



*Trinidad West*



6470A Glenway Avenue, #109  
Cincinnati, OH 45211-5222

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For the first time since returning home, Dennie began to feel it wasn't a mistake. She leaned back in the lawn chair and gazed up at the sunlight filtering through the leaves that shaded her, letting the sound of children playing in the pool wash over her. A few more afternoons like this and she just might start feeling good about her life again. Cold drink in hand, warm breeze playing over her skin, surrounded by a welcoming family—maybe not *her* family, but a family she'd known for decades.

Her mother's old friend Beverly had cried when they'd bumped into each other in the cookies and crackers isle of the grocery store not long after Dennie's return. Why hadn't Dennie called, Beverly wanted to know. Why had she been such a stranger since they last spoke at Dennie's father's funeral? The family would be gathering at the house on Saturday. Did Dennie have any plans?

So Dennie became an honorary member of the Brandon family, invited to weekend barbeques and mid-week suppers and sent home with leftovers like she was a twenty-year-old just starting out on her own, not a forty-year-old trying to figure out how to start over after running a business and a marriage into the ground.

A splash of pool water hit her feet, accompanied by a happy shriek, reminding her that she was supposed to be keeping an eye on the children while their mothers fussed with something in the house. Beverly's grandchildren were a pretty well-behaved bunch, like their parents had been when she used to baby-sit them. Lord, that made her feel old. She had been feeling old since talking to James on the phone earlier in the week. She

couldn't believe she'd actually recognized his voice when she answered the phone for Beverly. She hadn't spoken to him for nearly fourteen years, and he'd been only sixteen then. Of course his voice had changed, but it still sounded like the old James. They talked for half an hour before she went to find Beverly for him.

Dennie had been thinking about that phone call ever since. How could someone she still thought of as a child sound so grown up and, well, honestly, sexy? How could little James, with his freshly changed, awkward voice, have turned into a confident-sounding man who's voice had so befuddled her that thinking about it the next day while she was scraping paint made her forget she was standing on a stool. When she stepped back to admire the wood emerging from under the paint, her ankle folded in under her and she landed hard on her butt. The resulting limp didn't make her feel any younger, either.

"I think Uncle James is here. It's his birthday, you know," eight-year-old Eleanor informed her. The girl sat writing in code with a piece of chalk on the concrete.

Dennie sat up a little straighter and peered over the back of her chair, but she didn't see any sign of him. "Your grandmother didn't tell me."

"She probably just thought you knew. She always makes a big deal about his birthday. My mom brought the decorations."

So that's what the sisters were so busy with in the house. Putting up the birthday decorations for their big brother.

"He's my favorite uncle," Eleanor confided, leaning a little toward Dennie.

"Why's he your favorite?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't know. He just is."

Dennie nodded, feeling a little buzz of unspoken female communication. Even eight-year-old girls knew a charmer when

they saw one, and James had always been a charmer, even when he was Eleanor's age.

Eleanor suddenly jumped up and ran toward the house, her chalk and her conversation with Dennie forgotten. Dennie stayed put. She was glad she could not abandon her post as pool watcher. Then again, she did not want to have to greet James sitting down. That was always awkward, not to mention unattractive if it meant squinting up into the sun. She put down her watery iced tea and stood up. She'd been sitting too long anyway and her ankle had stiffened up. She was sticking her foot out, rotating it in front of her, when Beverly came out of the house.

"Here come reinforcements," the older woman called out.

Dennie turned around and—and for a moment she couldn't even think. He was dressed to swim in baggy trunks. His flawless skin revealed the contours of perfect, subtly defined muscles. He was so beautiful she could hardly stand to look at him, but she couldn't stand not to either. She knew the instant he recognized her, when his eyes widened and he went very still.

"Dennie." Did his voice crack a little?

She nodded. Her mouth had gone dry. Then somehow he was standing in front of her and his arms went around her in a tight hug, and she felt all that fabulous skin pressed up against her. *God, he smells good.* She put her hands tentatively on his back and hugged him back. His skin felt wonderfully cool, but she felt heat flare up inside her.

James stepped back and put his hand on her cheek. "I think you've been out in the sun too long."

Which of course sent more blood rushing to her face. She was saved from stammering like an idiot when two dripping-wet nieces ran up and took James' hands and tried to pull him toward the pool.

"C'mon, Uncle James. We've been waiting all day for you."

He let them drag him a few steps but he kept his eyes on Dennie.

"We'll catch up later?"

She nodded and watched James resist the little girls just enough that they had to work to get him into the pool.

"I think I didn't do too badly with that one," Beverly said with satisfaction. "Even if he was the one I learned on."

"You must have had girls beating your door down," Dennie said, trying to keep the awe out of her voice.

"Not especially. But, yes, I see what you mean. They probably would have been lining up if he hadn't discouraged them."

"Oh." Dennie tore her eyes from the vision in the pool and looked at Beverly. "I didn't realize." *How stupid can you be, Dennie?* She felt herself blushing even more furiously.

"No, not that, silly. He liked some of the girls well enough, but.... Didn't you realize?"

Dennie shook her head, feeling completely at sea.

"He was waiting to be grown up enough for you."

"For me?" Dennie repeated. "James?"

Beverly smiled at the confused expression on Dennie's face. "I thought you saw it. I always thought that was why you were extra nice to him."

"He was a sweet kid. Boy, how did I miss that, with all the time I spent over here?"

"I guess we see what we expect to see," Beverly said with a shrug. "I don't know about you, but I need a drink. Follow me."

Dennie looked back at the pool, where James watched her while a little girl climbed onto his shoulders. She gave him a weak smile and turned to follow Beverly obediently into the house. They avoided the kitchen, where Beverly's daughters had

two blenders going, making something pink and icy.

"I think we need something stronger than that," Beverly said with a sympathetic smile. She led Dennie to the art deco liquor cabinet in the dining room and poured something clear and potent-looking into two glasses, which she set down on the table.

"Sit."

Dennie sat and took a sip of her drink. Not gin, at least. She hated gin.

Beverly took her own drink to the window that looked out on the back yard and the pool. "He was eight years old when he first told me he planned to marry you when he grew up." She turned and smiled at Dennie. "Your mother and I had a fine time pretending to plan the wedding."

Dennie gulped her drink, but she doubted it would help her adjust to this new information.

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you," Beverly said, walking back to the liquor cabinet and putting her empty glass down. "You know how I speak before I think. But I admit, it's the first thought I had when I heard about your divorce."

"Jeez, Beverly. Is that why you've been inviting me over?"

"Of course not. I invite you because you're family and because I like having you around. Anyway, keep your mind open. He'll be here for a week, then back off the to the City. Of course, seeing the way he looked at you, I don't think you'll need a week. He may have stopped waiting, but James has never been one to pass up an opportunity." She topped off Dennie's drink and patted her on the shoulder before joining her daughters in the kitchen.

Staggered by Beverly's revelation, Dennie got up and stood by the window in the spot Beverly had vacated. James was playing a game with the four children that involved a lot of squealing and splashing. A lifetime ago, she had played similar

games with him and the other Brandon children in that pool. From eighth grade on, she'd practically lived at the Brandon's during the summers, watching the children and doing chores while Beverly took whoever was the baby at the time with her to work at the family business. She had taught James to float on his back. She could remember standing in the shallow end of the pool and propping him up with her hand at the small of his back until he was ready to float on his own. She had an unbidden sensory recollection of the feel of his skin against her hand when he hugged her just minutes ago, and her hand tingled. It actually tingled. *Get a grip, Dennie.*

\* \* \*

James had changed into shorts and a T-shirt, and the family was squeezing around two picnic tables set end to end in the back yard. Dennie hesitated, her plate of barbequed chicken and baked beans in one hand, a bottle of water in the other, and the drink Beverly had given her still dancing in her head.

"Come sit down, Dennie." James smiled up at her, indicating a space between him and a brother-in-law that might have been wide enough for a supermodel on a hunger strike, but not for a nearly middle-aged woman with a taste for chocolate. He inched a little closer to Beverly, who sat on his other side. "There's plenty of room."

Dennie eyed the small space on the bench warily, but James' smile was so warm and so reminiscent of the little boy she used to like so much that she couldn't refuse. She put her food down on the table and stepped over the bench. The brother-in-law moved enough to give her another desperately need inch, and she sat down to happily discover that it wasn't such a squeeze after all. So why did James' knee bump up against hers as soon as she got settled? More to the point, why did it stay bumped up against her leg?

He was talking to his mother, answering her questions about the summer course for teachers he had just completed, but she could still feel his awareness through his leg. She felt the warmth of his bare skin through her cotton skirt and couldn't decide if she was glad her skirt came between them or if she wished she were wearing something shorter so she could feel his skin against hers. She wondered if anybody would notice if she put her hand on his leg, just for a second, just long enough to feel him against the palm of her hand.

"Aren't you going to eat, Dennie?"

Her head snapped up. Oh, God, she'd been staring at her plate and thinking about his leg. She picked up her chicken and smiled. "Lost in thought," she said, feeling like the neighborhood eccentric.

"Mom tells me you've been fixing up your parents' house."

Dennie nodded and swallowed the bite of chicken in her mouth. "There's a fabulous house hidden under all that paint. I had no idea until I saw a restored bungalow in Pasadena last year."

"Sounds like a big job."

Dennie shrugged. "I seem to have a lot of time on my hands these days."

James' knee moved ever so slightly up and down against hers. "Maybe I can come see it while I'm here," he said.

Dennie nodded. She could handle the conversation, but the subtext was killing her. She took a bite of beans to avoid speaking.

"I guess it hasn't been a very good year for you," he said.

Dennie felt a little knot loosen in her stomach. She leaned closer to him and whispered, "I found out that my husband was screwing one of his graduate students and investing our savings in her father's business to try to win the approval of her family.

I've had better years."

"Ouch. I didn't know it was that bad."

"I haven't been exactly eager to share the details with your mother. Hardly my proudest moment."

"You look like you landed on your feet, though."

"Well, I crawled back up to my feet, at least. I'll tell you, you haven't seen pathetic until you've seen a cheated-on woman who's eaten nothing but ice cream for a week."

James leaned back to look at her. "Nothing else at all?"

"And cheap red wine," Dennie admitted.

"Impressive."

"And coffee, of course."

"Of course. What kind of ice cream?"

"Every kind, I think. Plus sauces. But no sherbet. Sherbet and wine just don't go together."

"Maybe with white wine."

Dennie bit into her chicken and shrugged.

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Dennie," James said, "but I'm glad you came back."

Dennie looked around the table at three generations of Brandons and realized that she felt truly at ease for the first time in months. "Yeah, me too."

It took no effort at all to let her hand drop casually to her lap while she speared beans with her fork, and only the smallest effort to move it a few inches to the right to rest on James' leg. She felt him go still when her fingers brushed against the inside of his leg just above the knee. She only left her hand there for the count of three, but afterwards she couldn't look at him. What had she been thinking? With that simple touch she'd revealed something to him that she wasn't ready to articulate even to herself.

*Great, Dennie. Really great.* She'd actually made a move on

James—James whom she used to read Golden Books to. Could she have done anything more stupid?

When the party moved into the house for the opening of presents, Dennie shrank into the background. She felt bad about not having brought a present for James, but she was also relieved that she hadn't known it was his birthday. What on earth would she have gotten for him? She was much happier claiming blissful ignorance than she would have been waiting in dread to find out if she got the right thing.

Dennie leaned against a doorframe and watched while James let the kids take turns unwrapping packages for him. Books and CDs, mostly disguised in larger boxes, were the order of the day, and Dennie supposed with relief that she would probably have taken that route if she had known.

When the room was a shambles of wrapping paper and ribbons, Beverly stood up and announced, "Cake and kisses!"

Dennie looked toward James in horror. She could not read the expression on his face, but he was looking right at her. How could she have forgotten Beverly's birthday tradition that required giving the birthday boy or girl a kiss in exchange for a piece of cake. It was supposed to ensure good luck until the person's next birthday. The cake looked wonderfully chocolaty, but Dennie decided it wasn't worth even the price of a peck on James' cheek in front of the entire family. If she needed something sweet later, she had her emergency Hostess cupcakes at home.

While everyone else followed Beverly to the dining room, Dennie slipped outside unnoticed. The air was still hot, even with the sun just set, and smelled of chlorine and Beverly's roses that edged the yard. She sat down on the warm concrete at the edge of the pool and slipped her sandals off. Dipping her feet into the water, she leaned back on her hands. Her ankle ached

from standing for too long and the cool water felt good on it. She looked out over the suburban rooftops to the foothills beyond and the evening star shining above them but saw no sign of fog rolling over the hills from the ocean to cool off the valley.

It was nearly dark when James joined her, sitting close but not too close, with a piece of cake on a plate and a cup of coffee. Dennie thanked him with a smile and tasted the cake. She took another bite and rolled her eyes. The cake was moist and dense and tasted of extra dark chocolate. The whipped cream frosting had the same dark chocolate flavor but its light texture contrasted with the cake, and the raspberry filling tied it all together perfectly.

"You let children eat this cake?"

"Good, huh?"

"Good? It's indecent. I wouldn't be surprised if it was illegal in some states."

"I'm sorry I didn't make it to your parents' funerals, Dennie."

Dennie washed down a bite cake with a sip of coffee. Too bad she couldn't wash away the wave of sadness that his words brought. "You'd moved away, James. Nobody expected you to drop everything to be there."

"But I wanted to be there. I wanted to be there for you. But when your mother died, I figured you had your husband, so you wouldn't need me. Then when your father died, I was seeing this woman who was having her own crisis, and she needed me with her."

"You did the right thing, then."

"I know, but I resented her for it afterwards." He gazed into the water for a moment, then said, "I heard how your husband acted at the funeral."

"He actually did turn off his phone at the funeral," Dennie

said with a little laugh that surprised her with its lack of bitterness. "I think he thought he was being well behaved beyond the call of duty. It was during the reception at the house afterwards that he was on the phone the whole time. With his graduate student, probably. Anyway, you wrote those nice letters. They made me cry."

James sighed. "They were supposed to make you feel better."

"They did, when I was done crying." When she had finished the cake she said, "I still have them."

"The letters?"

Dennie nodded and put down the empty plate with a contented sigh and wondered briefly if there was any leftover cake.

Kicking her feet in the water, she thought how nice it would have been to have had somebody to lean on when her father died and during the years of his decline. Right now she wanted nothing more than to lean against James' shoulder and forget about all the decisions she needed to make about her future, but she was determined not to indulge in that kind of weakness. Instead, she sat and enjoyed the companionable quiet. Summer evenings made her feel like she had all the time in the world.

"Cake and kisses, Dennie," James said softly after a few minutes.

The words floated down to her like a caress that woke her from a long hibernation. They terrified her and they pleased her, all at the same time. Her heart pounded, but she couldn't turn her head to look at him.

"Dennie," he said, his mouth close to her ear. "Kiss me."

He was leaning so close to her that the action of turning her head brought her lips into contact with his. *Think fast, Dennie. Keep it chaste? Friendly with a hint of something else? Tongue?*

*Ravenous assault?*

Then he sighed her name against her mouth and all thought abandoned her as she tilted her head and caressed his lower lip with hers. She thought she felt him tremble as she ran her tongue along his lip. His hands came up to her face and he coaxed her mouth wider open as their tongues met. Dennie moaned as his tongue explored her mouth.

When James finally pulled back to look at her, she felt light-headed and she realized she was clutching the front of his shirt in her fists for support.

"Jill and Henry are about to leave. Come say good-bye, James." Beverly's voice cut through the twilight.

James straightened up and put his hands over Dennie's.

"I'll be right there," he called over Dennie's head.

Dennie slid her hands out from under his and hoped he didn't feel how they were shaking. She kept her eyes firmly on his chest, too cowardly to look at him.

"Go," she said. "They're waiting."

He paused, and Dennie was afraid she was going to kiss her again. Then he jumped to his feet and she was disappointed that he hadn't. She turned to admire him as he walked away from her, silhouetted by the light from the house. She almost allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to wake up next to such a fabulous bundle of energy. Instead she leaned over to plunge her hands into the pool and tried to cool off her face with the water. What she really needed was to plunge her entire self into the pool, but she doubted even that would undo the effects of that kiss. One kiss, and she could feel the moisture threatening to soak through her panties. An hour of sanding stair rails might cool her off if she could manage not to think about him while she worked.

Fat chance! That kiss as was going to get her through the

rest of the summer. She would hold it up as a shining hope that there just might be life after divorce and near financial ruin—but with somebody she had yet to meet, not with the boy she used to baby-sit. She had heard enough stories of middle-aged women making fools of themselves over younger men. She would take the kiss for what it was—something they had both apparently needed to get out of their systems—and nothing more. Not a manifestation of long-suppressed feelings. Not a declaration of anything deep and meaningful. Not even the opening scene of a summer fling.

Dennie put on her sandals and her confident woman-with-much-to-do face and went back into the house, irritated that her limp detracted somewhat from the image she wanted to project. She retrieved her keys from the kitchen counter and followed the sound of Beverly's voice into the living room, where she and James were stuffing wrapping paper into a garbage bag.

James looked up and smiled, but Dennie remained resolute. She did not let her brisk-woman face soften into a recently-kissed-woman face, let alone a woman-still-feeling-the-effects-of-a-kiss face.

"Happy birthday, James. Thanks for inviting me, Beverly. I'm off."

"You're not planning to walk home on that ankle, are you?" Beverly asked, sounding as though Dennie intended to walk home stark naked.

"Sure. It'll be good for it." She meant to turn and walk away, but Beverly's maternal scowl pinned her where she stood.

"Don't be ridiculous. James will drive you home."

She should have seen that coming. "It's only five blocks, Beverly. I walked here. I can walk back. I'll call you when I get home if that'll make you feel any better."

"James will drive you home," Beverly repeated. She turned

to her son. "She hurt her ankle a few days ago. She probably shouldn't be walking on it at all."

"Humor her, Dennie," James said. "I'll never hear the end of it you walk." He moved to stand beside her, took her arm, and turned her toward the door.

Dennie tried to ignore the way James' light touch on her arm resonated through her whole body.

"I won't wait up," Beverly said happily.

Dennie glared at Beverly over her shoulder. What plan would she have conjured up if Dennie hadn't conveniently hurt her ankle?

On the front porch, Dennie pulled her arm from James' hand. "She's throwing us together!"

"Is that so bad?" James asked, heading down the porch steps.

Dennie stopped and looked at his back. *Of course, it's bad.* "I don't like being told what to do."

He turned to face her. "Yeah, I remember that about you. Will you just let me drive you home so I can avoid the wrath of my mother?"

"Fine," Dennie answered. *Oh, no, that sounded petulant.* "Thanks, James," she added.

By the time they got to his car, parked several houses down the street, Dennie's ankle was throbbing and she was glad she didn't have to walk home, but she wasn't about to admit it. She was grateful that James didn't attempt to chat on the short drive. She rolled the window down and watched the familiar neighborhood roll by. Being in a car on a summer night left her feeling pleasantly nostalgic. Maybe it had something to do with the absolute freedom that summer used to bring. Once upon a time, summer nights were long and full of promise and never sullied by thoughts of what had to be accomplished the next day.

She didn't want to get out of the car when James pulled up in front of her house, but when he walked around and opened the door for her, she couldn't just keep sitting there. Her ankle had stiffened up again. She thought she managed to hide the limp as they walked away from the car, but going up the porch steps, she had to lean heavily on the railing. James offered his hand but she waved him away.

"Determined not to let anyone help, aren't you?"

"I'm fine."

Undeterred, he ascended the steps beside her, ready to offer support should she need it. "I used to let you help me with my homework all the time," he reminded her.

"That's because you never wanted to take the time to read the directions."

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest. "I'd forgotten that. No wonder it drives me crazy when my students do it."

Dennie unlocked the door and pushed it open. "Serves you right. Good night, James. Thanks for the ride."

"Aren't you going to invite me in to see the house?"

Didn't the man know a firm good night when he heard one? "My ankle really hurts," she admitted. "I just want to sit down."

"Then sit down and I'll rub your ankle. It'll help. I promise." He raised his eyebrows in a silent plea.

She looked away from him. How could she think straight when he used that look on her? It was the same look he used to use when he'd beg her to let him stay up an extra half hour when she baby-sat. It always worked back then, too.

"Fine. Come in," she relented with a sigh. She'd let him visit for fifteen minutes, tops, then send him home.

She held the door open for him, then locked it behind him and flipped a switch, illuminating the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling. Dennie watched him as he looked around the

shambles of the entry hall and peered into the dark living room, where the furniture was shrouded under drop cloths. Under their feet, the linoleum was half peeled up, revealing the wood beneath. On one wall of the entry, the wide strips of wood trim were painted a dingy cream color. On the other side, the trim was mostly naked wood, showing streaks of paint that still needed to be sanded away.

"I thought I'd work from the front door in," Dennie explained, "but then I got distracted by the staircase."

"Where are you living?"

"Here, I'll show you," she offered without thinking. She led him through the dark, stuffy house to the kitchen and the back door, where she paused to stand on one foot for a few seconds to allow her ankle to stop throbbing.

James came up behind her and put a hand on her waist. "Are you all right?" he asked.

He was so close, she could have leaned back against him. She wanted to—sort of. She shook her head, clearing away the temptation. They were feeling the warm glow of nostalgia. That was all.

Dennie unlocked the deadbolt and stepped into the screened-in sleeping porch. "It's been so miserable in the house the last few nights, I've been spending my evenings out here."

At one end of the porch was a mattress, which she had wrestled down the stairs and through the house several nights before when she got fed up with tossing and turning in her airless bedroom. At the other end was an upholstered chair and a wrought iron floor lamp. One chair. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She should have pulled the covers off the living room furniture and put up with the smell of sawdust and paint remover.

"Is it safe to sleep out here?" he asked.

Dennie laughed. "Careful. You sound like your mother."

She sat down in the chair and reached up to turn on the lamp, but then she remembered the spider webs that she kept forgetting to sweep off the ceiling and she decided the dark had its benefits. Besides, there was enough light spilling out from the kitchen.

James sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of her and picked up her right foot.

"This one?" he asked.

Dennie nodded and tried to not tense up too much at his touch. She had forgotten he'd said something about rubbing her ankle. She watched the top of his head as he bent over her foot and slipped her sandal off. She held her breath. That felt a little too much like being undressed, but she didn't move. The warmth of his hands as they gently held her foot felt too good to pull away from. She stared out at the shadows of the overgrown back yard and tried to think while James began to massage the arch of her foot.

Conversation. The situation called for conversation, but James didn't seem to realize that. He appeared to be concentrating on her foot.

"High school English, huh?" Oh, God, could she have said anything more stupid?

"Junior English, Senior English, and one remedial class," he answered without looking up.

"You can't have been much older than your students when you started."

He laughed and said, "Only five years older than the oldest of them. Winning their respect took some doing."

"It must not have been easy, with all those nubile young things running around." Dennie wanted to pick up the lamp and hit herself over the head with it. She'd done it. She *had* thought of something even more stupid to say.

James set her foot down on his knee and cupped his hands around her ankle. "I haven't been interested in teenage girls since I was a teenager." He looked up at her and added, "I like grown up women."

The warmth of his hands seeped up her leg, and the warmth in his expression made her forget to breath. This wasn't going at all as planned.

James returned his attention to her foot, gently rubbing it where it met her ankle. Dennie didn't know where to turn her attention. She certainly wasn't going to try conversation again.

"Dennie?" he looked up at her again.

"What?" she asked warily.

"Could you possibly try to relax?"

She almost shook her head, but she stopped herself. She doubted honesty would work any better than conversation. She didn't want to tell him she couldn't possibly relax because she was terrified of the way his hands were warming her entire body. "I'm not very good at relaxing," seemed like a safe response.

"Maybe closing your eyes would help," James suggested.

Dennie closed her eyes.

"And lean your head back. You look like you're on guard duty."

She leaned her head against the back of the chair, but she didn't feel any closer to relaxed.

James' hands stopped moving on her foot. "Try to stop thinking, Dennie," he said. "I can see the thoughts racing across your face."

Dennie opened her eyes. "Stop thinking?"

"Yes. Stop planning. Stop anticipating. Just... *be*."

Dennie looked down at him. *Just be. Just be here in the dark with James.* It sounded appealing. "I haven't tried that for a while," she confessed.

"I can see that. Will you try now?"

"All right."

She closed her eyes and leaned back again and realized she was clutching the arms of the chair. She turned her palms up and concentrated on relaxing each finger. She was actually almost feeling a little bit relaxed when James put her foot down. Before she could decide whether or not to protest, he picked up her other foot and slipped off the sandal. Dennie felt herself sink into the chair when he started massaging the bottom of her foot with his thumbs. When his hands moved up to massage her calf, she realized she was more than just relaxed. She was aroused. She wanted him to touch her like that everywhere. She bit back a little moan as one of his hands moved up under her skirt and rested just above her knee while his other hand stroked up and down her other calf.

*How pathetic, being so turned on by such a simple touch.* She clenched her jaw and tried to steel herself against the sensation. She didn't want him to know how much he affected her. She didn't want him to suspect how long it had been since even her ex-husband had touched her like this. She wanted to stand up and run away, but both his hands slid up her legs, pushing her skirt up with them.

Good Lord, was James seducing her? She reminded herself to breathe. His hands stroked slowly back down her legs to her feet and back up again. She bit the inside of her lip when she felt his lips on the side of her knee.

Definitely. If memory served, this was seduction, and he was pretty good at it.

She opened her eyes and watched as James kissed one leg just above the knee, then the other leg a little higher up. He was on his knees in front of her now, leaning over her lap. She couldn't even remember now what her plan had been, but she

was sure it had gone completely awry. This was altogether too intimate a position to be in with James. If he kissed any higher up her legs, he'd be sure to sense her arousal, and she'd be mortified. For crying out loud, this was James, whom she'd known since before he knew how to read. This couldn't be right.

He sat back on his heels and rested his forehead on her knees, which she hadn't even realized she had clamped tight together. Maybe he was coming to his senses. Then he leaned back and picked up her foot and raised it to his mouth. He trailed kisses along the arch and gently kissed her bad ankle. It wasn't so easy to keep her knees together with one leg straight out in front of her. Except that it wasn't quite straight out. He had angled it out just a little bit as he kissed his way up the side of her calf. His lips seared the back of her knee. He put her foot down and turned his head to kiss her other knee while one hand slid up her leg to her hip.

"Dennie."

The tell-tale huskiness of his voice sent a reluctant tremor through Dennie.

"Open your legs so I can touch more of you."

*Whoa!* That wasn't the sort of thing James was supposed to say. She stood up so fast that she stumbled over him, but he was faster. He jumped up and caught her around the waist. She grabbed his arms to keep from falling, which wasn't any better. Her face was pressed against his shoulder and she was out of breath.

He dropped his hands and said, "I'm sorry Dennie. I'd hoped you wanted this as much as I do."

Dennie stepped back, but she couldn't will her hands to let go of him. She focused on the seam of James' sleeve and thought hard to gather the right words together. "It's just that...I'm having a hard time thinking of you this way, James."

James took her face in his hands and made her look at him. "Then stop thinking," he told her.

She nodded. "Right. Easier said than done."

James lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, tentatively at first, then deeper when her arms went up around his neck. With one hand firmly against the small of her back, he dropped his other hand to her bottom and pulled her closer to him. Dennie felt her knees go wobbly and she retreated a step, then another, determined to maintain some remnant of control over the situation. James continued to hold her, his mouth never leaving hers, and she realized that she wasn't so much retreating as pulling him along with her until she felt the wall against her back.

She lowered her hands to his chest, but he was kissing her neck now, and if she'd had some vague thought of pushing him away, she couldn't imagine why on earth she would want to do such a thing. When James took her hands and raised them over her head, pressed against the wall, all thought fled except the one thought of keeping her body in contact with his as much as possible. He leaned against her, mashing her breasts against his chest. That was nice, but it wasn't enough. She wanted movement. She pushed against him, but he pulled his lower body back. The move brought her almost back to her senses. She tried to gather her thoughts together, but it was hard to concentrate with his tongue in her ear.

"Still thinking?" he asked. He ran one hand down her arm and lightly over her breasts to her hip.

"Sort of." *Had* she been thinking? She couldn't remember now.

James looked down at her and smiled sexily, but Dennie thought she detected a hint of uncertainty in his eyes.

"What are you 'sort of' thinking?" he asked.

"I'm thinking I want you to touch me like that again." Just saying it sent a wave of heat through her, and judging by the way his hand clenched on her hip, hearing it had the same effect on him.

He kept his eyes locked on hers as he moved his hand slowly back up her body, brushing against her breasts, making her nipples pucker, and up to the V of her blouse, which he traced with his fingers. He dipped his head briefly to kiss her, then leaned back again to watch her face as he lowered his hand and rubbed his thumb across her nipple. She had just enough brainpower to spare to be thankful that he still held her hands over her head, giving her breasts, she thought, a not-so-middle-aged lift.

When James moved his hand to the buttons of her blouse, all Dennie felt was impatience, but he seemed determined to take his time. He studied each bit of skin revealed by each unbuttoning until he reached the last button and pushed the blouse open.

She closed her eyes, suppressing a shiver, when he ran his fingers gently over the top of her breasts.

Finally he released her hands so he could pull her blouse off. One of her bra straps slipped off her shoulder, and James tugged down the cup and took her breast in his hand—and just gazed at it, standing absolutely still.

Dennie started thinking again. He'd never seen a forty-year-old breast before, had he? Even in the dark, she was sure it couldn't stand up to the much younger breasts he was probably used to. She should have followed her instincts. There was no way the adult reality of her body would live up to his teenage fantasies of her. Thank God he hadn't given her the chance to tear off his clothes yet. Now, how was she going to get them both out of this gracefully?

"James."

"Shh."

*Think, Dennie, think.*

Then, miraculously, he lowered his head and kissed her breast.

*Stop thinking, Dennie!*

His tongue flicked across her nipple, and Dennie felt an answering throb between her legs. His tongue circled her nipple and then he clamped his mouth down on it. Dennie tangled her fingers in his hair, and James' other hand started inching her skirt up her leg. Then his hand was under her skirt, sliding up her leg and around her back to the waistband of her panties, where it stopped. He gave her breast a little parting kiss and raised his head to look at her.

"I've always wanted to do that," he said.

"Oh."

Dennie didn't even care that she couldn't think of anything intelligent to say. James was running one finger along the inside of her waistband, from the middle back to the middle front. He smiled when he found the little tear in the side seam. Dennie couldn't even bring herself to care that he'd discovered she was wearing past-their-prime underwear.

*Just touch me*, she wanted to scream. But she wouldn't beg.

"I want to know what you like," he whispered as he kissed her behind her ear.

He pulled back to watch her face and his hand moved down to cup her mons through the thin cotton.

"Do you like that?"

Dennie nodded and closed her eyes. She couldn't watch him watching her. She locked her hands behind his neck to hold herself up, because she didn't think her legs were going to do the job much longer.

He didn't move his hand when he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her lightly. When he pulled her lower lip into his mouth she realized she was moving her hips, trying to rub against his hand.

"I can feel the heat coming from you," he said, but still he didn't move his hand.

Dennie whimpered. She was getting wetter by the second, and she knew James could feel it through her panties. Half an hour ago, it would have mortified her to let him know how desperate she was for his touch. Now it aroused her even more, and she pushed herself rhythmically against him. Then she realized he was smiling at her. She couldn't bring herself to move away from him, but she made herself still her hips.

"You're teasing me," she accused.

"Not intentionally."

Dennie took a shuddering breath. "What are you trying to do then?"

"Live out a fantasy."

"You've fantasized about me?"

James ran a finger down her cheek and said, "I used to all the time. I hadn't for years before I heard your voice on the phone." He moved his other hand up her body and pressed it against her belly. He ran his tongue along her ear and sucked on her earlobe. "All week," he said, "I couldn't stop thinking about all the ways I wanted to touch you. I was supposed to be learning about classroom management, but my head was full of images of you like this, hot and wet and wanting me."

His fingers slipped tantalizingly under the waistband of Dennie's panties, and she got an inkling of what he was waiting for. She took his face between her hands and kissed him slowly, stroking his tongue with hers and learning the taste of him.

"Touch me," she whispered against his lips. She felt his

hand tremble, but he didn't move it. "Touch me, James," she repeated. "Please."

He made a gratifying sound deep in his throat as he reached into her panties and his fingers plunged into her wet folds. Dennie could hear his unsteady breathing, and she could hardly believe this was James being driven wild just from touching her. There was certainly no doubt as to the effect she had on him.

Finally, he leaned the length of his body against her, and she felt his erection pressed against her hip. She wanted to reach down and touch him, but she was afraid of doing anything that might make him stop stroking his finger up and down alongside her clit, almost, but never quite, touching it, driving every other thought from her mind.

When he slipped his finger inside her and rubbed his thumb over her clit, she came so suddenly and so forcefully she thought her heart would stop. Her body thrashed against him, and if not for the wall behind her and James' arm around her waist, she probably would have crumpled into a limp heap when the sensations eased.

"I want to see how many times I can do that to you tonight," James said breathlessly.

"OK," Dennie readily agreed. She had to focus on forming the words. "Just don't kill me. Too much of a good thing, you know."

"Do you think a person can die of too much pleasure?" he asked, his hand warm on her breast.

"I don't know, but I think my legs are going to give out from too much pleasure."

"But first..." James said, and he reached around behind her and unfastened the single button at the waist of her skirt and gave it a little nudge that sent it falling to the floor. Then he unhooked her bra and pulled slowly it down her arms.

"Another part of the fantasy?" Dennie asked to break the intensity of his gaze.

James nodded and led her by the hand to the mattress. As she collapsed onto it, she felt him take hold of her panties and pull them off. She pushed the pile of blankets to the side and settled onto her back, but when she saw that James was just standing and watching her, she sat up and wrapped her arms self-consciously around her knees.

"How 'bout you take your clothes off too," she suggested.

Dennie's stomach fluttered at the sight of James kneeling on her bed and pulling his shirt over his head. If she had ever thought to fantasize about him, this would definitely have been part of it. She watched hungrily as he unbuttoned his shorts. Then he stopped.

"You." It seemed to be the only word he could get out.

Dennie crawled across the mattress to him. She could feel him watching her as she took hold of the zipper tab of his fly and pulled it slowly down. She nudged his shorts down to his hips, careful not to let her fingers brush against his hard cock, thinking to tease him as he had teased her. But when she slid her hands up and down his chest and under the waistband of his boxers, her self-control abandoned her. She had to touch him. She had to taste him.

She pushed boxers and shorts down to his knees and bent down to kiss his cock, to taste it, to take it into her mouth and circle her tongue around it. James moaned and his fingers clenched in her hair.

"Dennie..." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Dennie wait."

Understanding, she ran her tongue one last time up the length of his cock and kissed a path up his firm belly to his chest, where she paused to gently bite a nipple, and on to the tender

skin just above his collarbone, which she discovered she couldn't tear herself away from. His cock throbbed against her belly, but she was only dimly aware of it as she slid one hand around his neck and pulled him in closer while she licked and nipped and kissed. She had an urge to completely immerse herself in him, to devour him.

Her mouth did not leave his neck when he twisted around to a sitting position and kicked off his pants. Not until he grabbed her at the waist and hauled her up to the head of the bed with him did she pull back and look at him. He hovered over her, his cock barely nudging against her eager pussy.

"Tell me what you want, Dennie," he urged, his voice tight.

Dennie smiled. She could well imagine that a young man might fantasize about a woman begging him for sex. Imagining herself in the starring role of such a fantasy was a little more difficult to wrap her head around, but she was willing to give it a go.

She pushed herself up onto her elbows and brushed her lips against his ear. "I want you to fuck me, James."

She saw his eyes widen, and she knew she had surprised him.

She angled her hips against him, inviting him in, as she bit his ear lobe and growled, "I'm hungry for you."

"Oh, God, Dennie," he moaned and finally sank into her.

Dennie locked her legs around his waist and her fingers in his hair as James rained little kisses all over her face and her neck. He moved slowly inside her, sending the most wonderful, languorous sensations through her body.

"You're humming," he said after a moment, or maybe it was several moments.

Dennie opened her eyes. Is that what she was hearing? "Well, I'm in a very happy place," she explained. She ran her

hands down his back to his delicious firm ass, which she squeezed at the same time she squeezed her pelvic muscles around his cock. He moaned and lowered his head to her shoulder, so she squeezed again, intensifying the sensation of his movements inside her.

In a dizzyingly fast movement, James rolled them over, and Dennie found herself on top of him, her hands braced on either side of his head.

"Do that again," he said.

Dennie squeezed her pelvic muscles again. "That?"

"Mmm..."

She raised herself up and rocked gently on him as she squeezed and released, squeezed and released.

Suddenly James grabbed her by the hips. "Don't move."

It wasn't easy. Dennie wanted to move on him. She wanted to feel him sliding in and out of her, but she wanted even more to please him—to give him the absolutely best lay of his life. She felt it almost as a matter of honor, something she had to do for all the nearly middle-aged women in the world who had ever lusted after younger men. Especially beautiful younger men. She'd thought James looked good laughing and glistening in the swimming pool, but now, with his head thrown back and his eyes closed in ecstasy, he was the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen.

Squeeze, release. Squeeze harder—she was going to have the most interesting sore muscles in the morning—release. It was obviously giving James pleasure, but she wanted to send him over the edge. She moved her hands, which had been resting lightly on his stomach, in a slow caress up to his chest and back down to his belly until she bumped into herself, and she had an idea.

"James, open your eyes," she whispered urgently.

She couldn't help but smile at the hazy look in his eyes. It gave her the extra little bit of confidence she needed to run her hands up her body to her breasts. They overflowed from her hands as she lifted them and squeezed. When she squeezed her breasts together, James moaned and ran his hands down from her hips to her inner thighs. Now *he* squeezed, and Dennie drew in a sharp breath.

She couldn't stay still any more. She began moving over him, sliding slowly up and down his shaft, acutely aware that he was watching her. She held on to enough awareness to be surprised that she could set all self-consciousness aside with this man, that she wasn't worrying about how her body looked, wasn't wasting energy holding her stomach in.

The heat building where their bodies met was shooting through Dennie. Every time she squeezed her breasts she felt James swell inside her. He was at the edge, but something more was required to send him over. She wanted to give him more. He squeezed higher up her thighs, his thumbs just brushing against her pubic hair, almost making her forget that she was trying to drive him wild. Maybe she could please them both at once.

She let her hands fall and placed them over his for just a second before moving her right hand that crucial inch to stroke her clit with one finger. She had expected to feel self-conscious then. She had expected it would be a chore to follow the idea through, but pleasure drove away all self-consciousness as her finger circled over her clit and James' hands on her hips guided her movements to match his thrusts.

She felt his legs tensing as she threw her head back and closed her eyes, letting herself sink into the welcoming darkness. Dennie heard herself cry out, long and low, when her climax overtook her. She folded over onto James and fought to maintain the rhythm of their thrusts. A second later, James' hips jerked up,

lifting them both off the mattress, and he came with a soft moan that she probably wouldn't have heard if his mouth hadn't been right next to her ear.

She kissed him before his orgasm ended, relishing the taste of him, hungry still for more of him.

James rolled over to his side, taking Dennie along with him.

"Let me catch my breath," he said when he disentangled himself from her.

She shrank away from him, suddenly mortified by her loss of control. He'd think she was desperate. God, maybe she *had* been desperate. She'd definitely been insane. And giddy with the realization that he wanted her. But she had gone overboard with the enthusiasm. Now, how was she going to send him on his way with her dignity intact?

James reached a hand out and stroked her hip, but she couldn't bear to look at him. "You are so incredibly sexy, Dennie."

She ventured a quick look at him, but his eyes were on her body, following his hand as his moved down her leg.

"You're glowing," he said with a small grin.

Dennie felt her bullshit sensors vibrate. "Glowing?"

"It's sort of like a heat shimmer coming off of you."

His hand was traveling back over her hip to the curve of her waist.

"I'm not glowing," she said sensibly, but she could feel herself heating up again as James pushed her gently onto her back and spread his fingers out on her belly.

"You are," James insisted, and he moved his hand down to tug her pubic hair almost-gently.

Dennie gasped and arched her back. Dignity be damned. In another second she knew she was going to be writhing under his touch, and she didn't care. He stroked her legs, which she let fall

open, and he obligingly caressed her inner thighs, nudging her legs farther open until she felt the caress of the warm night air on her pussy. Then she felt James' caress, moving in long strokes that satisfied and tantalized at the same time. That did it. Now she really was writhing.

"I don't think I could ever get tired of seeing you like this," he whispered.

He lowered his mouth to her breast and flicked his tongue across her nipple. The brief sensation made her push her pelvis up against his hand like some perverse marionette. He flicked his tongue again and the same thing happened.

"Interesting," he commented.

"Not fair," Dennie complained breathlessly.

"Do you like this better?" he asked, and he pulled her nipple into his mouth and sucked hard.

Dennie tried to answer, but the combination of sensations, the sucking and the stroking, had short-circuited her brain. The only thought she could form was that if he stopped, she would die. She made a sound that James must have understood as a "yes" because he was stroking her now with two fingers. Dennie floated on the sensation, never wanting it to end. Then James' touch became less teasing and more purposeful and his teeth grazed against her nipple, bringing on an orgasm that exploded through her with such force that she began to wonder if the aftershocks would go on all night.

When it finally eased, she stretched contentedly, still experiencing the occasional pleasant shudder.

"Dennie, you're killing me," James whispered unsteadily

She smiled up at him. Just the sound of his voice, husky with desire, sent little tendrils of heat through her. She couldn't believe that she wasn't sated yet, that just the knowledge that he wanted her was enough to make her ache to feel him inside her

again. She felt wanton and free, as if all the promise of summers past had finally been realized.

She rose up on her elbows so she could whisper in his hear. "If you want me, take me," she said, running her tongue along the outside of his ear for good measure.

He accepted her invitation with such gratifying speed that Dennie yelped at finding herself so promptly underneath him and filled by him.

She came once more before James did, and when he pulled a blanket over them and held her in close, she felt like she had been shattered into pieces and put back together into something entirely new.

\* \* \*

The air had not quite lost its morning freshness when Dennie woke, but it was already warm enough that they had kicked the blanket off so that it tangled around their legs. She hardly dared open her eyes to look at James sleeping next to her with an arm and a leg flung across her. She turned her head toward the garden and opened her eyes. The low angle of the sun showed clearly that the screens enclosing the porch needed hosed off, but for now their dustiness gave her a sense of privacy. She was lying naked on her back porch in broad daylight. With James. Naked James, with his fabulous thigh pinning her to the mattress.

*Damn.* She had to pee. She slithered reluctantly off the bed and draped a blanket over her shoulders. Her ankle felt so much better, she hardly limped at all. Could it be the sprained ankle sex cure?

Once in the bathroom, she couldn't resist a quick shower, but she didn't get dressed. It didn't seem fair to be fully clothed while James was still sleeping naked on her porch. If he was still sleeping. She pulled on her bathrobe and went back down to the

kitchen to peek out the door at him.

He was still asleep but, much to Dennie's disappointment, he had pulled the blanket up to cover himself from the waist down. Even so, she spent a minute watching him sleep. Would he wake up pleased with what had happened the night before or would he be mortified now that the passion had passed and the deed was done? Dennie was pretty sure she would start feeling mortified as soon as he woke up and she had to look him in the eyes in the daylight. For the moment, though, all she felt was a satisfied ache and a need for coffee.

The jar she kept her ground coffee in sat empty on the counter, and she remembered leaving it there the day before as a reminder to grind more before she went to bed. So much for plans. She closed the door to the porch so the noise wouldn't wake James and ground enough for a half pot, just in case he stuck around for breakfast. That would depend on his mortification factor, of course.

Just as Dennie flipped the switch on the coffee maker, James stepped into the kitchen, wearing nothing but his boxers. He didn't look at all mortified, but maybe he was just being polite. She couldn't look at him as he walked across the kitchen and kissed her on the cheek. He stepped back from her and looked at her, his head tilted questioningly. Would he believe the coffee maker would only work if she kept her eyes focused on it?

"Good morning?" he asked hopefully.

Dennie ventured a quick glance at him. "Good morning. The only working bathroom is the one upstairs, by the way."

He kissed her cheek again and wandered off toward the stairs, yawning.

*Oh, God!* She couldn't remember how to handle mornings after. How many years had it been since she'd woken up with somebody she hadn't planned to wake up with? *Deep breaths,*

*Dennie. Don't let him see what a wreck you are.* With luck, it would look like she was enjoying the aroma of the coffee, not trying to keep herself from hyperventilating.

She had almost calmed herself down when she heard a soft footstep behind her and felt James' arms wrap around her waist and pull her in tight against him.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to wake up next to you," he murmured against the nape of her neck, sending a little tingle down to her toes.

Dennie opened her mouth to say something, but just then James pressed his mouth against her neck and she felt his tongue hot against her skin. Whatever she had been going to say came out as a sigh. Didn't he know they were supposed to be eyeing each other warily over mugs of coffee right about now?

"You smell like flowers," he said.

"Soap," she said breathlessly.

James nudged the collar of her robe aside and kissed her shoulder. He cupped his hands over her breasts. The silky fabric rubbed deliciously across her nipples. He moved his hands down to the sash that held the robe closed with a loose knot.

"Let's see what you're wearing underneath this."

"Just me," Dennie said, and she turned around to face him, covering the knotted sash with her hands.

James stepped back. "Show me."

Dennie hesitated. Letting him look at her in the dark was one thing. The bright daylight in her kitchen would reveal every flaw. It wouldn't let him forget how much older she was than him.

"Dennie?"

The desire in his eyes was clear, but it was joined by doubt now. *Doubt?* Could he possibly be as uncertain of himself as she was?

"Does any of this scare you at all, James?"

He smiled and ran his fingers through his hair. "I've wanted you forever, Dennie, but I never expected this to really happen. Every time I reach out to touch you, I'm terrified that you're going to pat me on the head and tell me to run along."

The sounds of a summer day drifted through the open kitchen window. A neighbor's lawn mower coughed to a start, then revved and hummed. A heavy truck drove by, and the little dogs next door sounded the alarm, but Dennie could hear her heart pounding over it all as she untied the sash and let her robe fall open.

After taking a long moment to let his eyes drift down her body, James stepped forward and put his arms around her and pulled her into a tight hug. Neither of them moved, but within a minute Dennie felt the heat growing between them.

He groaned, then released her. "Follow me. There's something I've been wanting to do." He hooked a finger around one of hers and led her out of the kitchen.

Dennie allowed her curiosity to overcome her trepidation as James sat her down in one of the shrouded armchairs in the dimly lit living room. He sat down in front of her just as he had the night before and lifted her foot onto his leg.

"Feeling better?" he asked, his voice oddly strained.

Dennie nodded. She felt weak with desire and anticipation. How did he do this to her? Then again, how could she not react this way to him? A single kiss on her leg, the way his lips lingered softly against her skin, conveyed his longing more clearly than the heat smoldering in his eyes when he looked up at her to gauge her reaction.

Dennie leaned down to kiss him, and his mouth met hers eagerly, but when she started to slide off the chair to join him on the floor, he pushed her upper body back and set her hands

firmly on the arms of the chair.

Dennie leaned down on her arms to push herself all the way back into the chair, but James grabbed her by the hips to stop her.

"You're perfect there." He bent his head to kiss her just above the knees.

Dennie relaxed back into the chair. Her butt was forward, almost to the edge of the cushion, and James was running his hands up and down her calves. She closed her eyes and focused on the warmth of his hands and the little tingles that shot through her every time he kissed her legs. When he nudged her knees apart, she didn't resist. He kissed the insides of her knees, and Dennie opened her eyes and laid her hand on his head to touch his hair. He turned his face into her hand and kissed her palm. Then he looked up at her.

"Open your legs for me, Dennie."

She felt no urge to flee this time, just a surge of heat through her body. She moved her feet apart, opening herself up to him. James looked down at her and she felt herself grow wet just from knowing he was looking at her with such desire. She watched as he lowered his head to kiss the sensitive skin of her thighs. Up and down her thighs he kissed, pushing them ever farther apart, until she was panting and sliding farther down the chair. He slipped his hands under her butt and squeezed, drawing a long moan from her, and then she felt his breath, cool on her hot skin, as he hovered above her pussy, and then finally, his tongue, tentative, even a little timid, on the hard nub of her clit.

"Oh, God," Dennie gasped. "I think maybe it is possible to die of pleasure."

"I'll keep you safe," James said softly against her fevered skin. "I promise."

Dennie remembered to breath, and James began exploring

her with his tongue returning every few seconds to the hot core of her desire until she was crying out. She felt his hands on her, spreading her further open, then his fingers inside her. His hands were everywhere they could reach, sweeping up to her breasts and down to her legs, pausing to squeeze and pinch, driving her into an oblivion of pleasure until she exploded, pushing herself against his mouth in little spasms that went on and on.

Finally he had mercy on her and sat back to smile up at her.

"I guess you'll be staying for breakfast, then," Dennie said when she caught her breath.

"And lunch?" James said hopefully.

Dennie slid off the chair to join him on the floor. She wondered if they were even going to get around to breakfast.

"One meal at a time," she told him. "That's as far ahead as I can think right now."

She pulled him down to the floor with her, heedless of the dust and the smell of paint remover, not thinking about anything at all.

\* \* \*

## *About the Author*

Men, dogs, and books. These are Trinidad West's favorite things. She's never met a dog she didn't like and she can find something appealing about almost every man she meets, but she's a little more critical about books.

Trinidad started writing stories about girls and their dogs when she was ten years old and made a natural progression over the years to stories about women and their men.

When she isn't writing, Trinidad thinks about writing, copyedits scientific texts, takes care of her family, and never quite gets around to cleaning her house. She lives in California in a house full of books with her family, a dog, and a surly cat.