

ANN CORY

*Blame the Rain*



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# Blame the Rain

*Ann Cory*

## Dedication

To my husband and soul mate. May fate bring us together for a thousand life times more.

## Chapter One

She pocketed the poor excuse for a tip and brushed a strand of bottled Champagne Blonde hair from her face. The day had dragged on and her feet longed to be submersed in warm water. Sable pulled off her ketchup-stained apron and left it in a crumpled heap on the counter.

“That’s it. I’m done,” she muttered to no one in particular and thrust both arms into her skimpy jacket.

They’d all heard the words a thousand times, but this time she meant it. No more waiting tables. She was through with earning a few extra bucks by cheapening herself for the classless men who walked in and out of the door, in and out of her life.

The smell of stale garbage and hard rain filled her nose the moment she stepped out the back door and onto the sidewalk. She wrapped her jacket tightly around her frame to block the chill in the air. Dimly lit streetlamps guided her to the beat-up old Chrysler she called transportation. Within seconds, she was completely drenched and silently cussing up a storm. Two solid weeks of rain was enough to send her willingly to the nearest padded room.

She flung herself into the seat and started up the rusted beast. Once, twice, finally the third time the engine caught. Sable checked the rear view mirror and backed out slowly. Between the dark and the rain she could hardly see a thing. She turned on the radio and, after several tries to find a decent station, gave up and switched it off.

Her stomach grumbled as she drove by one fast food joint after another. Thanks to months of working around grease and lard every day,

her appetite for quick and easy was ruined. Thoughts of a tantalizing pasta dish piled with noodles and a succulent Bolognese sauce ran through her mind. Half a loaf of crusty bread, layered with just the right amount of butter and fresh garlic to add a zip to her tongue. Washed down with a full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon to liven up her palate. It had been a long time since she'd treated herself to such luxury. Times were tough and self-indulgence would have to wait.

She turned her head as she passed by the famed VINO's Italian Patisserie when the sound of squealing tires caught her attention. Sable turned in time to see a blur of red lights too close for comfort. She slammed on her brakes, the car skidding side to side. The car finally stopped, but not before making contact with what looked like a brand new Mini Cooper S.

She beat her fists against the steering wheel and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Noooo! Tell me this isn't happening. I can't afford another increase to my car insurance!"

The driver's side door flung open and a tall, dark figure came toward her swiftly. For a fleeting moment, she considered backing up and racing off, but her conscience wouldn't let her. Like every other time in her life, she would have to face the music.

Her legs shook as she rolled down the window. A steady stream of rain battered her face and the upholstery of her car. She had no idea what to say, but she sure as hell wasn't going to cry.

An angry voice cut into her desperate attempt to pretend she was anywhere else.

"Do you realize what you did? I just bought the damn thing!"

Sable wiped the side of her face and tried to make eye contact. "Wait. Let me explain."

“What is there to wait for? I want insurance details, name and phone number, and I want to see some ID. Right now.”

She scrounged around inside her purse but couldn't see a thing. Her interior lights had burned out a month ago and the constant rain in her face only made it more difficult.

“Look, sir? I understand your anger, I really do. Can we talk about this somewhere a little less...wet?”

The man bent down and looked at her. “Pardon me?”

“I-I asked if we could talk about this somewhere out of the rain?”

He stood up and looked over the hood of her car, at his dented bumper, and back at her. “I suppose that would be more convenient. Why don't we dash into the restaurant over there?”

She squinted to where he had motioned and groaned. “Um. I don't think I'm dressed in the right kind of clothes for such a fancy place. Maybe we could go to the record store at the corner.”

He shook his head, sending drops of rain off his hat and into her face. “No, I'm afraid that won't do. Come, the patisserie will be just fine. Move your car over to the side.”

She blinked her wet lashes at him, hoping he'd somehow magically disappear. When she realized that home was a long way off at this point, she sighed and did as he'd suggested. He waited for her to park and then offered his hand to help her out. Struck by his good manners, she reached for him a little too eagerly, in her opinion, and together they made a mad dash for the covered sidewalk.

A doorman dressed in a fancy suit tipped his hat and ushered them inside. Immediately the sumptuous aromas of spaghetti sauce, lasagna and fresh baked bread made her mouth water.

Sable turned to address the guy she was about to pay a fortune to and was caught off guard by his regal good looks. He'd removed his hat

and trench coat and hung them on the brass coat rack. She swallowed hard as she took in his nicely proportioned physique. Dressed in a charcoal-gray cashmere sweater and snug black slacks, he looked like someone who frequented such restaurants on a regular basis. His chestnut brown hair was slightly damp and curled a bit around the tips of his ears. The big, expensive Rolex on his wrist was a dead giveaway the guy had money.

He ran a hand through his hair and then motioned at her. "May I take your jacket?"

Sable's body had warmed from staring at him and she'd forgotten she still had it on. She quickly pulled off the soaked thing and winced as most of the water drops splattered on him in the process.

Embarrassed, she hung it up herself. "Sorry about that."

A pleasant looking man with a portly body and long, curly mustache greeted them with menus and an Italian accent. "Good evening, folks. Table for two this evening?"

Sable looked toward the beautiful stranger and gave him a half-smile.

He put his hand on the small of her back and cleared his throat. "Good evening, Reginald. A booth in the back would be preferable."

"As you like, Mr. Benning. If you would kindly follow me this way."

She enjoyed the formal conversation between the men and wondered if that was how it was when one was rich.

Mister Tall, Dark and Handsome held out his hand to let her go first. Their server, led them to a small booth in the far corner with a single candle floating in a martini glass. Sable looked around at all the people busy with their own private conversations, almost all of them dressed in elegant dresses and suits. She felt sorely out of place and hurried to sit down.

"Will you be interested in wine this evening, Mr. Benning?"



She started to protest but was interrupted.

“Yes, I believe we will.”

“Very well, I shall leave you to peruse the wine list.”

“Thank you.” Handsome leaned forward and winked. “You don’t mind, do you?”

The candlelight lit up his deep blue eyes, highlighting gold flecks in the corners. She certainly wouldn’t mind staring into those bad boys for the rest of the evening.

“No, not at all. It’s just that, well...I thought we came in here to discuss damages to your vehicle. I know I’m completely to blame and saying how sorry I am doesn’t even begin to repair the damage...”

He waved his hand at her and sat back against the booth. “Let’s not be too hasty. I’m not entirely sure it was your fault.”

“But—”

“It’s a tough call.”

Sable shook her head and bit her bottom lip. “You don’t understand. I couldn’t stop as fast as I’d wanted. The tires spun and the front of my car dented your bumper. I was obviously following much too close.”

“I don’t think that would have happened if it weren’t for the fact that I pulled out in front of you. Which would put it at my fault.”

Sable shook her head. Was he kidding? Her eyes hadn’t even been on the road at the time. She’d been too busy daydreaming about being inside the very restaurant she was in right now.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist on taking the blame here.”

“How about we blame the rain instead? By the way, I’m Maxwell Benning. And you are?”

“Sable Morrison.”

His eyebrows arched high on his forehead. “What a gorgeous name. Very sophisticated.”

"Thanks. I'm still waiting for it to suit me. My mom figured I'd be famous someday and wanted me to have a glamorous first name. She couldn't have been more wrong."

"I disagree. A stunning name for a stunning woman."

She looked away, focusing on all the activity inside the restaurant. Flattery wasn't something she was used to. When she found her confidence, she tried to get the conversation back on track.

"I don't think the rain will be able to pay for your damages, but my insurance will. Besides, you were certainly yelling at me like I was to blame."

"Yes, well, that was before I got a look at you."

Amused, Sable sat up straight and pursed her lips. "Oh, I see. Because I'm a woman I therefore have only further proven the ridiculous misconception of pompous men that women shouldn't be out on the road or behind the wheel. Is that correct?"

She watched a tinge of red appear on his cheeks and the tips of his ears. The man was mesmerizing. Tanned, nice cheekbones, and clean fingernails. His dark, wavy hair looked inviting and she imagined running her fingers through it.

"No, no, no. I wasn't suggesting that. Not at all, quite the contrary. I think very highly of women."

"I'll bet you do. Explain your chauvinistic comment then. If you please."

"I meant that if you were some teenage punk, out cruising around without insurance or even a license, or you were some drunkard, I had to talk tough and sound intimidating. I needed to fluster my prey before the big pounce. Understand?"

"Not really, but I'd like to hear how you plan to get yourself out of this one."

“There’s nothing to get out of. Once I saw I was dealing with a smart, articulate, attractive lady, I changed my whole demeanor.”

She had to hand it to him; he was a charmer with his words. “And how could you tell I was a smart, articulate woman when I’d just rammed into your car?”

“Because you didn’t overreact. Instead you let me come to you. I got drenched and you stayed moderately dry. How smart is that?”

She laughed and let some of her tension go.

Their cheerful server returned with a basket of fresh baked bread and a ramekin of whipped herbed butter. “Have you two decided on a wine for this evening?”

Maxwell looked at her with a sheepish grin and flipped open the wine list. “Uh oh. We were so busy talking we didn’t even consider a wine. Let’s see.” He scanned down both sides of the paper and then gave her a wink. “Do you have a favorite?”

She wanted to appear more in the know than she was and named the first thing that came to mind. “Cabernet Sauvignon. I’m not too picky, though.”

“There you have it.” He closed up the wine list and set it at the edge of the table. “One bottle of your nicest Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“Very good, sir. Are you and the lovely lady ready to order?”

Sable shook her head and reached for the menu to find out what kind of prices they had attached to the delicious smelling food. A quick glance told her she wouldn’t have enough money for anything except a salad.

Blue Eyes pulled her menu down, just low enough so she could see his face. “Might I recommend the butternut squash ravioli tossed in sage brown butter? It’s amazing. No one else can make it the way Chef Daryl can. I promise you. One bite and you’ll be hooked.”

Her stomach buckled at the words. "I'm not sure I can afford that tonight."

He waved a hand at her and smirked. "Nonsense. I'm paying. Don't argue with me either, this is my treat."

"I really shouldn't..."

"You're right. You really shouldn't pass up the pasta meal to end all others."

He snatched the menu from her hand and turned to their server. "Two raviolis please."

The portly man bowed and placed the menus under his arm. "I shall return with your wine."

Sable eyed Maxwell suspiciously. What was with this guy? How was it possible a total stranger was treating her better than her fiancé of five years had?

"You don't really mind. Do you? Please say you don't. It's the least I could do."

She wanted to lay it on him thick, but at the same time she couldn't ignore his genuine smile. "I think you have things backwards."

"Why is that?"

Sable crinkled her nose at him and buttered a piece of bread. She was about to take a bite when Reginald returned with their wine and opened it. He waited for Maxwell to try a sip of his before filling both their glasses midway. Without a word, he left and went back to the kitchen.

"I'm not sure what to think of you."

He leaned forward with an impish grin. "Now this I've got to hear."

"I've decided you are insufferable. Have you forgotten what got us here in the first place? I ran into you."

"I'm not sorry about it."

She sighed. “Blame my being a woman, blame you pulling out in front of me, or blame the rain, I don’t care. The fact is you don’t leave a fender bender with a perfect stranger and go into the nearest fancy restaurant for food, wine and social hour. I mean, maybe in the movies, but not in real life.”

“It makes it more fun, doesn’t it?”

She ignored his playful banter. “There’s a catch somewhere. I just have to figure it out. And you were right on the part of my being smart and articulate. I am. In more ways than one.”

“No doubt about it. Listen, I follow where you’re going. I don’t have any ulterior motives, if that’s what you’re getting at. You’re the one who suggested we get out of the rain to talk it over. I took you up on it. Seemed like the perfect excuse to wine and dine such a lovely deity such as yourself.”

“I had no idea you would take me so seriously.”

He brushed his hand against hers and looked deep into her eyes. “I’d take you very seriously. All you have to do is ask.”

## Chapter Two

Sable didn't dare read into his words. It was bad enough his blue eyes practically seduced her right there. She swallowed hard and took a bite of the crusty bread.

He flashed her the kind of smile that was hard to resist. "Call it a guy feeling bad for yelling at a pretty woman. Label it my way of changing what could have turned into an upsetting and sleepless night into an enjoyable, quiet evening. I'm not a bad guy. Honest."

Sable chewed her bread thoughtfully, taking in not just what he said, but the tone of his voice. Not a single word sounded anything less than straightforward and from the heart. Either that or he was a very good actor. Which brought her to her next question.

"You drive a nice car, can afford an expensive watch, talk like someone well-educated, and I'm sure you date supermodels at least three times a week in stately restaurants all the time. You'd have to be pretty financially well off for that kind of living. How do you do it?"

"I gambled and it paid off."

She was in the middle of swallowing a sip of wine when the liquid went down the wrong tube and she started to choke. Immediately he was at her side, rubbing her back, a look of concern streaking across his natural good looks.

"You okay? Should I get someone?"

Tears welled in her eyes as she took a breath in and fought against the coughing. The last thing she wanted was a bunch of eyes staring at her, wondering why she was dressed in nothing but a plain, short skirt sans nylons, and a wrinkled button-up shirt. This wasn't her scene, but she wouldn't have any trouble dreaming it to be.

She cleared her throat until she could find her voice. "I'm better."

"You sure?"

Sable took a big gulp of wine and nodded. "Yes."

He took his napkin and dotted it along the corner of her eyes. The musky smell of his cologne made her lightheaded. In that moment, she wanted to lean against him and snuggle.

"Honest, I'm okay. Thank you. Guess the wine went down wrong."

"Easy to do with these big goblets, you know?"

"Mm hmm." Sable cleared her throat a number of times and rubbed her chest. The burning question leapt from her lips. "So you're a gambler?"

She knew he was too good to be true. The last thing she needed was another relationship built on lies and out-of-control habits.

"I like the way you said that. Gambler. Like it's dirty. No, I took a gamble. Had no idea what I wanted to do in high school but knew my folks were going to insist I go to university. So I decided to major in business. Found me a great partner, we raked in the dough, I've invested a decent amount and have bought into some stocks and bonds that have been helpful. I don't do the gambling thing."

"That's a relief."

"Have something against gamblers?"

Sable didn't want to go that route. "Sounds like you've got everything figured out for your future."

"Sort of. There are still things I'm holding out for."

“Well, you’re closer to making dreams come true than I’ll ever be.”

He stood and slid over to his side of the booth, placing his napkin back in his lap. A look of concern still remained on his face.

“So, tell me. What is it that you do for a living?”

Sable shook her head. It would be easy to lie and say she had a high paying career, but it didn’t feel right. He’d been much too nice. “I’d rather not say.”

“Oh, come on. I’m not the judgmental type.”

“Is that so? Mister I have to fluster my prey before I pounce.”

His eyes twinkled when the sides of his mouth curled up. She was beginning to wonder if the guy had a single flaw.

“Okay. I’m not *always* the judgmental type. Depends on the situation. Now spill. Reporter? Lawyer?”

“Think lower on the food chain.”

“Interior designer? Translator? Exotic dancer?”

She almost snorted wine out of her nose with that one. “Nope. Much lower.”

“Owner of a boutique?”

“Ah, no. I meant think boring. I’m a waitress.”

“Hey! Now that isn’t anything to be ashamed of.”

Sable was surprised by his reaction. “Really? Maybe not if you work in a ritzy place like this, but I work at a rundown diner and let me tell you, the men that eat there are all animals.”

“How so?”

“They tend to put their paws all over me.”

“Oh. Those kind of guys.”

“Yeah.” She shivered just thinking about it.

He refilled her wine glass then buttered a piece of bread. “Why don’t you quit and work somewhere else?”



“I did quit. Right before I bumped into you. I had an empowering moment this morning with my mirror and thought I could make some big changes in my life, once and for all. Guess I start back at the diner tomorrow.”

“Don’t do that to yourself. Besides, our meeting was fate.”

She didn’t have time to argue his last statement. Two big plates with piping hot food arrived. The ravioli smelled incredible.

Sable took her first bite and moaned so loudly she was afraid everyone heard. “This is fabulous! I’ve never tasted anything like it before.”

“It’s my favorite. Have it every time I come here.”

“How often is that?”

“Not as often as you might think.”

She sprinkled Parmesan cheese on the top and took another forkful. It was positively sinful. If it were possible, she’d have an orgasm right there. As much as she enjoyed talking to him, there was only one thing on her mind right now. Eating. The smells and flavors summoned up three months’ worth of a lost appetite. Between bites, she caught glimpses of Maxwell.

Each movement as he ate was like a carefully choreographed dance. Raise glass to lips, tilt slightly, inspect liquid, close eyes and savor. Cut with knife and fork, bring to mouth, inhale the aroma, take bite, and chew like it’s the last meal he’d ever have.

Sable wondered if he took that much care and effort in lovemaking. Provocative images flashed in her mind. On top of the car. In a vat of tomato sauce. Covered in Parmesan cheese. In a large porcelain tub. Beneath satin sheets. She squeezed her legs together. Oh the torturous thoughts!

The wine went down as smoothly as the food and in no time she was stuffed. Her meals as of late had been miniscule and as pleased as her stomach was to be full for once, she knew she'd pay later.

Maxwell finished his last bite and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Tasty, tasty. This dish never fails to satisfy."

"Indeed. Another bite and I think I'll explode!"

"I take it you'll be passing on dessert?"

Even the word was painful.

Sable leaned back and patted her tummy. "Not for this girl. I have a feeling it would be too rich and decadent, and way more than I have room for. Thank you all the same."

He shrugged his shoulders and poured the last of the wine into her glass. "More and more I'm convinced this was the right thing to do."

"Oh really? Are you going to pitch that fate stuff again?"

"I see you aren't much of a romantic."

She nodded her head and took another sip of wine.

"There's your problem. I believe fate plays a big role in our lives, and if we pay attention, we will stick to our right path."

"I see. So my path was destined to cross with yours, is that it?"

His eyes lit up again and an overwhelming sensation spread over her. Was this how it could be? A man she didn't know being so attentive to her that every look, every smile filled her with good vibes?

"That's the perfect way to describe it. Our paths crossed."

Sable covered her mouth to keep from laughing. "Okay, well, I'll let you hold onto that theory for a bit. I need to use the ladies' room or it's my legs that will be crossed all night."

"I'll be right here when you get back."

She smiled over her shoulder. "Your mother raised you right. You are going to make some woman very happy one day."

“Just one?”

Sable stopped and turned all the way to face him. His big goofy grin told her all she needed to know. He had a brilliant sense of humor, too. If only.

“One.”

She did her best to gracefully run to the ladies’ room and let out a deep sigh of relief. Normally she wasn’t this relaxed with a guy. After washing her hands, she looked up at the mirror. All the blood drained from her face and she crumpled to the floor.

## Chapter Three

Maxwell looked out the window while he waited, watching the rain come down and form puddles along the sidewalk. He liked her. The instant attraction was based on more than her beauty; she was intelligent and extremely witty. So many thoughts ran through his head while she talked, it was magical. She was an interesting woman with some equally interesting traits. Strong-willed, hard-edged and not interested in any funny business... There was a lot of substance to her. The longer he gazed into her deep green eyes, the more he wanted to get to know her. Quirks and all.

It was refreshing to hear a woman talk about something other than money, clothes and the latest fashion trends in magazines. He wanted a woman who had a little mystery to her. Unlike the plastic Barbies who didn't have a mind of their own, but seemed to latch onto him. For some sick reason, he was a Barbie magnet, and it was disturbing.

His mother had warned him about the girls who would be after him for his money and urged him to look for a woman with strong values, good ethics, and who wasn't afraid of a little hard work. The lecture came at a time when he wasn't in the least bit serious about commitment. Times had certainly changed.

Sable was about as real a woman as he'd seen in years, and he didn't want to let her get away too quickly. He believed fate played a big hand in making his dreams come true, but he hadn't realized it would work for

love as well. He planned to test her a few times, to see if he really was right about her, but otherwise he wanted to let things go their natural course. If they were meant to be together, then he had nothing to worry about.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket and he glanced around to see if Sable was on her way back from the washroom. She was certainly taking her time. He hoped she wasn't sick.

"Max here."

"There you are. I've been calling your house for hours."

He rubbed his forehead and looked at his watch. "Sorry, I got a little sidetracked. What did you want to talk to me about?"

His friend and business partner, Grayson, nagged like an old woman sometimes and he loved giving him a hard time about it.

"We really need to think about hiring a woman for the office," Grayson stated.

"Okay, I'm game. What will we do with her once we've bought and paid for her?" Maxwell pulled the phone away as his friend burst out in laughter.

"You're a riot, man. I meant we need a woman to help run the place while we're busy doing our meetings and stuff. An administrative assistant or whatever they're called these days. Someone who is independent, smart, articulate, and plans to show up for work on time. What do you think?"

Already Maxwell had an idea formulating in his mind. The perfect woman was in the very restaurant he was.

"Sounds fantastic. As luck would have it, I think I have just the gal we're looking for."

"Serious?"

"Serious."

“Okay, man. I trust your judgment. Why don’t you set up an interview so I can meet her too, and then we’ll go from there?”

“Yeah. Will do.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

Maxwell slipped his phone in his pocket and made eye contact with Reginald. The server came right over.

“Did you enjoy?”

“Immensely. Wouldn’t go for pasta anywhere else. Tell Daryl he can do no wrong.”

“Very good. Shall I bring the dessert tray by?”

“I think we’re done for the night. All I need is the check.”

“Certainly, sir, right away.”

Maxwell sat back and scanned the room. If Sable wanted to make some changes in her life, he could certainly point her in the right direction. An office job where he could see her every day and spend some quality time in the fax room.

## Chapter Four

Sable opened her eyes, surprised to see a group of elderly women gathered around her. One woman with a bright sequined dress and long dangly earrings bent down and patted the top of her head.

“You okay there, honey?”

She sat up and looked around. “Wh-what happened?”

“I think you passed out. Have you eaten? Are you sick?”

“No, I’m fine. I think I need a few moments. I appreciate your concern.”

The one lady helped her up, her fingers pinching like an angry crab. “You sure, dear?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You should soak a paper towel and put it on the back of your neck.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Sable waited for them to leave and ran to the mirror. The reflection didn’t lie. Somewhere between the rain, crash, and dinner she’d forgotten one very important detail. How wretched she looked! The whole time Maxwell had been smiling and talking with her, she’d looked worse than a drowned rat. It was beyond humiliating!

Her carefully applied eyeliner had disappeared. Mascara smudges were all over her face. Lipstick faded. Eye shadow worn off, and her hair was vacuum-packed to her head. And worst of all, she looked completely washed out. She realized it was hopeless to redeem herself fully, but she

had to try something. How could their server have called *her* lovely? Sable sifted through her purse and used what little makeup she had to try and perform a miracle.

With the lip liner, she was able to fill in her lips and add color to her cheeks. She cleaned up the mascara smudges and reapplied black eyeliner. Her hair was another story. The strands looked more like bits of straw. In remembrance of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, she turned on the hand dryer and stuck her head under, hoping to get some volume, at least on the ends. She flipped her hair a couple times, fluffed it around with her fingers, and pinched her cheeks. At least she looked passable. There wasn't much she could do about her clothes. If he ever asked her out again, she'd be sure to wear something glamorous.

Sable realized she had no idea how long she'd been passed out and hoped Maxwell wasn't upset with her for making him wait. She opened the door and looked out, realizing she needn't have worried. He sat in the booth, laughing it up with their charming server. The man was a dream. A dream she didn't want to ever wake up from.



## Chapter Five

She liked the fact that he stood up as soon as he saw her coming. Chivalry wasn't dead after all. Even if this lasted only for one night, she would always remember it fondly.

"Everything okay? Say, you look like you've freshened up."

"Yes, only a little. My apologies for the way I looked earlier. How frightening."

His brows furrowed slightly. "Not sure I know what you mean. At any rate, we're all paid up and can go whenever you're ready."

She looked around and recognized the ladies from the bathroom staring at her. "Um. I think I'm ready now."

"Friends of yours?"

"I guess you could call them that."

As she followed him to the front of the restaurant, she swore she was floating. Didn't she deserve to have a man treat her right and not be ashamed to be seen with her? She'd forgotten how good things could be when she stopped finding reasons why life was full of disappointments.

He held her jacket while she slipped her arms in, easing it up slowly around her neck. What she wouldn't give to have it be his arms wrapping around her instead. With a coy smile, she waited for him to put on his coat and grab his hat.

"Why don't you wear this for now? I don't really think it's me anyway. At least it will help keep your hair dry."

“Thank you.”

He set the hat on top of her head and then smoothed his hand down her cheek.

“Much better on you.”

The wine made her feel loose and daring, but she resisted the urge to kiss him right there. Instead she headed for the door with him close behind her.

A moment of panic swept over her as she realized this was it. The night had been such a breathtaking change. She didn’t want it to be over. Not yet.

“Are you sure you won’t let me take the blame on this one?”

“Absolutely. I pulled out in front of you and with the streets as wet as they are, you couldn’t have possibly stopped in time. All that matters is that you’re okay.”

“All right then.” She put her key in and unlocked the door. His presence behind her was maddening. It was crunch time. Take a risk or go the safe route...she didn’t know. With a deep sigh, she got in her car and tried to start it up.

By the sixth try, she rolled down the window and giggled nervously. “It usually takes several tries before she gives in to my demands. Looks like she’s being stubborn. You don’t have to wait.”

“Not a problem. I’m in no rush.”

Over and over she turned the key but the car wouldn’t start. She leaned her head against the steering wheel. It had become such a long night. Just when something was going right, reality bared its ugly teeth.

She got out of the car and slammed the door shut. “Serves me right. I’ve been meaning to get it into the shop, but because of my oddball shifts at the diner, no one was ever open when I needed them.”

“Would you allow me to give you a lift home?”

Sable cringed. It was bad enough he'd seen her dressed in frumpy attire with her hair plastered to her head and a piece of crap for a car. Now he'd see the dump she lived in.

"I...don't want to impose. If you remember, I am the one who slammed into your backside."

He gave her a cheeky grin and she realized what she'd said. "I meant, your car's backside. The bumper." A rush of heat covered her face, making her ears tingle.

"I liked the way you phrased it the first time. Since you seem to be the kind of woman who needs to be coaxed into a situation, please, I beg you, let me take you home. It's much too miserable out here to walk and it wouldn't sit well with me if you took a cab."

It would be her loss to say no considering she didn't have enough to cover cab fare. "If you're sure you don't mind. I'm feeling pretty guilty here."

"Nonsense. You seem to have a one track mind." He took her hand and led her over to his car. "You can call for a tow truck when you get home."

Sable ignored the big gash in his bumper and walked to the passenger side. She reached for the door at the same time as he did. The feel of his hand on hers carried more volts than the time she'd accidentally electrocuted herself.

"Apologies. I was taught to open doors for women. Hope you don't mind."

She pulled her hand back and let him open it. The inside of the car was plush and had all kinds of interesting gadgets. It even had the new car smell to it. He got in on his side and started up the car. Immediately the engine purred to life. Why couldn't she have a car that did that?

"So, where to?"

"It's not that far, really. I live in an apartment complex at the corner of Harbor and Gleason."

"I don't think I'm familiar with the area."

"No. You probably wouldn't be. It's not a very, well, it's not the kind of neighborhood you'd pass through."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you don't go there unless you have to. Financially speaking."

"Oh."

She twiddled her thumbs in her lap while they drove. Maybe she could ask him to drop her off a block before and wait for him to leave before she walked the rest of the way. It sounded like a great idea and would save her from some serious humiliation, but she had a feeling he wasn't that kind of guy. Not from what he'd shown her so far.

As he turned the corner, she sat up tall and gasped. Rows of utility trucks were parked along the front of her apartment and men dressed in tall wading boots were handing garbage cans to one another.

He gave her a concerned look. "What's the matter?"

"Um. This is where I live. Unfortunately."

She didn't even wait for him to come to a complete stop before she was out of the car and running up to one of the men.

"Hi. I live here. What the hell happened?"

"Pipes broke. Flooding in all the ground floor apartments. Hope you didn't have anything important on the floor."

"What!" The night went from bad to worse and she wanted to scream.

Maxwell was at her side in a flash, his arm around her in a protective hold.

He squeezed her shoulder. "You okay?"

“No,” she whined. Could she look any less pathetic right now? “Just the fact my carpet is going to reek and anything I had on the floor is now ruined. Which means clothes. I must have broken a mirror or walked under a ladder without realizing. There’s no way one person can have this much bad luck all at once.”

“Are you superstitious?”

“Not generally, but right now, yes.” What she really wanted was a good cry and a pint of ice cream.

“Okay, aside from hitting my car and your place flooding, what was so bad about a lovely meal, a glass of wine and nice conversation?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder and didn’t care what he thought about it. “You’re right. I’m not one of those optimistic types. My glass is always half empty and that sort of thing. I’ve been this way for as long as I can remember.”

He pulled her in closer, resting his chin on her head. “Don’t change a thing. I like you the way you are. Bad luck and all.”

“You say that now.”

“Now is what we have. So, you want to crash at my place? I promise you can have your own room and not be bothered.”

“I don’t have too many other places to go. If you’ll have me, I’d like it very much.”

She followed him back to the car and waited as he opened the door. There was something intriguing about seeing the kind of place he lived in. She also wanted to be bothered by him. Hot and bothered.

## Chapter Six

As he drove, the music was on low and she felt restless.

"I meant to discuss something with you earlier, but things seem to keep happening. Do you always live such an exciting life?"

"No. Trust me. What did you want to discuss?"

Maxwell cleared his throat. "Right. My partner Grayson and I are in desperate need of an administrative assistant. The pay is good, there's no credit check or anything superficial like that, and absolutely no experience required. I wondered if you'd be interested."

"Actually, I've done the administrative assistant stint back when I was simply titled a secretary. So typing, filing, phone calls, organizing, all that is a breeze. The only problem I have is...I don't like handouts. That is a sensitive subject for me right now."

"It's not a handout. I don't do that."

"Sounds like one to me."

He put on his blinker and checked the rearview mirror. "Nope. No sweat off my back. Thought I'd mention it in case you were interested in a new job."

"If it isn't a handout, why'd you bring it up right now and not put an ad in the paper?"

"Because Grayson called while you were getting cleaned up. We need someone to oversee things and he's impatient. It's just a job. You don't

have to decide anything right now. I'm not going to push you. Maybe coax you, but not push you."

She laughed. "I never used to be so indecisive."

"Yeah, well, life happens. So what do you say to an interview?"

"I thought you said I didn't have to decide right now?"

"I'm only coaxing." He gave her puppy dog eyes and stuck out his lower lip.

The sight was too cute for words. "Okay, fine. I'll come in for an interview. I'm not promising anything more."

"Well, there you go. I mean, I don't want you to think I'm handing it to you on a silver platter. If Grayson doesn't like you, then you're out."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"You're welcome. We'll set up an interview for tomorrow afternoon, say around three?"

Her smile diminished as she thought about her apartment.

"Oh wait. Bad idea."

"What's the matter?"

"I won't have anything nice to wear tomorrow. Chances are I'll be dealing with the landlord, taking inventory of anything ruined in my place from the flooding and looking for a place to crash. I don't think I should make any plans."

"Ah yes, I forgot all about that. We'll figure something out, I'm sure. Okay, here we are. Welcome to my humble abode."

They turned into a long stretch of driveway and a batch of lights came on, illuminating the entire place. Sable leaned forward and stared.

"This isn't a house. It's a mansion! You live here all by yourself?"

"Don't rub it in."

She socked him in the shoulder and resumed her state of shock. "It's amazing. How many rooms does it have?"

“Six bedrooms, a study, spacious family room, living room, huge kitchen, a pool room, a gym, and I’m sure there’s more, but to be honest, I’m not around much to enjoy it.”

“How did you afford this?”

“A perk of being the only grandson of two people who loved him dearly. An inheritance.”

“I’ll say it again. Amazing.”

Maxwell got out of the car and hurried over to her side, using his jacket to shield the rain from hitting her face. The close proximity was inviting. As they moved up the walkway, Sable took in the exterior of the house

It was the kind of home she fantasized about living in. The front was done in deep blue and gray brick with large Tudor-style windows. All along the front was a well-manicured lawn, perfectly landscaped with trees, flowers and various colored plants. A small rock garden was off to the side with a tiny stream of water trickling down. She looked closer and saw some colorful fish.

Sable followed him through the tall, blue painted door and found herself in awe once again at the décor of the interior. Chandeliers, cherry wood flooring, exquisite furniture and a staircase covered in rich blue carpet. Fine paintings hung on the walls and sculptures lined bookshelves.

She took off her soaked jacket and hung it on the wall hook. For a brief moment, she envisioned herself a courtier, stepping into the royal palace, waiting for the handsome prince to ask her to dance. Nothing about the night had been ordinary, and she wondered what other surprises were in store. Maxwell hung up his jacket as well. His wet hair shimmered in the soft light overhead. Before the silence became too awkward, he smiled.



“Would you like a glass of port? More wine? You name it and I’ll fix it right up for you.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ve had my fill of alcohol tonight. I’m not a big drinker.”

“Another thing in common. I’m not either. I appreciate a nice wine with a meal, but that’s about it for me. Are you cold? I could build us a fire.”

She rubbed her arms up and down. “I wasn’t cold until you mentioned it.”

“It’s because of all the windows. Makes it drafty in here. I’ll build us a fire and get this place a little cozier for you.”

“As nice as that sounds, I think I’d rather have a look at where I’ll be sleeping tonight. I was up at five this morning and I don’t think I can stay up much longer.”

Maxwell smacked his forehead. “Once again I’m being completely insensitive. I’m sorry. Of course you must be exhausted, you’ve had a hectic day. All the bedrooms have fireplaces, so I’ll get your room nice and cozy for you. Follow me. Watch the knob on the banister, it’s wobbly.”

She ran her hand along the smooth wooden frame of the stairs and followed him up, staying a few steps behind. The view was extremely distracting. Blue Eyes knew how to wear a pair of slacks.

“It’s right up here and to the left. Nice big bed with plenty of blankets to snuggle into.”

Blankets sounded nice, but she wondered how nice it would be to snuggle into him.

He opened the door and led her into a large room. Sable wasn’t in even two steps before she asked to use the bathroom.

“Sure, be my guest.”

“Thanks. I’ll only be a minute.”

Maxwell looked around the unused room and decided to give it a homey feel. He felt bad that things weren’t going right for the poor girl. In fact, he was beginning to wonder if he were adding to her bad luck rather than helping. Still, he hadn’t felt so comfortable around a woman in years and it was doing all sorts of weird things to his insides. When she’d smacked into his car, he’d been furious. But one look into her eyes and the horrified expression on her face melted all of the anger away. There was no way that someone with such a gentle demeanor had done that on purpose. In fact, he was confident the accident was his fault. The car was simply a car, a thing. Contrary to the belief of those who didn’t know him well, he was not a materialistic guy.

He walked to the fireplace and checked the logs. A canister of long matches sat on the mantle next to a sterling silver music box. Turning it over, he found the lever and gave it a couple turns. “Music Box Dancer” spilled into the room, giving it an enchanted feel. He struck the match and lit the logs, watching the start of a blue flame appear. It didn’t take long before a nice roaring fire blazed and chased away the chill. Maxwell wondered if he could warm the chill from around Sable’s heart.

He could see it in her eyes that she wanted him. Whatever happened, he wouldn’t push her and he didn’t want to play on her vulnerability. He knew all too well what it was like to let your guard down and allow trust back in. If there was anything he’d learned from his past mistakes, it was to treat others with the same kindness and respect you wanted from them. It was clear someone had hurt her, and it affected him at a gut level. He vowed to not be the guy to break her heart again.

Behind her tough exterior was a woman who could take care of herself and didn’t need someone telling her what to do, how to live, or

what to think. Someway he needed to reach in and defrost the icicles that held her heart hostage. She was the woman for him, and he'd give her all the time in the world to realize that if that's what she wanted.

The music stopped and he went to the window, looking out at the moon. When he'd woken up that morning, he knew right away something good was going to come his way. He didn't realize it would come in the form of a beautiful woman.

The only concern left was, how could he sleep in the next bedroom knowing she was tucked in the biggest bed in the house, and possibly naked?

## Chapter Seven

Sable wetted a washcloth and gave herself a mini sponge bath. If she wanted even the slightest chance to get him in bed, she needed to feel confident with how she smelled. Several bottles of lotion lined the counter and she picked one that was the least masculine. The silky liquid made her skin tingle and glow. If she ended up being allergic to the stuff and broke out in hives within the next five minutes, she was going to call it quits and enter the monastery. She finger-combed her hair until the ends framed her face. A quick check in the drawers and cabinets had her coming up empty for any last minute fixer uppers. It was the best she could do with what she had available.

When she strode out of the bathroom, a fire was lit and the orange glow brought a sensual ambience to the room. Maxwell stood beside the large four-poster bed with the covers drawn back, fluffing the pillows. Lilac satin sheets peeked out just enough for her to see. She couldn't wait to slip beneath them, or him.

Sable stepped forward, hoping she oozed more confidence than she felt. There was no doubt how much she wanted him. All the logical thoughts of how he was still only a stranger fled from her mind and she trusted the animal instincts guiding her now.

"How is it possible you get more and more beautiful each time I see you?"

She shook her head and unzipped her skirt, letting it fall down her bare legs. Warmth from the fireplace spread around her like the embrace of gentle arms. Half of the excitement was watching his facial expressions. For years she'd been looked at through the eyes of an intoxicated man, who always had his mind on the next pot of money he'd win. Tonight, she was being seen with new eyes, and it resurrected the desire of being with a man that had been hidden and abandoned so long ago.

Her trembling fingers found the buttons of her shirt and slowly worked their way down. All the while her eyes never left his. She took one arm out of the sleeve and then the other and let the shirt also fall to the floor. In only her midnight blue satin bra and matching panties, she took a deep breath and walked toward him.

"I want you to know, I had every intention of being a gentleman."

She smiled. "I know."

"Is this what you want? I don't have any expectations."

Sable put her finger to her lips. "Shh. You talk too much."

The role reversal was kind of sexy. Usually she was the one who was shy and reserved, but it was a night for changes.

"No matter how hot and bothered I am, when you say stop, I will stop. Okay?"

"Okay." The likelihood of that happening was nil. Her body was on fire and the only way it was going to be put out, was by him putting out.

"I'm serious."

"I appreciate that."

"I appreciate the way you look."

"You're still talking when you should be doing."

Sable slipped her hands underneath his sweater and pulled it up over his head. She ran her hands along his chest, reveling in the softness

of his skin. His arms wrapped around her and drew her close. He worked the bra off and kissed her neck. She sank into his body, her nipples raised and prodding against his pecs. No alarms went off in her body; instead she was at complete peace. Maxwell worked his lips from one side of her neck to the other, leaving a wake of goose bumps in his path.

Sable grabbed a handful of his soft hair. "You're driving me crazy." She tilted her head back and pressed her breasts against him.

His lips found hers and their kisses started out clumsy at first, but grew impassioned. She could feel the burning between her thighs grow and change into a flame that flickered through her veins. She wanted this man. A desperate feeling started in the pit of her stomach and worked its way down. She needed him now, right now.

Greedily she worked off his belt and unzipped his slacks, pulling them down over his muscular thighs. The bulge inside his black briefs was a welcome invitation and furthered the inner desperation. Here he was, such a gentleman, catering to her feelings and emotions, and all she wanted was to tear off his clothes and ride his cock until she was raw and writhing above him. She told herself to calm down, but adrenaline was coursing through her body at a dangerously fast rate.

"Mind if I nibble on your breasts?"

Her knees buckled at the very thought of his mouth on such a sensitive area.

"I-I don't mind." Her lungs ached. Everything in the room disappeared save for the soft glow of the firelight. She took in shallow breaths, the air whistling through her nose. Maxwell bent down slightly and sought out her raised nipples, pressing his face into her breasts. The feeling was intense enough that it made her jerk and quiver over and over again.

He took to his knees and looped his fingers through the sides of her panties. Sable held her breath. Slowly and steadily he worked the fabric free from her body. She smelled the scent of her sex in the air and knew the panties had to be drenched. With her hands resting on his shoulders, she stepped out of the last remaining article of clothing and felt a tremendous amount of freedom.

His hands stroked along her abdomen, circling her belly button until she playfully pushed his hand away.

"I dare you to push my hand away when I place it right...here." His hand rested between her thighs, the top knuckle of his pointer finger nudging against her clit. Sable shook. "No. I didn't think you would. Did you want me to explore with my fingers or my tongue?"

Sporadic waves ebbed in her stomach. From the deepness of his voice to the promise of an orgasm that had been locked away tight, all hopes of holding back in a ladylike fashion were long gone. There was no sense in pretending.

"Both."

"That's my girl."

She liked that phrase the way he said it. His girl. He didn't let her thoughts spiral too far before he slipped a finger inside and slid along her slick walls. The room swayed and she reached for his head, pulling him closer without meaning to. His tongue flickered against her swollen nub, taking full advantage of the situation, and making her cry out.

"Oh god. I didn't know."

He kissed along the soft patch of hair and slid his fingers inside her.

"What didn't you know?"

His voice vibrated along her body, sending little electric currents throughout her womb.

"How good that could feel."

“I want you to feel that way all the time.”

“I have a feeling with you, I would.”

He stood and picked her up, carrying her over his shoulder in a rogue-like fashion to the bed. Sable spread her arms down until her fingertips grazed the top of the sheets. Gently he set her down with her bottom resting at the edge of the mattress, her legs spread wide apart. A maze of colors and objects swam in her mind as she drifted in and out of an erotic dream. The way he worked his tongue and fingers reminded her of the way he savored his meal. She was his to devour, and God, how she wanted it.

“Mm. I love the way you smell.”

Sable watched him with glossy eyes as his tongue and lips dared to bring her to an orgasm. Her body spasmed and jerked uncontrollably. She’d never had a man bring her over the edge this way.

“Please,” she gasped, trying to find her voice, “I need you inside me.”

Maxwell took a long, slow suckle of her clit and then winked. “All in good time.”

“Please, you won’t be able to make me come.”

Challenged, he parted her with three fingers and manipulated her clit faster. Her eyes brimmed with tears, the feeling was so overwhelming. She tilted her hips and moved against his mouth, her muscles tightening up.

“Oh God...”

She could hardly take it. The moment was there, lapping at the surface, as if begging for her to give permission. Her whole body trembled. Sable gripped the sheets, willing the years of obstacles and stress to fall away and allow her a moment of freedom.

“Don’t stop, I’m so close. So very close.”



He was relentless with his tongue and fingers, working them simultaneously, drawing out the very breath from her lungs. She squirmed until the inner issues pushed away and the orgasm broke free. The waves continued pouring over the surface, sending her into an altered state.

“Have you never had a man take you with his mouth before?”

It took her several minutes to catch her breath and be able to answer. “It has never been successful before. You’ve been a first of many things tonight.”

“I must say that does wonders for my ego. Fortunately for you, I’ve only begun.”

He leaned over her, his erection sliding against her thigh. Sable spread her legs as wide as possible to accommodate whatever would come next. He buried his face in her hair and nipped at her earlobes, sending a new bath of spasms through her body. She reached down along his back, trying to make him enter her saturated folds.

His lips moved to hers and they shared a heated kiss, the taste of her sex surprisingly welcome to her palate. She felt the brush of his hair against her chin as he left her lips and trailed down to her breasts. Again she was hot and ready for him, her nether region soaked and demanding more. The man knew the fine art of foreplay and she would be forever spoiled.

She arched her back as he feasted on her nipples, savoring each one like a tiny morsel, quickening her pulse until she thought her heart couldn’t take anymore.

“Damn you, I want you now,” she cried in a voice trembling along with her thighs.

“Demanding, aren’t you?”

She pled with her eyes.

"I need to feel you so badly, please don't make me suffer this way anymore."

She reached between them and found his shaft throbbing intensely.

"You know you want to feel me. I can't wait any longer. I'll beg... I'll do anything." She didn't care what power she was giving up or how whiney she sounded. All her senses were alive and craving the sustenance that only he could provide. "Please, satisfy both our needs."

"Yes." His voice was drenched with hunger.

He teased at her entrance, painting her pussy with languid strokes like it was a canvas. "I can smell the fire in you."

She choked back a cry as he pushed in his cock, forcing her open wider than his fingers had.

"Woman, you are unbelievably tight." His voice was a growl and vibrated deeply.

With each inch that slid in, she tightened her inner muscles around him, suctioning herself around his sex. His rigid shaft found a pulsing momentum inside her secreted walls; her body thrashed about with each plunge. She cried out, her hips thrusting, pushing her mound hard against him. The blaze between them heated up and she found herself locked into a sacred rhythm, their bodies pumping to the drumbeat of their elevated pulses. The way he filled her up was miraculous. He gripped her hips and lunged between her inner folds with eloquent force. She watched through half-closed eyes, enjoying the pleasure he showed on his face.

His muscles rippled along his chest and arms as he lifted her lower body up and into him. She gripped the sheets tight up over her head, hanging on to the edge of the mattress.

He guided her to turn over and pulled her body toward him until she was on her knees. The new sensation and friction provoked her further.

She slammed into him, propelling her body back and forth, ignited by the feel of his firm cock slipping in and out of her. With her fingers, she simulated his earlier movements and rubbed at her clit until she was close to a release. She could hear him grunting from behind, giving it his all. Exhaustion threatened to win over but somehow she mustered up her second wind and stormed against him until she couldn't hold on.

Her orgasm belted through her body, and she was startled by the magnitude of the empowering jolts that followed, shooting through every space in her body. He hurtled himself one more time into her drenched sex and cried out, their juices mingling with one another. As he stretched out on the bed, she turned over to nestle into him, her breasts heaving. Now she understood what was so explosive about sex. If she died now, she would die with the biggest smile on her face.

## Chapter Eight

She lay in his arms, resisting the urge to pinch herself. If she were still dreaming it all, she didn't want it to fade away.

"I heard some pretty music playing while I was in the bathroom."

"I started up the music box on the mantle. My mother used to play that when she tried to get me to sleep. She claimed I was a colicky baby and it was the only thing that worked. Can't say I remember. I think it was just an excuse to introduce me to classical music early on."

"Do you still listen to classical music?"

"All the time. I can't get into the stuff they play on the radio. Rubs me the wrong way."

"Same here. I get bummed out when I think about all the kids that are half my age making more money than I am with a single song."

"Money is a sore spot with you, isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"So tell me something. I like to consider myself an extremely good listener, and I pick up on things that other people don't."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. If I say the word 'gambling' what are the first things that come to mind?"

Sable shuddered. There was no reason to pinch now; the little bubble had burst. She turned toward him, resting her head on her hand.

"You're way too observant."

“My mother taught me well.”

“She must be an amazing woman.”

“Yes, she was.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. She was a very elegant woman. Thoughtful too.”

“She’d be proud of you.”

“I’d like to think so. But we weren’t talking about me. What comes to mind when you hear that word?”

“I think jerk, debt and nasty fights. I think sleepless nights, selling off things that have personal value, making sacrifices and constant depression.”

“Why is that?”

A tear hovered in the corner of her eye and she tried to blink it away before it showed itself.

“My former fiancé had a gambling problem. Because of him I’ve had to start all over and work my way back up to at least making ends meet. I have absolutely no credit, or actually I do but it’s bad. I owe creditors a ridiculous sum of money, and I’ve lowered my standards for both myself and the life I live.”

“That’s harsh. How long were you two together?”

“Five years. He bought me a really nice engagement ring and not even three months later had to hawk it for money. He always owed people. It was an addiction he couldn’t get a handle on, no matter how much I begged and pleaded.”

His fingers traced around her arm and shoulder, and then up around her chin. As difficult as it was to be open, he made her feel at ease.

“What happened to him?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know. One night he never came home. I have a feeling someone got to him, but then again he might have run

away to keep from getting caught. He owed a lot of people money, bad people. Some of them have followed me, called me at work and harassed me on the phone. I change my number every few months. It was a situation I never thought I'd find myself in."

"You brave girl. How long has it been since you last saw him?"

"A year. It still hurts, but not as much."

"I'm very sorry."

"Well, it was a lesson. I don't get caught up in illusions too much anymore, or at least, I didn't until tonight."

"After the incredible sex we had, you call this an illusion?"

"You're mixing up my words. I didn't mean you were, or the sex was, but the situation is. It doesn't even make sense to me. Earlier today I had convinced myself there was no way I'd get myself caught up in a relationship again. Now look at me. I'm my own worst enemy."

"Not true. Fate heard you and decided to step in."

She shook her head. "Stop saying that. You are an amazing man and have shown me the most fairy tale night of my life, but I know when I wake up in the morning, everything will go back to the way it was."

"I thought you were looking for change."

"I am."

"Change is taking place now. I guess you don't realize how exactly it works. You said it yourself; you decided love had no place in your life. You quit your job and swore you weren't going back. You've been meaning to get your car fixed."

"Yes, then I meet you and..." Without meaning to, she sobbed into his chest.

Maxwell stroked her hair and rocked her in his arms.

"Shh. It will all be okay."

"It's all too much and I'm just tired."

"I believe it. But the neat thing is, you're not alone. Everything is more overwhelming when you go it alone. I'm right here. Love is right here. Looking right at you. Tomorrow can be the start of new things in your life. If you let it."

"It sounds so easy, but I don't think I can do that right now."

"Letting go of past wounds is the hard part, but letting love in is easier than you'd think. I won't rush you, Sable. I made a promise to myself and I won't break it."

She looked up at him through soaked lashes. "What promise?"

"To not be the guy who breaks your heart again."

"You're on the right track. If I was the right girl for you, I'd never let you go."

"Who says you aren't the right girl?"

She flopped to her back and brought the covers up to her chin.

"Please. Like I need to spell it out for you."

"I think you do. See, I'm envisioning many more evenings with you."

The tears were starting up again and she couldn't do a thing about it. "Haven't you learned anything about tonight? I'll bring out the demons in you. I'll make you sorry you ever took a chance on me. I'm bad luck."

"No, you aren't. That's an old tape replaying in your head. I've learned a lot tonight. I've learned that I enjoyed my ravioli more than I ever have before. I learned how much I like Cabernet Sauvignon. And I learned that I love you."

Her heart thudded. Had he really said those words? She didn't know what to say.

"I know. It sounds farfetched. But it's true. I speak my mind and I'm telling you right here and now, I love you."

She turned to him and pushed her face against his chest.

"It doesn't make sense."

“Love isn’t supposed to.”

“I know that I’m bad luck. Things won’t go right if you’re with me. One thing after another will unravel and pretty soon you will be blaming me for everything, and you’ll have every right.”

“Once again, old tapes. Did you know that a person has the ability to make things go wrong for themselves just by thinking it?”

She shook her head.

“It’s true. They can fool themselves into a vicious cycle where nothing goes right, and pretty soon all their negative expectations start to come true. What if you changed all that in the quest to start new? Start to make positive things for yourself. What do you say to that?”

Sable shrugged. “Sounds easier said than done.”

“I’d be right by your side, helping you every step of the way.”

“I told you. I don’t like handouts.”

“I’d prefer to use the word support. And we’d be doing it together.”

He ran his hand along her breasts, making her nipples shoot straight up to attention.

She sighed. “I like it when we do things together.”

His sexy little smile made her wet between the thighs.

“Then you’ll like what I’m about to do next.”



## Chapter Nine

Maxwell couldn't believe he was raring to go again. The woman awoke his inner animal in a way he hadn't ever known. All the years of women who only wanted his money had somehow cheapened the whole sex thing for him. They would cater to his every need for a price, and then when the price wasn't met they were gone like a flash. Sable was, without a doubt, what he needed in his life.

With a coy smile, she moved to the end of the bed and positioned herself between his legs.

"I think this time I get to do a little teasing of my own."

"Says who?"

"Me. I'm one of those equal opportunity gals. You give a little. I give a little."

She knelt and leaned over him, rubbing his cock along the side of her cheek. The pliant texture of her skin was a blessing, soothing him. She ran her tongue along the length of his shaft and back up again. His body tensed at the sudden descent into her moist mouth. He slammed his head back into the pillow and bit the sides of his cheeks to keep from yelling out. Her pinky fingers grazed against his balls, teasing them lightly as her hands followed the up and down direction of her accommodating lips.

Damn! She knew all the right spots. His curiosity got the better of him and he watched her blonde head bobbing up and down. He reached

down, his fingers tangling in the soft strands of her hair, a silken nest he could lose himself in for days. She slid his cock between her lips and watched him intently, obviously pleased he was enjoying the show.

With her tongue, she taunted the tip with graceful flicks and swiftly swallowed him whole again. Sweat gathered across his forehead at the intensity of her movements. As she went down on him, her hips swayed side to side, an erotic pendulum that would easily make him succumb to anything she wanted.

Faster, she engulfed him, securing her mouth around him. It was unimaginable the way his body was responding. His muscles tensed as he tried to keep himself steady. Tightness in his abdomen signaled he was close to an orgasm. She devoured him over and over, drawing out all his pent-up desire.

“Sable...”

He couldn't continue on with his pleading. All his air welled up inside his lungs as he held his breath. Images of him plunging inside her soaked snatch caused him to go over the edge. He sucked in his breath and then let it go. Maxwell cried out, his fists clenched and eyes tight.

She wasn't through with him yet. Lovingly she stroked his cock while licking the tip of with feathery wisps of her tongue. He reached for her, wanting to give her more pleasure. She crawled over him, grazing her breasts along his body, her nipples hardened like daggers.

“I want you to make me come with your mouth again.”

Her words were clear and she wasn't about to take no for an answer.

“Gladly.”

She rested her ass on his chest and slid her pussy up in front of his thirsty lips. Her scent was intoxicating. Wild musk. Wild honey. Dammit! He just knew he'd want her again and again. The night would be an endless torrent of fantasies come true.

He pointed the tip of his tongue and outlined her clit. As he dipped inside her juicy offerings, she got herself off with her thumb and fingers. His hands wrapped around her hips and drew him toward her, reaching as far inside her scented bounty as he could. Already she was moaning and panting heavily. He loved how much she needed him to give this to her. She cursed under her breath as she rode him hard, her luscious breasts jiggling. Maxwell understood the moment where the brain got in the way of the need to let loose, it had happened to him enough times. He tried his best to make it easier for her. With his fingers, he pushed up into her tight anal hole and darted in and out until she squirmed so hard he knew she was there.

“Oh God! Maxwell! I can’t believe it!”

Her juices spilled against his tongue and he lapped it up. Everything about her was just right.

She climbed off him and thrust her tongue into his mouth, sweeping the sides. The way her body shook made it all the sweeter. She propped herself up on her hands and looked into his eyes, tears running down her cheeks.

“I don’t know how you do it, but you bring out the best in me.”

“That’s all I could ever want.”

“Damn you for being so perfect.”

All he could do was smile. This was the woman he would do anything for. He would love her completely with everything inside himself. If only he could chip away some of the ice around her heart. What he wouldn’t give to hear that she loved him back.

“Yes, damn me. I am terrible for wanting to taste every inch of your body.”

She laughed and rolled into him, her body slick and warm. “I have never felt this whole before. Ever. I’m not saying that in the heat of the moment either.”

“That’s good, because I love all of you. Every single desirable bit.”

“And I love you.”

## Chapter Ten

Raindrops plunked away at the window during their brief moment of silence.

“I guess I really was lucky I ran into you tonight.”

“It’s what I’ve been saying all along.”

She groaned and traced a heart shape along his chest with her finger.

“You aren’t going to let that go, are you? The fate thing.”

“Not until you admit there’s a possibility.”

“I’m not completely convinced. Sounds too much like magic and I’m not buying that either.”

Maxwell groaned and raised his eyebrows at her. “You still don’t believe? How many times did you want me to convince you tonight?”

She cast him a wicked grin. “As long as it takes.”

His cock stirred again beneath the sheets. “You’re a slave driver.”

“I’m practicing this change thing you keep touting as such a good thing. You might be on to something.”

He took her hands and kissed each finger gently. “I was serious when I said I’d be here for you. Your own personal cheering squad.”

“Thanks. I could use one of those.” Sable took a big deep breath and let it all out. “Okay. I’m going to do it. Make changes, I mean. In the morning, I’m going to look at things in a new light and start fresh.”

“Good for you. Have anything sorted out yet?”

“First, I have to call a tow truck. I may despise my car, but I’m still going to need it.”

“Actually, I did that for you when you were in the bathroom. It’s at the shop. Not to worry either, my pal Stan is a great mechanic and he’ll have it running for next to nothing.”

“Serious? Wow. Thank you so much.”

“Nothing to it. Hope you aren’t mad.”

“How could I be?”

“That’s what I thought.”

She punched him lightly in the arm and laughed.

“What else are you going to do?”

“I’m going to check on my apartment and hope I can grab some clothes before everything starts to smell bad. Plus, I’ll need something classy to wear for the interview. I think I have a nice pantsuit in the closet.”

“I think you should consider a short skirt.”

“Pardon me?”

He gave her a sheepish look and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

“A skirt is good for an interview.”

“Uh huh. Now you’re sounding like a typical guy again. How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“You have a smooth transition between typical guy and Romeo romantic.”

“I want to be all things to you.”

Sable shook her head. He was incorrigible. Sexy, but incorrigible.

“So, about that skirt thing. A nice tight, see-through blouse would look great. Be sure to wear one of those lacy things underneath.”

“You mean a camisole?”

“Mm. Even the word from your lips is turning me on again.”

“You better settle down or we’ll never get any rest.”

“If you don’t have a skirt, we can go shopping.”

She gave him an exasperated sigh. “I won’t let you spend money on clothes for me.”

“We’ll take the amount of the outfit off your first paycheck if it makes you feel better.”

“It does. Oh, and I’ll have to call my old boss and ask for my final paycheck to be mailed to me.”

“Then I’ll take you to lunch, drop you off for the interview, drool over your legs in some hot little skirt during the interview, celebrate you getting the job after the interview, take you out to a delicious dinner and then seduce you back to my place.”

She laughed so hard she snorted. “Sounds like *your* plans, but I thought we were talking about *my* plans.”

“Actually, I thought we should be discussing *our* plans.”

“Ours is nice. In fact, I really love the sound of that. How is it I managed to find the perfect guy for me when I wasn’t even looking?”

He kissed her forehead and nestled close into her. “Since you still don’t seem convinced it was fate, I guess we can blame the rain.”

“The rain it is.”

## About the Author

Ann Cory's passion has always been writing thanks to a relentless muse and an overactive imagination. Her biggest fans and supporters include her adorable son, handsome husband, and two crazy cats.

Erotic romance author Ann Cory invites you to sample her literary offerings in the hopes of leaving you with an acquired taste for sophisticated reading. Visit her website <http://www.anncory.com> or blog <http://anncory.blogspot.com/> to see what is new on her publication menu.



Look for these titles

*Now Available:*

Melting Iron  
Under a Warlock's Spell

*When Elena Richardson mistakes her millionaire landlord  
for a prospective employee, she'll lose more than just her virginity.*

## Teaching Elena

© 2006 Maggie Casper

What happens to a virgin who decides she no longer wants to be innocent?

While some may go to a trendy bar looking for a one-night stand, others choose less conventional methods.

Elena Richardson is many things, but conventional is not one of them. Hiring a stock boy for her lingerie store seemed like the perfect plan. A hassle free way to get a man past her overbearing brother.

The problems start when Elena mistakes her millionaire landlord for a prospective employee. One taste and she can't turn back.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Teaching Elena*.

She tried to ignore it, but the feeling of being watched, no hunted, was overwhelming. The hair-raising feeling had plagued her for the past few minutes. She couldn't shake it off. Just on the off chance someone had come into the store without her realizing it, she peeked over her shoulder. The air whooshed out of her lungs at the sight behind her.

The tall, extremely well-built man, who looked to be in his early to mid thirties, was looking at her as if she were Little Red Riding Hood and he was the Big Bad Wolf ready to gobble her up. With his legs braced wide and his ham-like fists clenched tight, he was intimidating and oh, so sexy.

Her heart felt as though it would pound its way right out of her chest; it took what seemed like forever to catch a breath.

Just the thought of this exceptionally large man doing to her what she so wanted to experience made her core quiver and puddle. Thinking this was the man she was supposed to interview for the bogus position of stock boy at her lingerie store, Leather and Lace, and not wanting to take the chance of such a fine specimen getting away, she quickly stood and turned toward him.

“Good, you made it,” she said, sounding a little breathy. “We can worry about the paperwork later, why don’t I get you started?”

Laney watched as the beast of a man took notice of the room around him. Rows, racks and bins of lingerie covered every possible surface while still allowing customers the room to move around comfortably. She couldn’t imagine that such a masculine man had ever been in a room with so much lace. He didn’t look relaxed. He also didn’t seem like the type to hang out in women’s clothing stores.

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he swallowed. The muscled cords running along his neck rippled with the action, making her want to touch her lips to the spot. She watched as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Was he nervous?

“Paperwork?” he asked quizzically.

“Yeah, you know. Name, Social Security, the type of stuff I need to get you on the books.” She waved a hand in the air as if to dismiss something trivial. “But for now we’ll just get you started.”

Watching his face sent a wave of apprehension zinging through her. He seemed confused. Like he had no idea what she was talking about. He was here for the job, wasn’t he?

Reaching the storeroom, Laney turned toward him. Would he agree to her plan? The thought brought a dimpled smile to her face. He made no effort to hide the ferocity of the lust his face revealed. A look, she was sure, he knew had the tendency to make women weak at the knees.

She cleared her throat, hoping to find her voice and break the spell his deep brown eyes held over her. "Um... Mr..."

"Thomas. Luke Thomas, and you are?" he asked in a husky voice.

"Oh! Sorry," she replied as she stuck out her hand. "It's Elena Richardson, Laney."

The feel of his very large, very strong hand as it engulfed her much smaller, much softer one sent a shiver up her spine. The abrasive pad of his thumb made sensual movements over her knuckles for just a moment before he released her. Such a simple, tantalizing gesture was all it took to embed her decision in stone. This was the man who would teach her what she had been missing, if she had to tie him to the bed to get it accomplished. The thought of him tied to her canopy bed almost made her giggle. It also brought along with it heat. Pure, raw heat, the type she hoped would feed the flames of the desire he did nothing to hide.

"Mr. Thomas, there was one thing I wanted to speak to you about before you get started," she said, trying to sound as professional as possible under the circumstances.

"Luke, please. And may I call you Laney?" he asked.

Laney gave him an affirmative nod then forced herself to continue. "Besides helping as a stock boy and with errands, I would like to speak to you about some help of a more...personal nature."

Luke's brows shot up, almost losing themselves behind the curly mop of brown hair that fell onto his forehead. He said nothing in return.

For what seemed to be hours, but were actually only minutes, they stood staring in silence. Laney's conscience nagged at her. Would following through with her plan alienate her from her overbearing brother, the brother who raised her after their mother died? She shook her head, trying not to think about it. There was no reason he would ever have to know. And if, for some reason, he did find out she was right

smack dab in the middle of a torrid affair, then John Richardson would just have to deal with it.

For years he had treated her like a child, a princess to be placed on a pedestal. It drove her nuts. The only time he treated her like a normal person was during their monthly softball game. It was time he learned she wasn't made of glass. She was a grown woman capable of making her own decisions. It was a good thing she loved the big oaf so much because she no longer wanted to have the stigma of being a virgin held over her head.

She couldn't even count the times she'd been dumped after a would-be lover found out she was not only inexperienced, but an honest to goodness virgin. One of the idiots even had the nerve to tell her that a man would have to be a fool to tangle with a virgin. He had laughed and stated he hadn't realized they made virgins as old as her. It had been a low blow landing directly on its mark.

About that time, she made a decision to shed her virginity with a no-strings-attached affair with an older, more experienced man. Being like a little sister to half the men in town, and like a daughter to the other half made her quest hard. She couldn't very well put a personal ad in the paper stating she was looking for a sex coach, so the next best bet was to look for a stock boy. The ad brought in many prospective employees, but none had been what she was looking for.

The majority had been young men looking for part-time work while they weren't in school. Since younger men weren't her idea of experienced, she had thanked them all and sent them on their way.

Until today, that is. The minute Luke Thomas walked into her place of business she felt her luck change, and in a big way.

The look on his face prodded her on. She watched as his gaze raked her body, caressing her with his eyes, causing her breath to quicken. The increased rise and fall of her breasts as she fought to slow her breathing

made her cheeks heat. She could feel the blush rise on her face and neck. She could feel the warmth spread down her neck to the top of her breasts.

Unlike some, she tended to blush an attractive dusty rose instead of blotchy red. At least she had one thing to be thankful for. She could tell Luke liked what he saw. Just knowing he found her attractive boosted her confidence.

“Um, well yes. Where was I?” She knew she was stammering but couldn’t seem to stop herself. Taking a deep breath, she told herself it was now or never, then jumped from the pan straight into, what was sure to be, the hottest fire ever.

“I have this problem and would like you to solve it.”

“Oh? And what would be your problem?”

She raised her eyes to his, holding his gaze. Her darker side took over, and the need to see his expression clearly as she told him of her plan made her mouth turn up at the corner.

“My virginity,” she announced, as if it were nothing.

*Anything can happen when jokers are wild.*

## Call Me

© 2006 Lena Matthews

When Kayla Martin tries to revolutionize the sex toy industry she calls on the one person she's grown to count on more than anyone else, her best friend and downstairs neighbor, Dylan Thompson.

When Kayla approaches him about being a test subject for her newest invention, an anal toy, Dylan is intrigued and aroused. That is until he finds out that The Walnut Wand is an anal toy for men.

Kayla's sure that a prostate stimulator will be a hit, all she needs is a willing participant. Far from willing, Dylan flat out refuses, but that's not enough to deter Kayla.

After their monthly poker game, Dylan and Kayla decide to make a risky bet. Kayla wants a test subject and Dylan wants the one thing's he's been craving for years. They'll risk it all on one hand, but anything can happen when jokers are wild.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Call Me*.

"Come on," Kayla said, tugging on his arm. "Let's just get the game started. This isn't an eighteen-hour bra. It's a wonder bra, and it's squeezing the bejesus out of the twins."

Dylan wasn't appeased, but short of doing exactly what he wanted, he had no other choice but to follow her. Watching her walk out the door was the highlight of his day though. Her full, round ass swayed and the skirt clung to her like a second skin. Feeling his body beginning to respond to the sight of soft delectable rear, Dylan quickly thought of all things not erotic to try to clear his head.

Baseball, the smell of the men's bathroom, her cooking. Anything to

get his mind focused before his money wasn't the only thing he lost this evening.

Taking a seat at the table, Dylan looked around at his friends, who were all glancing not so subtly at Kayla's pale cleavage, and cleared his throat. When everyone glanced his way, even an amused Kayla, he muttered, "Ante up."

Kayla's winning streak that night had more to do with her bra than her brains. Every time she was backed into a corner, she would lean forward and squeeze her arms together, causing her breasts to swell and appear as if they were going to pop right out of her shirt.

Her only real competition that night was Dylan, who was onto her, but unfortunately, it didn't stop him from making a couple of bad moves either. All in all, she thought the twenty-dollar push-up bra had been a wise investment. It doubled her pocket in just one night. *This bad boy*, she thought amusedly, *is getting hand-washed and placed in a position of honor in the drawer.*

Racking up her loot, she nodded and smiled as the guys made their way out Dylan's door. As the last sucker, as she referred to them in her mind, left, she let out a loud cackle that would have done the vilest of witches proud.

"I kicked ass tonight," she roared as she jumped up from the table. "Go, Kayla, it's your birthday. Go, Kayla, it's your birthday."

"You are a grifter," muttered a disgruntled Dylan as he slumped onto his couch.

Kicking his shoes off, he put his feet on the coffee table. Leaning back with his arms folded across his chest, Dylan watched with an obvious smirk as Kayla did her victory dance.

Wiggling her hips and shimmying her breasts, Kayla slinked around in circles.



Rubbing the cash over her chest, she laughed at his disgruntled look and flaunted the money in his face. Winning was great, being able to throw it in Dylan's face was priceless.

"Men are such idiots," she said, throwing her head back and tossing the money in the air. The money showered over her like green confetti as it floated to the ground, landing at her feet in a puddle. Smiling, Kayla walked around the table and dropped down next to Dylan on the couch.

"Breasts are the best thing that God invented," she teased, laying her head on his shoulder. Rubbing against his neck like a kitten, she burrowed closer to him and inhaled his scent. A mixture of spicy cologne and aftershave lotion, Dylan smelled just like a good man should, intoxicating. It was a scent she couldn't get out of her mind.

Snorting, Dylan pushed the table forward and brought his legs to the ground.

Nudging at her with his shoulder, he tried to dislodge her head.

"What, the poor baby upset that he lost to a woman?"

"I didn't lose to a woman," he scowled. "I lost to a pair of tits."

Gasping in mock outrage, Kayla poked her fingers into his ribs and wiggled them.

Knowing that Dylan hated to be tickled, she attacked him with relish. Groaning, Dylan grabbed her hands and fought off her advances. They wrestled, rolling onto the floor in their attempt to be the victor. Kayla landed on her back with Dylan firmly encased between her thighs and her arms held above her head in his strong grasp.

All laughter ceased to exist as they became aware of their potentially awkward situation.

"Just admit it," Dylan said softly. "You used your tits to unfair advantage."

"I didn't force anyone to look."

"As good of a player as you are," Dylan paused to glance down at her

heaving breasts, “you wouldn’t have gotten as lucky as you did if it weren’t for these beauties. You used them to distract us. Admit it.”

*So he thinks the girls are beauties, huh?* Kayla’s breathing slowed as her arousal rose. The feel of Dylan, heavy and hard on top of her, was having a dangerous effect on her ability to think. She had to admit, it was a feeling she could grow to love.

“Maybe a little.” Sliding her tongue over her parched lips, Kayla moved a little, forcing her skirt to rise higher on her hips and causing Dylan to shift directly between her thighs. The obvious sign of his arousal was pressed firmly against the moist juncture of her center.

*Now this is certainly a very interesting development.*

“Care to get up?” she asked, half-hoping he didn’t. Kayla had been wanting him in this position for a while now and wanted to savor every second of it.

Pressing forward a little, he replied, “Not especially.”

*That works for me.* Dylan’s weight, full and strong, felt more than just right pressed against her. It felt damn good. So good in fact, that Kayla had to resist undulating her hips towards him. “Are you willing to put your money where your mouth is?”

“You have all the money you’re going to get from me tonight,” he replied as he released her arms. Placing his arms on the side of her head, he pressed up and rose off her, giving Kayla an eagle-eye view of what she had felt moments earlier. *Not only does it feel good, it looks damn good too*, she thought as he offered her his hand, helping Kayla to her feet.

Pushing her skirt down, Kayla said, “We don’t have to play for money.”

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