspapers worldwide.

That was why cutting *The Planet's* overhead and expenses was so important to Kurt. He knew it wouldn't take much for Ralph to simply cut off *The Planet* altogether.

When the cab pulled into the driveway of the mansion

where his father and his third wife spent more and more time, Kurt took a deep breath, soothed the wrinkles from his pants, and walked forward. This trip was going to be the culmination of all he'd tried to accomplish in the last few years. If things went right, the next twenty-four hours could be the most successful of his life.

* * *

Samantha told herself she wasn't lonely when she let herself into the house that night.

Kurt had been summoned to Denver for a meeting with his father, *The Planet's* owner. He had called her from his cell phone that morning on the way to the airport to let her know.

"This is good," she told herself as she unlocked the door. "I've been spending so much time with Kurt that I haven't had any time to do the things I did before."

She closed the door and listened to the silence, shaking off the loneliness as she went up to her apartment. Zip jumped down off the back of the sofa, greeting her with a cry and twining her sturdy little body between Samantha's legs, then bounded off to the kitchen where her food was stored.

"Zip, we've got the night to ourselves," she said. "We can do whatever we want. I could clean the house."

Zip stopped and looked back over her shoulder as if Samantha had said a foreign word. "Now, I'm not that bad," she protested on a laugh. "It's just a bit cluttered."

Samantha joined the cat in the kitchen and, after filling her bowl with fresh water and giving Zip a can a food, Samantha looked over the supplies in her refrigerator.

"Well, I'm kind of out of luck here," she murmured. "I've got some lettuce that has that brownish, soggy tint that makes it *sooo* appealing, some cheddar cheese with a good start on growing antibiotics, and one egg that's been in here an

indeterminate amount of time."

Samantha closed the fridge and walked over to the cabinets, where she found a can of cream of mushroom soup, about a quarter of a cup of instant rice, and a dented can of stewed tomatoes.

"Guess I haven't been to the grocery store in awhile either."

If she'd been thinking, she would have stopped at B&B's. Or, she could always call and order a pizza, but Samantha didn't feel hungry. How was it possible that after such a short amount of time, one man would have made such a difference in her life?

When the phone rang, she raced to it. Maybe it would be one of her friends, or even work. She'd take anything now.

"Hello."

"Miss me?" His voice soothed her nerves like balm on sore muscles.

"Hi." She sounded breathless to herself. "How's Denver?"

"Okay," he answered. "Actually, it's lonely."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought you'd be too busy in meetings and with your family to be lonely."

"The meetings have been long."

"Any news?" she teased.

Kurt hesitated then answered, "You know, the same old boring management type stuff."

Samantha detected something in his voice, but couldn't quite put a finger on what it was that bothered her.

"How was your day?" he asked switching the topic.

"Same old, same old," she parroted. "We had a newspaper today so that was something."

"Any thing new on the employee practical joke scene?" he asked.

Samantha laughed. She forgot about that one. "Actually yes. Remember me telling you about the chair incident?"

"Yes," Kurt replied.

"Well, the one-upmanship has begun. Today, Fletcher called a locksmith into the building. He wanted him to chain the chair to the floor."

Kurt groaned. "Oh no. What did you do?"

"Well, I told him we couldn't have anyone just drilling in the floor. I told him there were lots of wires and stuff imbedded there. He'd have to get building supervisor's approval. I also told him you'd probably have to sign off on something like that as well."

"Good thinking," Kurt said. "That also explains the e-mail that I got from Fletcher today."

"Oh no. I'm sorry, Kurt. I didn't think he'd ever go through with it."

Kurt laughed. "Believe me, it's not a problem. Did anything else happen?"

Samantha laughed. "Well, sort of. It seems while John was away from his desk someone from the Salvation Army came to pick up the chair. They'd been told it was a reject and was being donated. They were thrilled at the prospect of being able to auction off such a valuable piece of office equipment."

"Did you stop them before they got out of the building with it?"

"Well, actually John came back just in time to stop the whole thing. He didn't see the humor in the fact that some other staff member had called to donate his personal chair."

"Oh, this is classic. Do you know who called the Salvation Army?"

"I think the suspects are too numerous to discipline. I also happened to hear on the grapevine that the whole thing was a setup. The guy wasn't from the Salvation Army at all."

"Where was he from?"

"We're not actually sure, but the grapevine says he's a nephew of your secretary."

Kurt laughed for several minutes. "I'll have to make sure she gets an extra day off just to thank her," he said finally.

There was a slight silence. Then Kurt spoke again, his voice lower, more intimate. Samantha felt the tremors from it wrapping around her as if he were sitting right next to her.

"What are you doing right now?" he asked.

Samantha started to tell the truth then decided to do something she'd never done before.

"Right this minute?" she replied.

"Yes."

"Actually, you caught me just as I was getting ready to take a bath."

Kurt groaned. "Are you naked?"

Samantha laughed. She couldn't believe the sound, throaty and provocative.

"Of course, silly. You can't take a bath in your clothes."

"Are you touching yourself?"

"No, but hearing your voice is making me hot," she said. "My nipples are tight and my breasts are feeling heavy."

Kurt moaned again. "Hold on," he said. A few seconds later he was back.

"Will you touch yourself?"

Samantha couldn't help herself. Although she'd been lying about being naked, now she wished she was because she yearned to do exactly what Kurt asked.

"Only if you'll touch yourself," she replied.

"Oh, I am baby. I am. I'm so hard just from talking to you that I'm afraid I'm going to come all over myself any second. I wish you were here so that I could plunge into your tight little pussy and reach for your womb."

Now Samantha moaned. Her nipples were hard and rubbing against the silk of her bra. Imagination aided by the real life memories of having felt him thrusting deep inside her was a powerful aphrodisiac.

"If I were there with you now, I'd take your cock in my mouth," she whispered. "Like I did that night in the limo."

"Samantha," he groaned.

"Yes. I can tell you remember. This time I'd do it without a condom, without anything between your flesh and my mouth. I'd run my tongue up and down your shaft like the delicious meal it is. I'd measure your slit and let the essence of you linger on my tongue. It would be difficult, but I'd take your entire length in my mouth, swallowing you and sucking you until you couldn't hold back your release."

He was breathing audibly now. She knew he was as excited as she was. Pinning the phone to her ear with her shoulder, she began to rip off the buttons on her blouse and wriggle out of her pants and panties. Soon she was almost completely naked. She could feel her own dampness at her pussy lips and almost cried out at the need to feel him inside her. She made her way into the bedroom and fell onto the bed.

In between gasps he spoke.

"And while you were sucking my cock, I'd be going down on your beautiful pussy. You taste so good to me, baby. I love the way your clit swells with just a slight puff of air as I separate your outer lips."

Samantha moaned again and reached with her left hand for her pussy. Her fingers slipped in the dew already there.

"While I was sucking your clit, I'd stick two fingers in your hot hole," he added. "I love the way your muscles grab on as if they'll never let me go. I can feel each spasm as you come. Can you feel it?"

"Yes," Samantha panted. "Give me your cock now, Kurt. Please."

"I am baby. I am. Can you take my load? Can you swallow it all?"

"Yes, Kurt. Yes!"

"Here I come," he shouted.

Samantha dropped the phone as her own climax washed over her and stars exploded behind her eyes.

When she finally caught her breath, she realized the phone was lying on the bed. She reached for it and heard that they had not lost the connection.

"Wow," Kurt's chuckle sent a warm surge of happiness over her. "I've never had such an intense experience in my life."

Samantha laughed. "Me, either. Anyway, phone sex isn't something you can really do when you live in the same building."

"After today, I think we should definitely try this again," he said.

"Oh no. If you were downstairs, then I'd want to be feeling this in person. This is reserved just for out of town situations."

"I see. Well, I think I'm going to definitely have to head out of town more often."

Samantha laughed again and they ended the call a few minutes later with Samantha offering to pick him up at the airport since his flight would be arriving in Buffalo shortly after six.

* * *

Kurt paced impatiently at his gate at the Denver Airport late the next afternoon. Numerous thunderstorms rumbling across the Midwest were delaying all the takeoffs, including his flight.

He ran a hand over the back of his neck and closed his eyes as he thought about that incredible phone call with Samantha.

Even after he had exploded in his handkerchief, he'd still been so hard he'd had to take a cold shower before he could meet his father and stepmother for a late dinner.

He'd been tempted to change his flight and take the redeye back just to get to Buffalo in time to wake up Samantha. Instead, he'd been a good soldier and stayed for the final meeting this morning with his father.

The thing was, he had to agree with Ralph. *The Planet* was spread thin across the budget lines. Kurt had been sent to Buffalo to get it back in the thick zone. On paper, the task was simple. In reality, it was tougher.

The editorial department was the only department in the plant that was non-income generating. It also was the reason most people felt compelled to plunk down their hard-earned fifty cents six days a week, and two dollars on Sunday. But, he'd been over the budgets for every other department. There was only one more place to make cuts.

Now came the hard part: convincing Samantha that her department was the place they had to look. He wished this was all happening either before he and Samantha had gotten close or a little later, when he'd had time to make sure her feelings for him were as strong as his were for her. He knew she wanted him. Physically she was so responsive that she was his fantasy come true. It was on the emotional side of things that his footing was less certain.

He pulled at his tie that was suddenly too tight. He wasn't quite sure why he was so worried about the emotional side. He wasn't an emotional guy himself, he had never been before. So why was it so important that he make Samantha feel something emotional for him?

He should be happy as a hog in shit. He had found his match in every sensual area he dreamed of, yet she had an air of

innocence about her as well. He knew that although she'd been with other men, she was truly discovering her sexual appetites with him. Surprisingly that made him greedy. When he had called her last night he wondered for a second if she might not be home. Or worse, if she was home but not alone.

Sure, he had no questions that she had been faithful to him. But he also saw how the people she worked with, hell even just came into contact with on a daily basis, looked at her. For the first time in his life, he didn't want to even think about what she'd be doing and who she'd be doing it with when they went their separate ways.

He didn't want to think at all about going their separate ways. He wanted Samantha in his life. Forever.

He sat down hard on one of the plastic seats in the boarding area.

That was it. That was the rub.

He wanted forever.

She wanted...what?

He rubbed his hand over his clammy brow.

He was in a world of trouble. He loved her and he was about to have to go back to Buffalo and fire her or most of her staff.

Well, she was a professional. He was, too. They would work together to make *The Planet* stronger. If not, then she could be his wife. She wouldn't have to work any more he had enough money to let her do anything she wanted.

"Ah, shit," he mumbled. "This is a cluster fuck."

He shook his head. He had to go into this with a 'can-do' attitude.

He wanted Samantha to be his wife. He had almost asked her last weekend after they had gone home from their afternoon at the zoo and made the sweetest love he'd ever known, but he

wanted a chance to be certain of her response before he asked, that she was as enthralled with him as he was her.

That was a hoot. He'd always been willing to take a chance. On anything. Samantha wasn't anything.

The latest decision from his father didn't change those plans. All it did was change the order. He felt in his pocket for the engagement ring he'd been carrying around with him for a few days, waiting for the right time. Well, there was no right time, no right place. Tonight was the night.

Chapter 12

Samantha stood outside the security gate at the Buffalo/Niagara Regional airport and tried not to worry. Kurt's plane was late.

He'd called her earlier in the afternoon to warn her of the delay taking off from Denver and that he'd catch a cab, but she'd checked online and his flight had finally left Colorado. It had been scheduled to arrive in Buffalo half an hour ago. But with the start of an early-season ice storm in Buffalo, she feared soon the airport would shut down, causing all in-bound flights to be diverted.

She hoped he would be happy that she decided to meet him anyway. She would be happy to see him again. A month ago, she wouldn't have believed she could be this happy in a relationship with any man, especially not one who was in the business and her boss to boot. Things just kept getting better every day she had with Kurt.

She smiled as she remembered their day at Niagara Falls. It had been a magical day, with the bright fall sunshine giving the area a clean aura that was even more special because of the bite in the air. Soon, winter would be upon the region, and the people enjoying the Falls seemed to realize it. Kurt and Samantha had wandered through the funky gift and souvenir shops, and had shared hot dogs and ice cream while walking through the little park that led to the embankment of the Falls. There were couples, some most likely honeymooners, and families

everywhere. All Samantha could think about was what it would be like on a honeymoon with Kurt.

She smiled at the whimsical, romantic thought. They were a long way from getting to that point in their relationship, but for the first time, she thought she had found a man who could put up with her demanding career. Heck, his was even more demanding than her own.

She was even beginning to soften her attitude about personal relationships in the workplace. Kurt was her boss, but it hadn't caused a single problem so far. Maybe the critical part was in the personalities involved. Kurt trusted her abilities, and even though he had first indicated that she would have to sacrifice the quality of her section in order to meet his bottom line, he hadn't said another word about it since then.

Perhaps her arguments had changed his mind. More likely, he'd been in the region long enough to realize just how important sports news and *The Planet's* coverage of it was to their readers.

Some time she'd ask him. But first, she wanted to give him the welcome home he deserved.

She looked at the arrival board anxiously just as the updates changed.

"Transwest Flight T1909 now arriving at gate 63A" a voice over the airport-wide loudspeaker announced.

Samantha expelled a relieved breath. *Kurt's flight*. Because of the security regulations, she wasn't allowed to go to the actual gate, but she moved into a position that he should be able to see her as soon as he cleared the security area.

He looks tired, she thought, then immediately felt warmed by the way his smile lit up his face and eyes when he saw her. She didn't realize she was running until his arms wrapped around her and they kissed. She knew they were standing in a

public place where anyone could see, but she had to let him know just how happy she was to see him. She opened her mouth and met his tongue with her own, wanting only to taste him, to devour him.

His hands moved up from her waist, underneath her open coat and traced the edge of her breast. She hadn't worn a bra today, wanting nothing more than to be able to feel him as close to her as possible. When his thumb tweaked her nipple, she sighed and moved closer, feeling the edge of his erection as their pelvises met.

"God, it's so damn good to see you," he said between biting kisses. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too." She was feeling frantic now and ground her hips against his as she strung bites and licks across his lips. "I know you said you'd take a cab, but I thought this was better," she said, hearing the breathlessness in her own voice.

"Better but not so good," he growled.

Samantha blushed a little and pulled away. Although they weren't exactly causing a scene, it wasn't strictly kosher to be doing what they were doing in the airport.

"I guess we'd better go get your luggage," she said. She wrapped her coat tightly around her. She still felt as if her nipples were about to burst with her desire, but at least it wouldn't be so obvious. Kurt wasn't as lucky. His erection wasn't quite tenting his trousers, but it was clearly outlined by the material. Samantha saw more than one woman looking at it before his coat covered it.

"You're right. Then, we're going to set the land speed record for getting home, woman. There are a few pressing items we need to discuss."

Samantha laughed and went to his side. They walked, arm

in arm, down to the first floor baggage area.

"You look tired," Samantha said, looking for anything to get her mind off the delicious things she planned to spend the night doing with Kurt. "Your meetings didn't go well?"

Kurt sighed. "I guess they were about what I expected. My father isn't the easiest man in the world to work with."

Samantha nodded. "I know. I've probably met him a half a dozen times and he still calls me girlie."

Kurt laughed and shook his head. "Don't feel bad. That's what he calls every woman who works for him. It's a wonder someone hasn't filed a harassment suit against him."

"He's definitely old school, I'll give you that." She paused as he reached down to pick his suitcase off the conveyer belt and pull out the handle that made it easy to roll behind him. They headed for the doors leading to the parking garage. "Is that what wore you out? Just dealing with him?"

"No." Kurt shrugged and looked away. Samantha had the oddest feeling he wasn't telling her everything. "I think I must have gotten a cold or something while I was there. Maybe it was something to do with the altitude."

"Oh." Samantha immediately felt sorry as she unlocked the car and they got in. Sorrier that since he wasn't feeling well she'd have to postpone the special welcome home celebration she'd planned. "Let's get you home then. I was going to buy your dinner, then seduce you. That can wait until later. Right now, you sound like you need to get some rest."

"Seduce me?" he perked up a bit at that.

"Well, yes." Samantha attempted to look coquettish. She felt like an idiot, but the flare in Kurt's eyes told her she was on the right track. "I wanted to do something a little special, so I stopped and did a little shopping. Wine, good food, and lingerie."

Now his grin was full-fledged like the one he had when he

saw her waiting for him.

"Lingerie, huh?" He turned slightly in the passenger seat, running his hand over her arm up to her shoulder. He played a little with the ends of her hair before caressing the line of her neck and breastbone. Samantha shivered a little, her body reacting to him immediately.

"Well," Samantha drawled. "I don't want to ruin the surprise, but it might be black and lacy. Then again, it could be red and see-through."

"Oh man. How long will it take for us to get home?"

"Down, boy. We have to eat first."

"Who needs food? I had some crackers on the plane."

Samantha laughed. "Well, thanks a lot for that. This after I spent all afternoon slaving over a hot stove for you."

"You cooked? For me?"

Samantha laughed. "You don't have to act like this is a miracle, you know."

"Well, let's see, I've known you for six weeks now. I've lived underneath you, too, and I don't think I've ever smelled anything except the aromas of Hanratty's coming from your apartment."

"I'm not that bad. Am I?"

Kurt put his arm around her and pulled her as close to him as he could, considering the bucket seats of her car. "You're not bad at all. In fact, you're perfect, and I'm honored that you'd take the time to cook me a welcome home dinner. I'm also excited about the seduction part of this plan, but I'm willing to be patient, so I'm clay in you hands. Mold me how you wish."

"You'd better wait until you taste the food before thanking me," she said with a grin. "You might be sorry. Although if you can survive the main course, I can guarantee the dessert will be unforgettable."

* * *

Kurt leaned back in her dining room chair and put down his spoon. "Wow. That's all I can say."

Samantha smiled and leaned her chin on her hands, elbows on the table around her bowl. She'd made her mother's famous minestrone soup in the slow-cooker and served it with fresh Italian bread that she'd purchased from Jo-Jo just before going to pick up Kurt. While Kurt was in his apartment unpacking, she'd grated some fresh mozzarella cheese over the bread and melted it in the toaster oven.

He'd eaten two huge bowls of the soup and had just finished the last of the bread a few minutes ago.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Enjoyed it. I can honestly say this is the best meal I've had in Buffalo," he said. "You could open your own place with this recipe alone."

Samantha laughed aloud. "Now, I know you must be sick. It wasn't that good. Besides, we haven't even had dessert yet."

Kurt eyes gleamed. "Believe me, I'm more than ready for dessert, but I beg to differ on the meal, ma'am. I'm a man who knows quality cuisine when he tastes it."

Samantha felt herself blushing at his praise. "Better be careful, sir, you'll have me believing you're buttering me up just to lower the boom."

Kurt stiffened at her words, and Samantha felt as if her world had stopped. "What's wrong?" she asked. "And please don't tell me nothing. I can see it in your face."

He looked down at the silverware sitting beside his plate. He picked up his fork and starting playing with it, making little designs on the white tablecloth.

"I don't want to ruin our evening with this," he finally said. "I've called a meeting of all the department heads for eight

tomorrow. Then there will be an editorial staff meeting at one. All departments."

"You're going to make me wait until tomorrow?" she asked half-teasingly. "I'm going to have to hear this with everyone else? I thought at least after that meal I'd rate a little special treatment."

Kurt sighed. "Samantha, you wanted to keep our personal life separate from our business life. That's what I promised you I could do. Don't you remember that I told you I could, and would, do that?"

"Yes. But things are different now," she said. "Do what you think is right, but I think I have the right to know if it's something that will adversely effect my people. I hoped you'd would feel the same way."

She stood, starting to leave when she realized they were in her apartment. She turned and bit her bottom lip, hoping he wouldn't be able to see just how his lack of trust hurt her.

"Samantha." She heard him move, then felt his hand on her shoulder. "Please, I don't want this to come between us."

She turned and looked at him. "I'm not the one who controls this, Kurt. You do. Obviously, this news is bad. You know it's going to upset me, but you'd rather see me upset at the paper than here. That tells me a lot about the way you think of me."

"No, Samantha, it has nothing to do with that. I just didn't want to ruin our dinner. I didn't want to ruin a night that you'd worked so hard to make special. I wanted to keep these two parts of our lives separate."

She smiled sadly. "You don't even believe what you're saying, or you wouldn't mind telling me now. You don't trust in us."

She was taunting him verbally and she knew it. She saw in

his eyes that he knew it as well.

He sighed deeply. "Fine. Have it your way. Dad wants us to make the cuts now."

Samantha tried to still her racing heart. "Okay. That isn't so bad. You told me weeks ago this was coming. I still think cutting twenty-five percent is too much, but if we must, I'll find a way."

"Dad wants us to cut thirty-five percent, not twenty-five. He wants us to cut thirty-five percent before the end of the year."

Samantha couldn't think for a minute. "Thirty-five percent? Thirty-five percent?"

"That's right."

"That's ridiculous. That isn't possible."

"It is possible. There are several members of the editorial staff who are retiring before the end of the year. We aren't replacing them," Kurt said.

Samantha nodded and paced the room. "That's a good place to start. Although, I'm sure the departments that are being hit will have to scrap to cover all the beats, it's a place to cut that will hurt the least."

Kurt hated what he had to say now, but she had been right about one thing. If he had waited to tell her in front of everyone, it would have been much tougher on her.

"I came up with a plan. Dad approved it. We're going to take three of your copy editors and switch them to the news desk. You're a little heavy there."

She sputtered. There really wasn't another word for it.

"Three? Three of my people? Are you trying to make up the whole thirty-five percent difference in the budget in the sports staff?"

Kurt didn't comment. He figured the worst was best to be told all at once.

"Dad has also authorized that we will no longer travel with

any of our sports teams. No more road games."

Samantha stopped pacing and stared at Kurt. "We're not traveling with anyone? Even the Gladiators?"

"Not even the Gladiators." Kurt agreed. "We have decided that we can get stringers, or in the worst case scenario, just use wire reports on the away games."

"Basically you're telling me that you've taken my one hundred thousand dollar travel budget and cut it completely. I'm just curious, what did you do in the other editorial departments?"

Kurt was silent. He knew she read the answer in his face.

"I thought you understood about this area and *The Planet's* readers. I was wrong. You didn't see anything, did you? You haven't changed one opinion since you came here."

Kurt held his temper, barely. "Don't you think you're taking this a bit too personally? After all, the cards have been on the table for over a year now. Dad, my family, I'm not going to continue to run *The Planet* at a loss. It just isn't smart business. That's what this is. You're too smart of a manager not to understand that."

"Having a newspaper with no news in it isn't smart business, either. Hell, having a newspaper these days isn't smart business if you listen to the media business planners. But *The Planet* has always, and is still to this day, one of the nation's leading money makers. We've continually brought in a twenty to thirty percent profit in a business that normally only sees a ten to twelve percent profit. What's wrong, Kurt, isn't that enough to keep you and your family in mansions?"

Kurt sighed. "Look, on this issue, we just have to agree to disagree. I've done all I can. These are our orders, now we just have to make them work."

"We'll just have to see about that," Samantha said.

"Samantha, I hope you're not considering going over my

head on this. All these plans have Dad's stamp of approval. Trust me, it'll all work out."

Samantha laughed. It wasn't a reassuring sound.

"There's more, isn't there, Kurt?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this wasn't just your fathers idea, was it?"

He looked at her steadily. He wished he could lie. He wanted to lie, more than he had ever wanted to in his life, but he'd never been a coward.

"No. It was my idea. I had the plan. I'd had the beginnings of it before I took over *The Planet*. Being here has solidified it. This will work. This will give me the leverage I need to move all the way to the top. Trust me, this will work."

"Trust you? Trust you? I can never trust you again."

She stalked to the door of her apartment and held it open. "Please leave now. Under the circumstances I'd rather you weren't in my apartment. I'm officially giving you my notice. I'll be moved out by the weekend."

"Sam," he said as he moved to the door. "Please, just think about this before you overreact. This doesn't have to affect us in any way. This is simply business."

She laughed again. The sound tore him neatly in two.

"Us? There is no more us, Kurt. If you think this is simply about business then you don't have a clue to the way I think, nor do we share the same beliefs."

"Sam," he said again.

"No, please. You've said more than enough. I will ask you only once more. Please leave."

He left her apartment and was only halfway down the stairs when he heard the door shut. He would have felt better if she had slammed it the way she'd slammed the door on their relationship. Well, he'd give her some time to think things over.

She'd be more likely to listen to reason in the morning.

He hoped.

Chapter 13

Kurt stood at the front of the large conference room on the first floor of *The Planet*. The room was filled with members from the editorial department. Behind him, on a small stage were the heads of each department, including Samantha.

The meetings with each individual department head that morning had gone pretty much as he expected. There had been frowns, arguments, and, in some cases, vows that the journalists under them would revolt. Most of the managers had quieted when they had scanned the list of cuts and found out just how much the sports department had been hit. The complaints had changed to relief, then happiness that they had missed having to bite that particular bullet.

After that meeting ended, he had hoped to talk to Samantha, but she left the room quickly, talking quietly to the news editor. Kurt didn't like the way the man looked at her or leaned close to her. Then he realized he was overreacting.

Yes, he'd been disappointed to find she had already left the apartment this morning when he woke. He'd rationalized that she had to get an early start, wanting to alert her people of the meeting this afternoon. Perhaps after this meeting, he could catch her attention, ask her to join him for dinner.

"Mr. Boscoe?" Lani Thompson, the reporter currently covering the Gladiators, stood up to ask a question and drew Kurt's thoughts away from Samantha.

"Yes, Lani?" He answered.

"What made management reach the conclusion that we were overstaffed in the sports department?"

"Well..." he began.

"Were market surveys taken? Or did management conduct a reader poll?"

"No. Not really." He had been prepared for tough questions from the staff. He just hadn't been prepared for his thoughts to keep wondering back to the woman who stood behind, and to the left of him. Her presence stood for solidarity. He couldn't help feeling, however, there was an invisible knife lodged right between his shoulder blades.

"I didn't think so. If management had taken a survey, they would have learned the people of Western New York live and die with the sports teams. This isn't just entertainment to our readers. This is their lives."

Kurt tried smiling. "Look, Lani, maybe you're right about the readers' opinions. But we're not taking the coverage away, we're just changing how we deliver it."

Thompson snorted. "Changing the coverage. Right."

Kurt plowed on and pointed to the chart that had been blown up and placed on an easel at the side of the podium.

"Now, listen folks, here's the bottom line. Five years ago, *The Planet* made a net profit of forty-five percent. Due to the rising cost of paper and ink from our suppliers, along with the biggest jump in the cost of employee healthcare in twenty years, this year's profit was down to twenty-five percent. My father thinks, and I agree, this drop is unacceptable in a single newspaper market."

"Are you blaming us, the union, for that?" This came from a copy editor on the other side of the room. Kurt didn't recognize the face or the voice.

"I'm not blaming anyone. I'm merely stating the facts."

Kurt removed the first chart and moved to the next one. "Look at this information. Our ROP, or run of the paper advertising, has dropped fifty percent just this last quarter alone. The downturn in the economy since the war has been sharply felt here in Western New York, and our advertising base has been affected as well. That affects our bottom line. Three regional plants have had major layoffs in the last sixteen months, and if anyone thinks that doesn't effect subscription and classified numbers they are dreaming. And folks, as important as the job you do is to this newspaper, the fact is that these numbers that I've just mentioned are the engine that drives this machine."

Kurt tried to make individual eye contact with a few of the people sitting in the auditorium. What he saw was resigned acceptance. He pressed onward.

"Traditional newspapers all over the world are facing an increasing threat these days. Thirty years ago the threat was from television and radio stations."

"Yes, and we weathered that," Lani said.

"Yes, for the most part, the industry did," Kurt agreed, "although our numbers have never truly recovered from the pre-television days, we did survive. Industry-wide we all made an effort to give people the inside, in-depth stuff they couldn't get in the television and radio sound bites."

"That's right," the male copy editor said. "But you're taking that option away now."

"Because the industry dynamics have changed." Kurt looked around again. There was more than just resigned acceptance on their faces now. There was a glimmer of understanding. "Do you know that since 9/11 the number one source for information in the world is not television? It is not radio. Sadly, it is not newspapers."

"The Internet." The voice was low, but carried distinctly

throughout the auditorium. It also came from behind him and to the left of the podium. Samantha.

Kurt wanted to close his eyes in relief. Now was not the time.

"Ms. Cruise is exactly right. The Internet gives people the immediacy of broadcast news with the extra information of print, and it is incredibly cheap to deliver. No presses, no ink. No delays delivering the product when trucks break down or blizzards make the roads impassable."

He paused again and scanned the faces looking at him. There was no joy, but there also wasn't as much hostility.

"Look, I have spent more hours than I can count trying to figure another way out of this problem. We can and will cut staff by attrition but that is a slow process. Putting a travel ban on all departments is the only acceptable option. Sadly, the department most affected by this is sports. Believe me, this is the best alternative."

The meeting ended a few minutes later. Kurt felt as if he had been through a major battle. When he turned to speak to Samantha, though, he felt his frustration rise. She was completely surrounded by her staff. Although he knew it wasn't intended, it was an effective way to keep him from talking to her. Promising himself that he knew where she lived and would be able to camp outside her door, if necessary, he left the auditorium and headed back upstairs to his office.

* * *

Samantha tiredly brushed her hair back from her face and stood looking in the mirror of the ladies room. It had been the toughest day of her professional career. Now she was facing the toughest night.

What she wanted to do was bury her face in her hands and simply cry everything out. She wouldn't give herself the luxury

however. Not here.

The door opened and Lani Thompson walked in.

"Hey, boss. Another banner day at *The Planet*, huh?"

"I'm sorry, Lani. There just isn't any other way."

Lani nodded. "I know. I would quit, but I'm too old to move and there's no way we can get two newspaper jobs in the same city today."

Samantha felt a pang of guilt, but she smiled, trying to cheer up her friend. "Look at it this way, you'll have twice as many weekends off now. You can do all those domestic projects you're always planning and never had time for."

Lani right. "Yeah, right, that's me, the domestic goddess of Buffalo."

Samantha smiled again. "Hey, who knows, maybe you'll want to come inside and do desk work. You could even be running the whole department."

Lani shook her head, "No, desk work would drive me crazy, and anyway, if they're cutting all the travel out, I don't think they're going to put in extra money to give you another assistant Sports Editor."

The import of what Samantha had said hit Lani. "Unless one of your assistants is planning on leaving. Nah, all of Mike's family is here. Holy cow, you're leaving, aren't you?"

"Shush," Samantha cautioned. Lani's voice had risen considerably. "I haven't announced it yet. In fact, I'm just on my way upstairs now with my letter of resignation."

"Wow, this is going to throw a monkey wrench into old Boscoe's big plans. I never believed you would do this. I thought you agreed with the decision they made."

Samantha shrugged. "No. Given the set of circumstances the Boscoe's have forced on *The Planet*, it is the only logical decision. I can't agree with it. I won't agree to run my

department like that."

"So you're just going to leave? Quit?"

"Yes. I'm giving notice, of course. But it's the only option I have."

"What about your relationship with Kurt?" Lani asked.

Samantha blushed. Although she knew it was almost impossible to keep secrets inside a newsroom, she'd hoped most people didn't know about her and Kurt. They hadn't tried to hide anything but they also hadn't flaunted it.

"We don't have a relationship," she said.

"Samantha, boss, you know I'd never butt in on your business," Lani began.

Samantha laughed at that. "Since when? You were the one who told me he was a hunk and I should go for it when he first came to work here."

Lani smiled. "Okay, maybe I am a busybody. But newspaper aside, heck, career aside, you shouldn't toss away something on the personal front that is good. Something that works for you."

Samantha felt the tears building.

"That's just it. I thought it worked for me, but I was wrong. He wasn't the man I thought he was. I knew there was a reason that office romances don't work, at least for me. I was right."

Lani opened her mouth as if to argue more, then closed it. "Well, I guess there's no changing your mind if you're sure?" Lani's voice held a hint of question. Samantha stamped out the hope inside her that questions raised.

"I'm sure. Don't be glum. It's not like I'm never going to see you again. It'll take me awhile to get another job—although I'm sure it won't be in Western New York."

"Well, good luck."

Samantha nodded and left the ladies room. Now came the

hard part. Part of her, the chicken part, hoped Kurt was either in a meeting or already gone for the day. Then she could just leave her resignation letter on the desk and flee.

As she climbed the steps heading up to the fifth floor, she straightened her spine and slumping shoulders. *Just do it*, she told herself. *Get it over with!*

She reached the door leading from the steps to Kurt's office, took one more moment to compose herself, then walked into his outer office, a smile pasted on her face.

Kurt's secretary Millie Johansson wasn't at her desk. Samantha looked at her watch, noticed it was nearly 5:30, and knew she had probably gone for the day. Maybe her luck was with her and Kurt was gone as well. She edged towards the door leading to Kurt's office.

"Did you need me for something, Samantha?" Kurt's question stopped her just as she reached the inner sanctum. She turned to see him standing behind her. She hoped the fact that just the sight of him took her breath away wasn't written plainly for him to see on her face. That was the galling part. Despite everything, just seeing him made her want him with a need that was nearly palatable. Her mind didn't like it, but her body was ready to cave like a rickety building.

"Yes. I wanted to leave you, I mean, give you this." She felt the blush creep up her face as she looked at him.

He took the plain, unsealed envelope from her, but didn't look at the letter inside.

"I wanted to thank you for backing up me this afternoon with your staff. I know it wasn't easy for you to do," he said.

He moved beside her and as he drew near, she felt a little pang for what might have been. She held her breath and prayed he wouldn't touch her. She was deathly afraid of what she'd do if he did.

"I said what I believed," she said.

"Still, I know it took something to admit I'm right in front of your staff. It wasn't a popular thing to do," he said. He placed the envelope on the desk then leaned his hip against the edge. He crossed his long legs in front of him and motioned to the empty chair. "Please, have a seat."

Samantha shook her head vigorously. "No, I'd better not. I've got an appointment with Joe in fifteen minutes. I don't want to keep him waiting."

"Joe found you another house to look at?" Kurt asked.

"Not exactly."

"Oh. I understand if you don't want to tell me about it. I thought we worked pretty well together going through the other places he showed you, though."

"We did."

He waited, obviously expecting more from her.

"Kurt, I think it's best if I move out. I told you that last night."

"Just because we disagree at work, you're moving out, too?"

"Not only moving out, moving away," Samantha said. "I doubt very seriously if I'll find another newspaper job since Buffalo is a one newspaper town."

Comprehension dawned on Kurt's face. He picked up the envelope he'd placed on his desk. "I'm not going to like what's inside here, am I?"

Samantha started to snap her reply, then, suddenly weary, said, "No."

"You're quitting because a decision was made at corporate headquarters that you don't like? You're giving up a great job? You're giving up a job that you are wonderfully suited for? You're planning on moving from the town you love? All because

you disagree with a decision that was made to help the paper grow stronger, more financially secure?"

Samantha shook her head. "This is what I'm talking about, Kurt. You just don't get it. You didn't get it when you walked into this town six weeks ago. Your father doesn't get it even though he's owned *The Planet* for close to three years. This decision won't make the paper grow stronger. It's a cop out. It's the easy way to go, a quick fix. Worse, it will make me become the kind of newspaper person I promised myself I would never become. In the old days, they used to say 'All the news that's fit to print.'

"Then in the yellow journalism days, people would accuse newspapers of inventing stories just to sell newspapers."

Samantha paused and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"But what you and your father have decided is that we're only going to give the readers the news we can afford. That's selling our readers short. That's selling the city short. I can't be a party to that. Not now. Not here."

Feeling as if she was going to burst into tears, Samantha started to turn away.

"Samantha, wait," Kurt said.

She didn't look back. "No, don't say anything else. Please. Just accept my resignation. That's all there is left to say."

* * *

Kurt stood in his office a long time after he heard the door to the stairs slam behind Samantha. He rubbed his index finger over the beginnings of a headache behind his right eye.

He had hoped she would be logical about this whole thing. He had thought she would just do what needed to be done.

He opened the envelope and read the three short sentences followed by her bold signature and the date.

Darn it, why did she have to bring up all that journalism

stuff? Newspapers were a business. Businesses, now or in any day, were about the bottom line. In this case, he and his father were right.

Okay, he admitted to himself, Samantha had one point.

If I made the rules, I wouldn't be slamming the door so hard now. If I made the rules, a twenty percent profit would be acceptable. "But you don't make the rules, old boy. You just follow them."

He moved to sit behind his desk, putting Samantha's letter aside. He picked up the stack of papers he needed to go through before leaving for the night. After staring unseeingly at them for five minutes, he set them aside, stood, and walked to the window in his office that overlooked the Cobblestone District of Buffalo.

"I'm right. I know I'm right," he said aloud.

"So why do I feel so wrong?"

Chapter 14

The last three weeks of work went by agonizingly slow for Samantha.

She spent the first weekend, with the help of her family who brought their pickup trucks from the farm, moving from her apartment to a new place. Her new apartment was so small that most of her stuff had to be sent to the farm for storage. It was probably silly to move from one apartment to another, especially when it was looking more and more likely she wouldn't be staying anywhere near Buffalo much longer.

Her parents had been insistent she come home. It had made sense—the savings in rent and utilities alone would help when her paychecks stopped coming in two more weeks—but she had held firm against the idea. The thought of moving back to the farm just made her seem like a bigger failure than she already felt.

But, living arrangements were the least of the uncomfortable times. It seemed people from all five floors found an excuse to stop by her office and tell her goodbye. Although some of the wishes were blatantly false, a surprising number of them were heartfelt. Several times Samantha was so moved by the outpouring she was nearly brought to tears. She realized she had a lot of good friends at *The Planet* and knew she would miss them terribly when she was no longer a part of the extended family.

That thought also brought her some home truths about her

feelings for Kurt. Other than that last day in his office, she hadn't seen him. Not a single time since that night. At first, she thought he was avoiding her. Not that she could blame him after the way she'd gotten so emotional on him. If she could go back in time, she'd change everything about that day. She'd change what she said and how she said it, she'd even change the timing of it all. There was no possibility of going back in time, however. She had made her decision, now she had to live with it.

More, she'd change the way things had happened at her apartment the night he'd returned to Buffalo. She'd have skipped dinner and made love to him, all night long. At least she would have had one last memory of them being together, but she couldn't think now about what ifs and what could have beens. She had to focus instead on her future.

Then, on the first day of her last week, she had lunch with Lani.

"Well, I'm very sorry to see you go, boss," Lani said when they were settled at a small table in the cafeteria. The bank of windows faced the arena. It was a gloomy, rainy, cold day. Samantha thought it fitting that the weather mirrored her mood.

"I'll miss you too, Lani," Samantha said. "I wish you'd reconsider and apply for the assistant sports editor job. I'm sure whomever they decide will take my place would love to have you as their number two."

Lani shook her head. "No, I'd miss being out there and getting the stories too much. Even though it isn't going to be the same not going on the road with the team, I still don't think I could handle being on the inside all the time."

Samantha nodded. "I can understand that. If I would have ever been half the writer and reporter you are, I probably would have never moved into management either."

"Speaking of moving into management, have you talked to

Kurt since you gave him your resignation?"

Samantha shook her head. "No. I didn't expect to. I moved into a smaller place, you know. My parents are keeping my things in storage until I find out where I'm going. I didn't really expect to see him here. Most of the times, our paths just didn't cross. Before he became publisher, I probably only saw the publisher once a year."

"Hmm," Lani said, running her finger around the edge of her coffee cup. "Well, I was talking to Millie yesterday. She says Boscoe hasn't been around much himself."

Despite her resolve not to care about him any more, Samantha's interest was piqued.

"Oh, I thought he would be busy putting together all the plans for the changeover." Samantha hoped she sounded nonchalant, but could tell by the look on Lani's face that she wasn't buying it.

"Well, according to Millie, the first week Boscoe was in Denver almost the whole time."

Samantha frowned. "Why would he go back to Denver? He was just there last month. And what could possibly be going on that he'd have to spend the week there? When they decided to slash our budget, that only took two days."

Lani shrugged. "That's the twenty-million dollar question. I thought maybe you might know what's going on."

Samantha laughed hollowly. "You've got to be kidding. I'm so far out of the loop I might as well not be in the building any more."

At that moment, Lani's source came into the dining area carrying a tray with a salad and a bottle of water. Lani waved and Millie came hurrying over.

"Hi Lani, Samantha," Millie said as she set her tray down. "What's going on?"

Lani glanced at Samantha and both women looked at Millie.

"You tell us," Samantha said. "You're the one who looks so excited you're about to burst."

Lani laughed. "Listen to you. I thought you said you didn't have a reporter's instincts."

"No, I said I didn't have *your* instincts. Millie is an open book. Anyone who knows her at all can tell she knows something good."

Millie waved them both off. "I've got no time for chit-chat. You're both right. I've got news and it's big."

"Well, don't keep us waiting. What is it?"

At this point, the old Samantha would have excused herself. Gossip just wasn't her thing, but she was certain that whatever Millie knew had to do with Kurt. Although she told herself the best thing would be just to forget about him and about everything to do with *The Planet*, Samantha didn't know if she could follow her own advice.

Then she thought about Kurt. She thought about how embarrassed he'd be about being discussed like this. She thought about how he deserved to have a staff that was solidly behind him.

And suddenly Samantha realized that even though she had been right following what was in her heart, he'd been equally right. He'd been given an order. Now, he was just trying to follow it to the best of his ability. When he'd told her that he agreed with his father's decision to cut the editorial budgets he hadn't said he'd liked it. He'd just tried to make it work.

Samantha smiled at both Lani and Millie and held up her hand.

"Please, Millie. Don't tell me. And I'd ask you both for my sake, for the sake of our friendship, to not spread the rumors around, no matter what or who they are about. Can you do that

for me?"

Lani looked resigned and Millie perplexed.

"But aren't you at least interested?" Millie asked.

Samantha shook her head. "No. Not now. This chapter of my life is closed. I wish everyone here at *The Planet* the best of luck, but I've got to move on. You all have to as well. Work with Kurt, and if you all pull together, perhaps this paper can be better than anyone ever dreamed. No matter where I am, when that day happens I'll stand up and cheer. For all of you."

Samantha stood and started walking out the door. Only then did she realize their conversation had carried throughout the cafeteria. Well, there was no need for the newsroom grapevine to carry this one, she thought. It had been broadcast news.

* * *

Samantha didn't know what drove her to head back to their house. She also didn't know why she thought Kurt would be there. It was still the middle of the day.

She was suddenly feeling as if she had to make things right with Kurt. She had a feeling she knew what Millie had been going to say. She had a feeling it had all been her fault.

She couldn't let him do it. She couldn't let him sacrifice his career for her. If her feeling was correct, he hadn't only sacrificed his career he'd sacrificed his relationship with his father.

She pulled in the driveway, turned off her car, and walked around to the front porch. Since his car wasn't there, she knew he wasn't home. She decided to wait on the front porch since she no longer had a key to the front door.

Although there was a bite of the coming winter in the air though since she'd left Lani and *The Planet*, the sun had come out and was making its presence felt. It was still warm enough that she knew she wouldn't freeze to death sitting there.

As she sat, she remembered all the warm, wonderful times she had spent in this house. The warmest and most wonderful of them had been after Kurt had arrived. She was remembering the trip to the zoo when he pulled into the driveway.

"Hi," he said when he stood on the walk in front of her.

"Hi yourself," she replied. He was so handsome standing there in the dying sunlight, his dark, curly hair just touching the top of his jacket. Samantha thought she saw a touch of gray at his sideburns and wondered if that had shown up just in the last three weeks. His eyes, the color of a winter sky now, were what brought her up short. They looked weary and there were new worry lines framing them. She ached to touch him and soothe those lines away.

"I heard about what you did in the cafeteria today," he said. "Thank you."

She shook her head. "Don't thank me. You should be kicking me. I'm probably the reason for such division in the staff in the first place."

He moved to sit on the porch beside her. He placed his briefcase down on the step between his legs. "No, you were never that kind of problem for me. You are a team player, but you've also got high standards, high ideals. I admire that."

"High standards? High ideals? That's a laugh," Samantha said. "I'm a coward. Pure and simple. Instead of staying and fighting for my standards and ideals I cut and run. That's nothing to admire."

Samantha paused to take a breath, to gather her courage.

"I cut and run professionally. I cut and run personally."

She held her breath. The ball was literally in his court now. She had bared everything.

"I didn't give you any choice." He finally turned and looked at her. She saw the sadness in his eyes. She saw the love there as

well. Hope bloomed slightly inside her heart.

"Samantha, I love you. I want to marry you. I have almost from the moment I met you." He ran a hand over the back of his neck, then took her hand in his and held it tightly. "But, I've made a mess of this whole thing. I was raised to know the right way to court a woman. I never had to put it to practice, though."

He held up his hand when she would have interrupted. "No, I'm not telling you a lie. I meant that I have never had to take it to the most important deadline. I've dated and I've courted a lot of women. None of them were *the* woman. Until I met you, that is. You are smart, strong, independent, and so much better than I am that I was a little overwhelmed. I thought our love was enough to make everything else unimportant."

"Oh Kurt," she said. "I love you, too. And you're right our love is enough to counter everything else. These last three weeks have been miserable for me. And not just because I'm leaving a job I love. I've learned that the job was truly meaningless to me. What I missed, what I yearned for, was being with you. Sharing the ups and downs with you. No job can replace that."

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. The kiss quickly flared into more than just a meeting of lips. Their bodies accustomed to the touch of the other's hands and mouth, now long denied, were both ravenously hungry. When they finally broke apart, they were both breathing like they'd had run an obstacle course.

"Samantha, I want you so much that my body is on fire for you," Kurt gasped. The flush of desire was etched on his face. She could tell by the way his pants were stretched tight against his body that he was more than willing to finish what they had started. She was more than willing as well and could feel her clit swelling and her juices gathering at her lips.

He took a few calming breaths. "We need to talk. God, I've

got to tell you what I've wanted to say for three weeks now. So please, please, stop looking at me like that."

Samantha laughed. Feelings were racing inside her, churning into a tumbled mass of emotion. She wanted to hear what he had to say. At the same time, she didn't care. All she wanted was to touch him, for him to touch her. She wanted to feel his cock buried into her to the hilt, wanted to feel his release pulse from his body to hers. That want was a burning fever inside her.

"We can talk later," she said, reaching for his hand.

"No, no."

She stopped. "No?"

She slowly undid the buttons of her coat. It was silly. It was a long way from a strip tease, but she could tell by the way his nostrils flared that it was as effective. Underneath her coat, despite the weather, Samantha had on the costume she'd worn the night they'd first met.

"Oh, God, Samantha," he groaned.

Samantha smiled. "I happened to find this buried in one of my boxes."

As if she was a magnet he couldn't resist, he reached out to touch the line of fabric that followed across her collarbone over the sensitive flesh at the tops of her breasts. Her nipples responded as if he had touched them, and she knew he could see the way they tightened under the soft, stretch material.

"The night we met, I was looking for something. I wasn't happy with my life and felt like I was drying up inside. You changed that for me. You showed me the woman I could be, the woman I wanted to be. You allowed me to set her free."

Kurt was shaking his head. "I did nothing except abuse your trust. I was a fraud then. I'm a fraud now."

Samantha reached up and placed her fingers against his lips.

His tongue snaked out and gently licked. From the way his eyes closed and his body shivered, Samantha knew he had been as unable to control his reaction to her as she had been to him.

"Shush," she murmured.

After a soft nibble and kiss, he pulled her hand from his mouth. "No, please, let me explain. I was incredibly unfair to you. All these years I thought I was a modern, liberal man. I had no problems with you being the sports editor. I had no problems with you being the best department manager in the building. Heck, I was even proud of you."

"Thank you," Samantha said.

"No, don't thank me yet. Because it was all a sham, you see. When I stood in front of my father in Denver, I could have argued with him that I had been wrong when I first presented my plan for *The Planet*. I could have told him that having lived here, worked here, things were different. I didn't. You know why? It was easier not to admit I had been wrong."

Kurt stood up now and looked out into the dark street. Samantha could see the lights from the street light system and the neighboring houses flickering to life.

"Nobody really trusted me before, and certainly not my father. He's always said all I cared about was spending money and living the good life. I always thought he wasn't being fair. I worked for him. I worked at newspapers doing every truly shitty job there is. I thought, what else does he want from me?"

"Kurt," Samantha interrupted.

"No. Please, let me get this all out. Just before I came to Buffalo my father and I had it out. All I wanted was a chance to prove I know what I'm doing and get a seat on the Board of Directors. He refused. He told me he could never turn the family business over to me because I wasn't responsible. All I thought about was spending money and getting laid."

Samantha caught her breath.

"Yeah, not a good legacy for a thirty-three year-old man, is it?"

"I don't know what to say," Samantha said.

"There's nothing you can say. It was true. I came to Buffalo determined I was going to prove the old man wrong. I was going to give him what he wanted here. And I was going to keep my pants zipped."

Now he looked right at Samantha. "Problem was, I didn't expect to go to an employee party and be swept off my feet by you. I didn't think, I didn't have a moment's hesitation. I took what you offered and proved my father right before I'd even been here twenty-four hours."

Samantha felt nerves of a different type rush through her. Instead of hot desire, cold pain was her companion.

"I see. So I'm to blame?"

"No, no." He ran a hand over his face. "I'm making a complete mess of this."

He took her hand in his. "Samantha, listen to me. You are not to blame. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life. I don't regret what we did that first night. I don't regret any moment of time I spent with you."

Samantha felt her heart resume its beating. "But..."

"But, I still had my father to deal with. More importantly, I had to resolve my feelings for my father to deal with. That's where I blew things three weeks ago. When I went to meet him, I knew the things I should have said. I knew what I should have done. Instead, I took the coward's way. I thought I could have you and have his respect, too."

Samantha felt her heart breaking. She knew what it was like to not have a family's approval. At least in her case, her family still supported her even if they didn't understand.

"I figured you'd go along with whatever I asked. Because your job, your career was secondary to mine. Because I am the man."

"Oh Kurt," Samantha, said ready to jump in his arms and tell him it was okay. He didn't need to torture himself so much over those absolutely normal thoughts.

"No, Samantha, please don't touch me yet. If you do, I'll never finish what I have to say."

Samantha stood as well, but instead of going and wrapping her arms around him, she leaned back against the porch column. "Okay. Finish what you want to say."

"I'm sorry, Samantha. Sorry that I thought your career less than mine, sorry that I didn't believe enough in you and your experience. Sorry I was so concerned about winning my father's approval that I lost the approval and respect of the most important person in the world, you. If you'll let me try, I'll work hard every day for the rest of my life to prove that I've learned my lesson."

At this Samantha laughed. "Every day? For the rest of your life? Wow, that's quite a promise. How do you hope to do it?"

He turned then and laughed with her. "Well I don't know exactly. You see, starting Monday, I have to hunt for a new job."

Samantha gasped. Now she knew what Millie had been about to tell in the cafeteria. "A new job? But what happened to your job at *The Planet*?"

"I went back to Denver two weeks ago. This time I took your original plan for cutting back. I also told Dad that I would take a pay cut to help trim the budget even more."

"You didn't! But why?"

"Because you were right. Because *The Planet* does mean too much to this town, this area, and to these people to take the easy way out. I stopped in at B&B Butcher Shop the day after

you moved out. I had a long talk with Jo-Jo. Do you know that he has a collection of every sports section for each Gladiators football game since the team came to Buffalo? He keeps them in the storage room behind the deli."

"I know. One of the center spreads I planned on having in the Sunday paper next month was on his collection. He's got them sealed and everything. They're in better condition than even our library could have kept them."

"I know. It's truly amazing. And I've been meeting more and more people like that every day. But, even if I hadn't met them, you still would have been right. I've been involved with newspapers since I was a kid, but I never really understood it. You taught me to understand it, you and the other people at *The Planet*. It's about deadlines. It's about excitement. It's about giving the public the information they need to live their lives. Sometimes it comes down to only doing the right thing. No matter what."

Samantha smiled and looked at Kurt. She saw everything she'd ever dreamed of in his eyes. She felt like crying. She felt like laughing.

She chose the second option and launched herself into his arms.

He swung her around in his arms and kissed her exuberantly. Then he carried her into their house into his apartment, kissing her again as the lights in Delaware Park blared to life.

They only made it as far as the couch before he fell against the cushions. She tore his shirt off him while he tore her coat and Athena costume off her. Finally, their flesh met, breast to chest. Samantha sighed in relief at the feeling. He pulled her closer to him and their lips merged in a kiss that stole the soul from her. She didn't care.

Lips, teeth, and tongue all worked with hands.

"It's been too long," she sighed as her mouth followed her hands across his chest down his perfect abs until she reached the belt of his pants.

"You feel so soft," he murmured as he pulled her back up to his mouth and ran his hands over her spine and down to cup her buttocks against him. She felt the length of his cock under his pants and settled her hips securely over him.

"I need you now." She moved her hands, undid his belt, and unzipped his pants. The tip of his cock was visible just about the waistband of his jockeys. She had to taste him.

Before she could move, though, he held her still.

"Not this time," he said. "I want this time, our first time, to be inside you."

He wiggled his hips and his underwear slid downward, his cock jumping free. She slid over him, feeling her juices coat his head. He held still just for a moment and she understood that he wanted to prolong the feeling. He was throbbing with need and resting just against her pussy lips. It took every ounce of restraint to stay still. Her clit was swollen and she needed him inside her.

He brought his mouth down on hers and their tongues mated. At that exact moment, he flexed his hips and his cock found its home deep inside her canal.

"Oh God, Kurt," she cried as her orgasm began in her soul and rolled out throughout his body. Her body began to dance on his and his responded as well, hips meeting hips, cock rasping inner walls and touching the mouth of her womb.

When her climax reached its apex, he was panting and thrusting in perfect rhythm his come mixing with her own release as their bodies shuddered together.

A long, long time later when they finally able to talk without gasping, she lay in his arms, tracing the shape of his

nipples while he traced a line down her shoulder and arm to her wrist. She felt as if the world were perfect in every way.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

He sighed and looked deeply in her eyes.

"Well, first, you've got to answer my question."

"What question is that?"

"Will you marry a unemployed newspaper man with a huge mortgage and no visible means of support?"

"Absolutely," she said.

He clapped his hands and let out a whoop.

"Great. We've got to get busy. We can go to Niagara Falls and get married this weekend. Then I can take you on a honeymoon. We'll go to Tennessee to meet my mother. She's really not half bad, even if she did have the bad taste to marry my father. Maybe we can even look for some jobs down there while we're visiting. If we can't find any good jobs, we'll come back here and just go with the flow."

She put her hand on his arm and looked at him. Joy was bubbling inside her, but she knew she shouldn't make this so easy.

"Wait a minute," she said. "You want to get married this weekend? Just like that?"

He stopped and looked a little deflated. "Oh. I guess that wasn't very romantic, was it? You probably want a big wedding with all your friends and family, huh? That'll probably take what, a week or two to arrange?"

Samantha laughed. "Boy, for a gently-bred southern gentleman you really don't have a clue. It takes at least six months to plan a wedding like that."

Now he looked completely deflated. "Six months," he sighed heavily. "Well..."

"...that's absolutely unacceptable," she finished. "So, let's

get to Niagara Falls. Just let me make a call and have someone check on Zip while we're gone."

Kurt laughed and pulled her into his arms. "Darling, that's something I can live with."

Their kisses soon became so heated it was like they hadn't both just reached incredible climaxes. Samantha wanted to feel everything with this man, wanted him to touch her everywhere at once. When he urged her from her back onto her stomach, she held her breath.

He kissed a line down her spine to the indentation of her buttocks. She tensed a little when he brought the palm of his hand down briskly against her right cheek. The slight sting was extremely erotic.

When his lips brushed at the stinging spot, she quivered.

"Samantha," he breathed, "will you let me touch you here?"

"I'm a little scared," she admitted.

"I promise if it feels anything other than perfect, I'll stop," he murmured. He began kissing her ass checks again, moving his lips slowly across her until he reached the crack. He spread it open and she could feel the way her anus puckered when his breath caressed there. "You are so beautiful to me."

She flexed her hips more fully against him. When his tongue explored gently at first around her hole she felt her tension evaporate as if it were a mist. As his mouth worked her one hand reached around to her labia and slipped between her folds. He found her clit and massaged it gently. It was an indescribable feeling having his mouth and fingers on her at the same time as if there wasn't a single inch of her he wasn't part of.

Suddenly his mouth left her ass and she felt his hands lifting her higher until she was resting on her knees.

One hand returned to her ass and a finger ran around her

hole.

"Tell me if this doesn't feel good," he said. "Just one word from you and I'll stop."

Samantha held her breath. She trusted him. Not only with her love, but with her body and life as well.

"If feels wonderful, Kurt. Don't stop now."

She felt him move so that he was kneeling behind her, his hands around her waist. She felt the head of his cock rubbing gently down her crack. She knew he was aroused as she could feel his pre-come acting like a lubricant. Slowly, a centimeter at a time, his cock worked his way inside her.

"Ohhh," she cried when she felt the head all the way inside her.

"Stop?" he panted.

"God no," she cried, flexing her ass and feeling him slip deeper inside her. "Kurt, I feel you. You're inside my ass!"

He held still for a moment. She could feel her heartbeats and his thrumming through her entire body.

Slowly, gently he pulled out a little and then slid back in. The feeling was like nothing she'd ever known in her life. When he slid his hand down her stomach and reached again for her pussy, she pushed her hips back against him hard and heard the slap of her cheeks against his pelvis. She came with such a force she briefly lost consciousness but not before she felt his own release firing inside her.

Epilogue

SIX MONTHS LATER

"Samantha?!?"

"What's wrong now?" she walked to where her husband of six months stood looking at her latest budget proposal.

"What are you trying to do? Put us in bankruptcy before we even get out of the first quarter?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you okayed a salary for the new football writer that's higher than both our salaries together. Who the heck is it?"

"Oh hi, boss, am I interrupting at a bad time?" Lani Thompson asked as she stuck her head around the door of the small all-in-one office they had rented.

"Kurt, meet our new football writer."

Kurt smiled and took Lani's hand in his own and shook it. "Welcome to the *Buffalo Register*," he said. "I've heard some good things about you."

"Thank you," Lani replied, equally serious. "I heard about an exciting new weekly paper starting up, and I just wanted to be a part of the team."

Kurt nodded. "Well, we've got a big job ahead of us, but so far the response has been great."

Samantha smiled at her husband and rested a hand on her stomach where their child lay. They hadn't found jobs in Tennessee. In fact, after getting married at Niagara Falls, they

hadn't even tried to find jobs. When they returned from their honeymoon, Jo-Jo had been waiting for them. He had a business proposal. It seemed the Hanratty brothers were interested in making an investment in the newspaper business. They had originally wanted Samantha and Kurt to help them invest in *The Planet*.

When Jo-Jo had learned neither Sam nor Kurt worked there any longer, he had offered to front them the money to buy a press and form their own newspaper. The only thing Jo-Jo asked was that for now, it be a sports only paper.

They also offered their readers the choice of reading their paper on the Internet. It was a bridge between the old and the new.

Samantha and Kurt had only taken a few hours to discuss it before deciding to take a chance. Kurt had some savings left after buying the house and Samantha had a stake as well. When her family had surprised them with a sizeable financial gift for a wedding present, they had been able to get a brand new press, their own Internet service system, and rent good office space near their home as well.

They had published eight issues so far, and their news to advertising ratio had been holding steady. Although they were far from being in the black, they were climbing each month, with Samantha handling the editorial content and Kurt the advertising.

Life was better than she ever imagined.

Samantha smiled when she realized both Kurt and Lani were looking oddly at her.

"What's wrong?" Kurt demanded, a look of panic crossing his face. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

Samantha laughed. "No, we're fine. We're all great. I've got some more news for you, though."

"Don't tell me it's something we have to stop the presses

for," he replied. "You know every time we have to change something in the middle of the print run it's money down the drain."

"No, it's nothing like that," Samantha assured him. "I just got a call from the doctor, though. You know how we decided to find out whether the baby is a girl or boy ahead of time?"

Kurt dropped his paper and rushed to her side. "Yes. What does the test say?"

"Both."

Kurt stopped in his tracks. "Both?" he asked, wonderingly.

Samantha laughed again. "That's right. The doctor says it's hot off the presses. They're twins."

About the Author

Life is a smorgasbord of men. Trixie Stilletto believes in diving in like a starving woman hitting an all-you-can-eat buffet!

Trixie loves men and has been fortunate enough to work—and play!—with some of the most intriguing ones on this fair earth. There's a little piece of each one in every hero she creates. She's had all manner of odd jobs, such as roadie on a rock tour, waitress, cook and bottle washer for an all-night dive, truck driver, dancer, truly horrendous singer and, of course, writer. She writes erotic romances because it's much more fun to keep the bedroom door wide open. She is multi-published in erotic romance and traditional romance. *Hot Off the Presses* is her first full-length erotic romance novel.

Trixie's philosophy in life is simple. Love what you do and who you're with and they'll love you in return. Come and join her as she dives into the next delicious dessert.

Visit Trixie online at www.TrixieStilletto.com.