



A View from the Clouds

by

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New Concepts Publishing

5202 Humphreys Road

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

CHAPTER ONE

The view from the sixty-first floor was fantastic.

Jackie Saranno was in the clouds, floating above the drab existence of the people crawling like ants on the city streets below. The office windows stretched from the carpeted floor to the paneled ceiling, clear and sparkling.

The last colors of the setting sun faded beyond the western horizon, leaving twilight to claim the city. She imagined the thin barrier dissolving, dreamed of the night air caressing her body. She stepped closer, almost touching the glass. The small bold step brought a rush of lightheadedness.

She almost believed that if she swayed forward just one more inch, she would fly.

"You're here." A man's voice, rough as raw silk, came from behind to wrap around her senses. "Finally."

He was standing in an alcove steeped in shadows, but the room was not so dark as to completely hide his features. He was tall, broad, with dark hair and blue eyes, and a firm set to his chin. A hand-tailored white shirt hugged his shoulders. Pleated trousers molded his long thighs. He was standing near the light switch, but he didn't move to illuminate the room.

He stood for a long moment, watching her, and Jackie could sense him mentally peeling away each article of clothing she wore. Her nipples tightened, and she must have drawn an audible breath, because the man gave a low chuckle as he pulled the office door closed and flipped the lock.

"Step in front of the desk," he said. "And take off your clothes."

Jackie's legs trembled, but she did as she was told, moving around the wide mahogany desk. Her fingers went to the top button on her sheer blouse, fumbled, then froze.

She couldn't do this.

The man stepped closer, close enough that he could have touched her. Something like pain lined his handsome face. "I want to see you naked."

Jackie slipped the first button from its hole, then, slowly, her hands dropped to her sides. A rush of unaccustomed recklessness swept through her. The same feeling she'd had when she'd looked out the window.

The exhilarating sense of freedom made her laugh. "No. You first."

She glanced toward the glass, then back at the man. The evening sky had faded to gray, but enough light remained to illuminate the angry flash in his eyes. She sucked in a breath. She was playing with fire, and she knew it.

"Start with your tie," she said.

The man's jaw locked, but to Jackie's amazement, he did as he was told. When the length of red silk lay on the floor, he gave her a hard look. "Now what?"

"Your shirt," she said.

He undid his cuffs. Jackie closed her eyes briefly as a hot flush made its way from her neck to her hairline. By the time she felt calm enough to hazard another look, the shirt had joined the tie on the Oriental rug.

She sucked in a breath. Even in twilight, he was magnificent. She reached back and gripped the edge of the desk with both hands. The movement caused her breasts to thrust forward.

The man inhaled a sharp breath, but didn't speak.

Jackie's gaze darted to his groin, where his cock tented his trousers to an unbelievable degree. She stared, mesmerized. "Take off your pants," she whispered.

Time moved in a blur after that. First he was naked, then so was she. She leaned back, supporting herself on the smooth surface of the desk. He followed, moving close. His muscled thigh slid between her legs, teasing

her as he nudged her up onto the cool surface of the desk. He came over her and lowered his head for a kiss, slanting his mouth over hers for better access. She opened her lips and his tongue slipped between them. His hands moved on her body, stroking her everywhere. One thumb and forefinger tortured her breast, the other worked magic between her legs. Then his mouth followed the trail his hands had blazed, suckling her breast, twirling about her navel, dipping lower.

She cried out as he made contact, bracing her arms on the desk behind her as he opened her legs wider. Her head dropped back, her breathing became shallow. The pleasure was building, building, rushing forward, almost there, almost....

A buzzing sound started, softly at first, just enough to bring her back from the edge. Pleasure faded. Jackie thrust her hips forward, trying to ignore the intrusion, but the noise only grew louder and more insistent. She tried to grab her lover, pull him to her, but her hands closed on air.

"No! Don't leave." She reached out to him, even though she knew it was too late. He was gone. And she was alone. Not in a luxurious office in the clouds, but in her own dingy efficiency apartment, half a floor below the sidewalk.

The buzzing was her alarm. Five-thirty a.m. Time to get up and go to work.

"Shit," she said out loud, then sighed. She'd been close in that one. Closer than she'd ever been in what had become a frustrating nightly dream.

Why the hell couldn't she ever wake up *after* the orgasm?

She sat up in bed, cheeks flaring as snatches of the dream replayed in her mind. Every detail of her dream lover's handsome face was etched in her memory. He visited her every night, but the relationship didn't stop there. He was the focus of most of her daytime fantasies, too.

He was Max Patterson. The youngest partner of Patterson Morely Patterson, the enormous Philadelphia law firm that occupied the top floors of Liberty Center, one of the tallest skyscrapers in Philadelphia. Jackie worked the computer help desk at PMP.

A woman would have to be in a coma not to lust after Max. He was thirty-six years old, tall, dark, and drop dead gorgeous. He had a body to die for, a killer smile, and a bank account that stretched from here to eternity. He'd been named top dog a year before, upon the retirement of the first Patterson in Patterson Morely Patterson--Max's father.

But no one in his right mind would have suggested the promotion was a gift. Max Patterson was a legend among Philadelphia lawyers. He had a brilliant mind, a Yale law degree, and a reputation for shredding his opponents in court.

And melting his women in bed.

Never married, Max didn't lack for female companionship, but from what Jackie heard around the office, he never dated any woman for more than a month. In fact, Jackie's boss, Paul O'Neill, ran a regular gambling pool he called "Who's screwing Max?" PMP's tech employees placed bets

weekly, estimating the final hour of Max Patterson's current liaison. The odds of breakup increased exponentially with each passing day. If Max ever kept a girlfriend longer than two weeks, the pool winner would clean up big time.

Jackie jabbed the off button on the alarm and struggled into a sitting position on the bed. The dim glow of a streetlight filtered through her one tiny window. It was a bleak January morning but the dream had heated Jackie's blood so much that she barely noticed the chill in her apartment. She sat in the darkness for a few beats, twisting her grandmother's silver and emerald ring on the fourth finger of her right hand.

Really, she shouldn't get so worked up about a silly dream. After all, there were probably a lot of women at PMP who dreamed about Max. Blinking the sleep from her eyes, Jackie staggered into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

Yeah. No big deal.

Except for one tiny detail Jackie couldn't quite ignore.

Her dreams had started before she'd ever heard of Max Patterson.

CHAPTER TWO

"Guess who I just saw?"

Kelsey's voice hit the excited squeak she reserved for sinfully rich chocolate and sinfully rich men. At seven a.m. on a Monday morning, after yet another restless night, Jackie was finding it hard to get into the mood.

"Who?" She kept her tone noncommittal and her eyes on her computer screen as she clicked over to her favorite website. She really didn't like to start the day without a fix of "Dilbert."

Kelsey plunked a Starbucks Grande and her butt on the edge of Jackie's desk. "I saw--"

The help desk line chirped.

"Shit," Kelsey said. "Seven oh three and already going at it. You would think the brainiac lawyers could handle their computers on their own for at least fifteen minutes."

It wasn't Jackie's turn to pick up, thankfully. Not Kelsey's either, unfortunately. Jackie heard Roger--the skinny geek with a greasy ponytail and bad skin who sat one cubicle over--take the call.

Leaning over, Kelsey punched a couple of buttons on Jackie's phone, taking both her own line and Jackie's off the hook. "Why the hell aren't they home screwing their wives this early in the morning?" She took a sip of coffee. "Oh, I know why. Their wives are all getting it on the side. On account of their husbands only get hard-ons in court."

Jackie scowled at her. "There are female lawyers at PMP too, you know."

Kelsey blotted her mouth with a napkin, smearing the paper with red lipstick. "My, we're in a bad mood this morning. But don't worry, you'll perk up when I finish telling you my news."

Jackie sighed and clicked over to weather.com. Another cold, dreary January day. Not that it made any difference to her. In the rat's maze of PMP's Information Technology department, the sun never shone.

"So what's your news?" she asked Kelsey.

Kelsey smirked. "Your man's back in town."

Jackie's head jerked up. "Bernie?"

"Hell no, not that idiot." Her smile widened. "Your dream man."

Jackie closed her eyes, as if that would prevent her cheeks from heating. She took a cleansing breath. Really, she didn't have anything to worry about. Kelsey didn't know about Jackie's late night fantasies.

She kept her eyes fixed on her screen. "I give up. Who's my dream man?"

"Max Patterson," Kelsey said smugly.

Jackie's hand froze on the mouse. "Max Patterson is in London," she said. "He's not due back until next week."

"Must've had a change of plans. He's up in the reception lobby chatting with a bunch of suits." Kelsey inspected her nails. "And word is that he's available again."

"That is news," Jackie agreed. "He was going for a record this time around. What was it, ten days?"

"Only nine," Kelsey said, pulling her Palm organizer out of her purse. She tapped the screen and read from the display. "Nine days, six hours, and forty-two minutes. Paul intercepted the 'Dear Jane' email last night."

Jackie rolled her eyes. As a rule, Max Patterson asked women out via email. He invariably broke up with them the same way. Paul kept tabs on it.

"You know," she said. "If Max Patterson ever found out Paul was snooping through his inbox, there'd be hell to pay."

"And who's going to tell him? Not anyone down here. The IT department protects its own." Kelsey grinned. "Guess who won this week's pool?"

"Who?"

"Me. Fifty bucks."

Jackie grinned back. "Lucky."

"Damn right. I'm hot." Kelsey slipped the Palm back into her purse and sent Jackie a speculative glance. "You know, you could get lucky, too."

Max is available. It's your window of opportunity."

Jackie twisted her grandmother's ring. "You're delusional. Max Patterson could have any woman in the city. In several cities. He doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Kelsey said. "Remember how you spilled coffee on him your second day here?"

Jackie's finger fumbled on the mouse as she clicked over to yourdailyhoroscope.com. She had indeed spilled coffee on Max Patterson the first time she'd seen him. On the morning after her first dream about him. She'd been coming into the lobby after a coffee run to Starbucks, balancing three Grande lattes in a cardboard tray and a bag of biscotti under one arm. She'd been hurrying across the reception lobby, head down, when she heard a man's voice. The same deep, sexy voice that belonged to her dream lover.

She caught sight of him and her heart damn near stopped beating. He was the man from her dream. The man she'd ordered to strip. He was tall and dark-haired, with intense blue eyes and an aura of power--the kind that made women draw close and other men back away.

He was striding across the carpet, talking vehemently into his cell phone, not looking where he was going. She watched him, her mind whirling. How could she have dreamed this man was her lover? She'd never seen him before this instant.

He was heading straight toward her. She told herself to move, but her

feet wouldn't obey. The next instant he plowed right into her.

The cardboard tray tipped and the lattes sloshed out of her control. Max's cell phone and the bag of biscotti flew into the air. Jackie fell, sprawling on her ass. Max Patterson went down on one knee. His white dress shirt had caught the worst of the coffee. A wide brown stain dripped down his chest.

"Oh my God," Jackie sputtered. "I'm so sorry."

"Jesus." Max sprang to his feet then extended one hand to Jackie.

"Are you all--"

He left off in mid sentence when she looked up at him. An odd expression flitted across his face and for a moment, Jackie was afraid he was going to take his hand away. Then he seemed to give himself a mental shake.

"I'm so sorry," Jackie said again, inanely, once he'd helped her to her feet. For the life of her, she couldn't think of anything else to say. Except maybe "you should take off your shirt," which, in light of her dream, didn't seem wise.

"Not your fault," Max said with a rueful smile. "Should have been watching where I was going." He retrieved his phone and ordered a woman at the reception desk to call for clean-up.

Then he left.

"I can only hope he doesn't remember about the coffee," Jackie told Kelsey.

Kelsey gave a dismissive flip of her hand. "You worry too much. So what if you ruined his shirt? I bet he has a hundred of them." She took another sip of her coffee, giving Jackie an assessing glance over the rim of the cup. "You know what you need, Jack? You need to cut loose. Lighten up. Look at you--what the hell are you wearing--a white blouse and plaid jumper for chrissakes? You look like a fugitive from Catholic school."

"I *am* a fugitive from Catholic school."

"Well, sure, but that doesn't mean it has to cripple you for life."

"I'd wear jeans, but we have a dress code here, remember?"

Kelsey slid her butt off Jackie's desk. "Well, I suggest you get a new wardrobe. You're going to need it. While I was picking up my fifty, Paul told me a top floor assignment came in for you. Of course, I told him I'd pass on the details."

Jackie raised her brows. "A top floor assignment, huh? It better not be anything like the last one."

Kelsey laughed. "You mean Lou Solomon's hard disk cleanup?"

"Yeah. That sleezoid had downloaded so much porn it's a wonder his system didn't have a meltdown." Jackie grimaced. "He even had a video clip of a woman doing it with a horse. Ugh."

Kelsey pitched her voice low. "Paul should have sent Walt up for that one," she said. "He would have loved it."

They both cut their eyes to Walt, sitting two cubicles away, on the other side of Roger. His considerable stomach barely fit behind his desk.

The half empty box of donuts beside his monitor hid a stack of magazines--programming and porn. The perfect combination.

He was on a call, talking into his headset, no doubt leading some computer-illiterate attorney through the finer points of Windows. His pudgy fingers played like lightning on his keyboard as scenes from Grand Theft Auto 3 flashed across his screen. Jackie didn't have to guess which activity was taking up more of his brain capacity.

She giggled. "He'd probably do it with a horse. Maybe I can get Paul to give him this new assignment."

"Oh, you won't say that once you hear what it is," Kelsey said. "In fact, you'll probably shoot anyone who tries to take it from you." She smirked, looking for all the world like a canary who had fed the cat to the dog.

"What assignment could possibly be that good?" Jackie asked, her curiosity finally kicking in.

Kelsey's smile widened. "Paul's sending you to Max Patterson's office. Max needs some personal instruction on the system updates IT ran while he was in England."

"Oh, no. No way."

"Yep. It's yours, babe. Run with it." Kelsey tossed her empty cup in the trash and retrieved her purse from the counter. "But, God, Jackie, don't shoot yourself in the foot and go up to the sixty-first floor looking like a bag lady."

She rummaged through her purse and pulled out a gold edged business card. "Here," she said, tossing the card on Jackie's desk. "This place is pure magic. For a thousand dollars, they'll do a complete makeover. Clothes, hair, makeup, the works. They're open evenings and you don't even need an appointment."

Jackie nearly choked. "A thousand dollars? I don't have that kind of money. I don't even have a spare twenty."

Kelsey blinked. "I know help desk doesn't pay much, but from what I see, you never spend a dime. Your bank account's got to be stuffed."

Jackie sighed. "I only wish. But my brother...."

"Don't tell me you gave him money."

"Just to tide him over. He's between jobs. And my sister...."

"Her, too?"

"Her kid needs braces and their dental plan doesn't cover it."

"So you chipped in."

"Yeah. A couple thousand. And then Bernie...."

Kelsey just looked at her. "Your low-life boyfriend? The one who took off last summer?" She shook her head. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"No," Jackie said. "When Bernie left, he took everything in the apartment that was worth anything. The TV, the stereo. Even my new laptop. Plus, he cleared out our savings account."

"Shit."

"Yeah, that's what I said." She twisted her ring. "But that wasn't the worst of it. We'd opened a few joint credit card accounts. Now they're all maxed out. He's disappeared and I'm liable for the full amount."

"Please tell me you got a good lawyer. There are only about three hundred of them upstairs."

Jackie shook her head. "It's not illegal to be stupid."

"You're not stupid, Jackie. You're just too damn good hearted. You never tell anyone 'no.' You give money to every beggar on the street. Then when you're in trouble, you don't ask for help."

"It's my own business. I'll work it out."

"You deserve better than to 'work it out.' When are you going to start looking after yourself?"

"It's not that bad. I get along fine."

"No you don't. You work too hard and you never have any fun."

Kelsey gave a quick glance toward Roger and Walt, then ducked her head below the upper edge of Jackie's cubicle partition and continued in a whisper. "What you need is a good screw. Preferably by someone tall, rich, and good looking. Someone like Max Patterson."

Jackie's cheeks flamed. "I don't!"

"Yes, you do," Kelsey said, warming to the subject. "It would loosen you up--who knows where it could lead. And this new assignment gives you the perfect excuse to be alone with him. For hours." She gave Jackie a once over. "We're about the same size. I could lend you something."

"No. Absolutely not. It doesn't matter, anyway. Max Patterson is not going to fall head over heels in love with me just because I show up in his office dressed for sex."

Kelsey snorted. "Love? Who said anything about that? See? That's just what I mean. You're too uptight. Just thinking the word 'love' sends guys like Max Patterson running in the opposite direction. But a woman looking for a mind-blowing, no-strings-attached fuck? Well, that's another story."

Jackie shook her head. "Let it drop, Kelsey. It's not going to happen." She heaved a sigh. "When am I supposed to show up in his office, anyway?"

"Friday afternoon at four. Doesn't get much better than that. Do you know where his office is?"

"Who doesn't? Jackie replied. "Sixty-first floor, southeast corner."

Kelsey moved off to her own cubicle. Jackie checked the clock on her computer. Only an hour until coffee break. She picked up her phone and plunked the receiver back on the cradle. It chirped almost immediately. She sighed and waited until the fourth ring before she picked it up.

"Help desk," she said.

* * * *

His dream woman ordered a Brazilian Roast.

Max leaned on the counter at Starbucks, watching her. She wasn't bad looking, though with the ugly dress she was wearing, it was damn hard to tell. She looked a lot different in person than she did in his dreams.

For one thing, in his dreams, she was naked.

Who the hell was she? He knew part of the answer. Jackie Saranno, age twenty-three. Computer geek. She dressed like a damn nun. Graduated from college last spring, started as a help desk operator for PMP last August 29th. She'd begun her starring role in his wet dreams that very same night. He hadn't known at the time that she existed.

He knew it now.

He watched as she paid for her coffee. She didn't turn her head his way, but he knew she'd noted his presence because she twisted her ring while she waited for her change. She'd scurry away as soon as she could-- she always did as soon as she spotted him.

Most likely it was because of the only time they'd spoken. Mentally, he grimaced. He'd been hurrying to a meeting while talking on his cell, embroiled with negotiations on behalf of a client. He'd nearly run her down, but instead of being angry she'd insisted the collision was her fault.

He took a sip of his espresso. Her transaction complete, Jackie grabbed her coffee off the counter and bolted for the door. She wasn't his usual type, that much was sure. His usual type was leggy and blond. Jackie Saranno was short with frizzy brown hair. Her head probably wouldn't even reach his shoulder. If it weren't for her wide dark eyes, he might not have

even recognized her as his dream lover.

The woman who haunted his nights was sexy and wicked. She arrived in his office dressed in leather and lace, and not much of it. He spread her on his desk and knelt before her. She tasted like heaven and he ached to plunge his cock into her. But it never happened. Every morning he woke up hard, a curse on his lips.

Max stared at the empty coffeehouse doorway. Things couldn't go on this way much longer. It was driving him nuts.

He had to have her.

CHAPTER THREE

Jackie knew she should have tossed the little gold business card in the

trash, but somehow it had found its way into her purse. And after that, somehow she found herself detouring on her walk home. Now she stood shivering in front of a narrow brick rowhouse. Snow floated from the slice of sky between the city buildings.

The Magic Beanstalk presented an unassuming presence in an alley between South and Lombard, shoehorned between a sushi bar and a music store. There was no storefront display, only a tiny window hung with a white lace curtain. The door was paneled and painted black, with a stained glass panel set in the transom above. An ornate doorknocker and a small brass plaque engraved with the shop name were the only identifying marks.

Jackie tried to twist her grandmother's ring, but it was gone. A lump formed in her throat. What had she been thinking, pawning her only family heirloom to get money for slut clothes? She should use the money to have her head examined.

But Kelsey's words kept running in circles in her head. A mind-blowing, no-strings-attached fuck. Jackie'd had sex, but it had been far from mind-blowing, and had never been no-strings-attached. Maybe there was a connection.

Maybe it was time she was a little bit irresponsible. Maybe it was time she did something just for the hell of it.

Maybe.

The thousand dollars she'd gotten for the ring nestled in her purse like a live grenade. The guy at the pawnshop had agreed to keep her ring under

the counter for a couple of days, but Jackie didn't get paid until next week. She hoped it would be soon enough.

She screwed up her courage and knocked. The brass ball came down on the door with a decisive thud. She really had no choice in the matter. She'd looked through her closet and decided there was no way she could wear any of the clothes in it while breathing the same air as Max Patterson.

The door swung open. A regal black woman dressed in a brilliant African print robe and turban stood on the threshold. She extended one hand toward Jackie. Sparkling rings bedecked each finger.

"Come in," she said. Her accent was faintly British.

Jackie held out the card. "Kelsey Harman sent me. She said you did makeovers."

"That's right," the woman said. She scanned Jackie from head to toe, then smiled. "Don't worry. You'll do fine."

Jackie let out a long breath and stepped into the shop.

* * * *

Four hours later, she stepped out again, slightly dazed. She'd been bathed, steamed, massaged, plucked, waxed, moisturized, painted, rouged, and powdered. Her hair had been washed, cut, straightened, streaked, and kinked. She was holding a bag filled with clothes she had trouble believing she would ever find the guts to wear.

It had to be nearly midnight. The night was cold and black between the streetlights, but she had no money for cab fare. She'd blown her last dollar at The Magic Beanstalk.

She hurried the ten blocks to her apartment. Once enclosed in her safe white walls, she locked the door and spread her new wardrobe out on the bed.

Excitement spread in a warm rush through her stomach and headed for parts south. Gazing on her purchases was like looking at some other woman's life. An exciting woman. A woman who never went to bed alone. A woman who had men kneeling at her feet.

First, a black leather thong with a tiny triangle of silver lace that barely covered her mound. Just looking at it made Jackie feel itchy in dark places. Next, black fishnet stockings and lace garters. She'd never worn either.

A matching bustier sucked in her waist and barely covered her nipples, but somehow managed to thrust her breasts up and forward, and deepen her cleavage. The lace edging on the bottom would fall just above the tiny silver ring in Jackie's navel.

Yep, she'd gone and had her belly button pierced. She'd always been fascinated by body jewelry, but had never seriously considered it before today. It was there, under the shapeless dress she still wore, making her feel incredibly sexy. She smiled, deciding she liked the feeling.

Next came a black leather skirt. Not too short, because after all, she

was dressing for work. The material was cool, sleek, and cut a size smaller than what Jackie usually wore.

A sheer black blouse shot through with silver thread dipped deeply at the neckline. A conservative black and silver jacket covered it. Businesslike and provocative at the same time. There was jewelry, too, a necklace of cascading silver teardrops. The lowest beads nestled between her breasts. Matching earrings dangled almost to her shoulders.

She looked into the mirror and almost didn't recognize herself. Her long, frizzy hair had been cut, highlighted, and tamed. It hung straight to her shoulders, accentuating the slant of her cheekbones and her newly plucked eyebrows. Her nails sported long tips painted fire-engine red. Her toenails matched.

The shoes that completed the ensemble probably wouldn't make it past airport security. Four inch high black stiletto heels. Jackie slid her feet into them and practiced walking across the room. Her hips swayed from side to side to compensate for the appalling lack of balance.

She kicked them off, then stripped to her skin and returned to the mirror. The clothes, the nails, and the shoes weren't permanent. The haircut would grow out, and she could always leave off the belly ring.

But then there was the tattoo.

It was a tiny star. She'd had it done just above her right nipple. It still throbbed a bit, but as she looked at it, she felt another thrill shoot straight to her groin. She imagined Max Patterson pulling back the silver lace on her

bustier and discovering it. Would it turn him on?

That thought more than anything brought home the reality of what she'd decided to do. She shivered. She supposed it wasn't a big deal to some women, but to Jackie sex had always been something she did with a steady boyfriend--after she decided she loved him. Not that any of her few boyfriends had returned the sentiment. They'd all moved on without looking back, leaving her hurting.

That was going to change, starting now. From now on she was the one in charge. She'd have sex with Max Patterson, but she wouldn't stick around long enough to become a commodity on the "Who's screwing Max?" pool. She would take what she wanted and move on.

She shrugged into a frayed terry cloth robe and went into her miniscule kitchen to make herself a peanut butter sandwich. There wasn't much else in the cabinets. She'd blown her last dollar at The Magic Beanstalk.

She hoped the payoff would be worth it.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Take off the dress," Max told Jackie.

She only laughed. "You first. I want to see you naked."

It was always like this in his dream. He commanded, the dream woman laughed in his face. None of the flesh and blood women he dated would have dared. If he told them to spread their legs, they did. If he told them to suck him off, they asked how long and how hard. If he told them he wanted to give it to them from behind, they got down on their hands and knees and wiggled their asses.

It was fucking boring.

Which was probably why his imaginary sex life had gotten a whole lot more interesting than his real one.

"Start with your tie," the dream woman said.

Max worked the knot loose. This was ludicrous. Even in her high heels, the woman barely cleared his shoulder. And she probably weighed next to nothing. He could have lifted her with one hand. And yet, when he looked into her deep brown eyes, he wanted to please her more than he'd ever wanted anything.

"Now your shirt."

Max shrugged out of his shirt, then removed the rest of his clothes until he stood naked. And very, very aroused. His cock thrust forward, pulsing almost painfully.

The dream woman eyed his hard-on and licked her lips. The unconscious act made him go even harder. Any more, and his balls would explode.

He reached for her.

She laughed and stepped back. "Not yet."

Why he obeyed her was a mystery. There was nothing stopping him from slamming her to the floor and plunging into her. He wanted it in the worst way, and he was sure she wouldn't protest.

"Stand still and keep your hands at your side."

Max did as he was told. The dream woman glided close, teasing him with her scent. Earth and musk, dark and potent.

His stomach clenched as she ran her hands over his body, touching him everywhere, it seemed, except his cock. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she dropped to her knees and took him in her mouth.

A hiss of breath escaped his lips. His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her closer.

She drew back and looked up at him, her red lips still caressing his head. "No hands," she murmured. "Or I'll stop."

He groaned and dropped his hands back to his sides. The dream woman returned her attention to his cock, suckling until he thought his legs would give way. At the last moment, just as his hips were beginning to arch, she gave his head a last swirl with her tongue and left him aching.

She backed away and sat her leather-clad ass on the edge of Max's desk. Sending him a sultry look from beneath her lashes, she ran her hands up her sides. Her palms cupped her breasts, offering them.

"My turn," she said. "Make me come."

He smiled wickedly. Two could play at this game. It was what made

it so enticing. "When you're naked," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he stepped forward and all but ripped the flimsy black blouse off her body.

She blushed as he removed each succeeding article of clothing. When she lay naked except for her shoes and stockings, he ran a proprietary hand over her body. She was small, but so perfect. Trim legs, flat stomach, lovely, pink-tipped breasts. She lay still, watching him with wide, dark eyes.

For a moment she seemed uncertain, and curiously innocent, as if he were the first man to desire her. The thought tugged somewhere deep in his heart. He was entranced.

In the next heartbeat she recovered her boldness. She lay back on the desk, drawing him after her, her hand stroking his cock until he thought he would explode.

His eyes locked with hers. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Her lips, full and pouty from her recent attention to his cock, parted. "I want you to...." she said, then stopped.

"Tell me," he urged.

She drew a trembling breath, as if gathering her courage.

"I want you to lick me. All over."

* * * *

Max groaned as morning thrust his dream aside like gale force winds

shoving flimsy clouds across the sky. As always, he'd awakened too soon, hard and throbbing. One touch and his cock would go off like a firecracker.

With a sound curse, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and strode into the bathroom. He neglected the hot water entirely as he stepped into the shower. Visions of his dream woman pulsed behind his closed eyes, mingling with a mental image of her improbable twin. Jackie Saranno, the help desk operator who dressed in shapeless jumpers and scurried away like a rabbit whenever Max got close.

He had to be going insane.

It would end today, he vowed. One way or another. He'd summoned Jackie to his office on the pretense of needing help with the new system upgrade. Would the real woman live up to her dream counterpart?

He intended to find out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Four o'clock came much too soon.

Jackie didn't have the courage to wear her new outfit to work, so she stashed it in a brown supermarket bag and hid it under her desk. Her haircut provoked some attention, though, and Kelsey had given the bag a knowing look.

At three Jackie sneaked into the ladies room to change. With a little luck, she would be on her way up the executive elevator before Kelsey got out of her meeting with Paul.

No such luck materialized. She emerged from the stall to find Kelsey waiting.

"I knew it," her friend crowed. "You went to The Magic Beanstalk."

"Yeah."

"That woman is a miracle worker. A true artist. Look at you."

Kelsey stalked a circle around Jackie. "I like it. Classy, tasteful, but sexy as hell. Especially with those shoes."

Jackie grimaced. "I hope I can manage to walk into Max Patterson's office without tripping."

"He'll catch you, believe me." She snagged Jackie's bag and pulled out a makeup kit. "Here. I'll do your face."

Fifteen minutes later Jackie was on her way up to the sixty-first floor. With each level the elevator climbed, her apprehension increased by a factor of ten. What had seemed like such a bold leap was now starting to feel like an idiot's worst blunder. Was she really going to waltz into the big boss' office and offer him sex? What was she thinking?

The elevator doors opened and she stumbled out. Get a grip, she told herself. She would just play it cool. If no opportunity for seduction presented itself, she would just walk Max through the system updates and leave. It would be fine. No problem at all.

Max's secretary was a surprisingly middle aged woman with gray hair pulled into a tight bun. For some reason, Jackie had expected a much younger personal assistant, with a Barbie doll figure and big hair. Well.

Grandma frowned as Jackie approached. "May I help you?"

"I'm Jackie Saranno," she stuttered. "From the IT department. I'm here to explain the computer system upgrades to Mr. Patterson."

The woman gave Jackie the once over and shook her head, as if she didn't believe a word of it. She buzzed Jackie through anyway. "Just

beyond the waiting area," she told her.

Jackie hiked down a short hall past an alcove furnished with red leather-padded chairs. She took a deep breath and rapped on Max Patterson's polished door.

"Come in."

Even muffled through two inches of hardwood, Max's deep voice set her pulse pounding. Jackie's buttocks clenched on the leather thong. Hot and cold shivers ran up her spine. She glanced over her shoulder, past Max's secretary, to the elevator. There was still time. She could bolt.

"Come in, Ms."

"Saranno," Jackie sputtered. Too late. The door had swung open. Max Patterson stood on the threshold in all his masculine glory, looking down at her with a stunned expression, though why that should be, she had no idea. He was tall, over six-four. Jackie's five-foot-one was no match for him. Even with the four-inch heels, she had to tilt her head back to catch a glimpse of his face.

His dark hair was just a little longer than what you would expect on a lawyer. His blue eyes were direct and unnerving, his nose straight, his jaw firm. He had a small scar on one cheekbone. Jackie wondered where he'd gotten it.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked. "You look a little queasy."

Queasy? Great. Just what a guy looks for in a potential mind-blowing no-strings-attached fuck. "I'm fine," she said, maybe a bit too

emphatically. "Fine."

Nervous energy propelled her past him into his office. She promptly tripped on the edge of his oriental carpet.

His hand closed on her arm. "Careful."

"That's what I'm trying not to be," Jackie muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing," Jackie replied hastily. She pulled back, breaking contact, then immediately realized her tactical mistake. Surely a woman looking for sex should stay as close to her target as possible. She told her legs to move forward, but they wouldn't budge.

Max was watching her with unnerving intensity. "Would you like a drink?"

"I don't drink," Jackie said. "At least not during the day."

His lips quirked. "I was thinking of coffee. You look like you need some."

Jackie gave herself a little shake. "No. Thank you. I'm fine." She squared her shoulders. "*Fine.*"

His gaze dropped to her chest and stuck. Jackie glanced down. Good God. Her top button had popped open, revealing black leather, silver lace, and cleavage.

Max went very still, like a predator preparing to pounce.

"You need help with the system update?" Jackie said, desperate to distract him.

He dragged his gaze to her face. "No. Not really."

"You don't? Then why...." She stopped herself and swallowed hard. Surely he didn't mean....

Max moved closer. Jackie's heart tripped a beat. Heat radiated from his body, surrounding her, smelling of raw power and pure, clean soap. Instinctively, she swayed toward him.

Disappointment flared when he stepped away and walked to the window. Jackie followed him with her gaze and sucked in a breath. She hadn't noticed the windows when she'd first entered the office. She hadn't seen anything beyond Max and a general impression of dark wood and expensive antiques. Now the fading winter daylight filtered through the expanse of glass, calling to her.

The view was to the southeast, across the river. Clouds streaked with sunset hovered in the sky, seeming almost close enough to touch. She felt like a bird.

It was exactly like her dream.

The scene drew her and before she knew what had happened, she was standing at Max's side. "It's beautiful," she said.

"I thought you would like it."

Jackie blinked up at him. "What?"

He turned and looked at her, his eyes assessing. "I thought you would like it."

"You did?"

He lifted one finger and traced a line across her jaw, then along her collarbone and down to a point between her breasts, stopping just above the slipped button. Liquid lightning shot to Jackie's nerve endings. "Yes. But I'm wondering about your clothes."

Oh God. "My clothes?"

"They aren't what you usually wear."

His comment took Jackie aback. "You know what I usually wear?"

He removed his hand from her chest and turned back to the window, as if studying the view. "You're in Starbuck's every morning. You order a Grande and dump three sugar packets in it."

Jackie gaped at him. "I didn't think you noticed me."

The corners of his mouth quirked. "I noticed when you spilled coffee on me in the lobby last summer."

"Oh, shit," Jackie said. She tried to squelch the blush she felt coming. "I mean, I'm so sorry about that. I'm not usually that ditzy."

Max's answering grin did strange things to Jackie's nipples. No wonder women lined up on his doorstep. That smile came close to inducing spontaneous orgasm.

"I know," he said. "Paul O'Neill told me you're one of his best techs."

Jackie scowled at him. "What were you doing, checking up on me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He looked uncomfortable with that question. "I don't know."

"You're lying," Jackie countered. Her fingers searched for her grandmother's ring, then froze when she remembered it was gone.

Max caught her hand and ran his fingers over hers. "Where's your ring?"

"Ring?" Jackie sputtered.

"The silver one with the emeralds."

"You noticed that, too?"

He locked eyes with her. "I notice everything." His gaze wandered back to her chest.

Jackie's blush started up again, hotter than before. Moisture dampened her thighs. "I pawned it," she said. "At a shop near South and Broad. I needed the money."

He didn't probe further. He dropped her hand and turned his attention back to the window. Jackie studied his profile as she mentally retraced their odd conversation. He didn't need help with the upgrades, but he'd called her to his office. He'd been watching her since she started working at PMP. It made no sense.

"If you didn't need help with the updates, why did you send for me?"

He sent her a probing look. "I think you know why."

She shook her head. "I haven't the foggiest."

He raised his hand and undid the second button on her blouse. Jackie gaped at him, stunned.

"I might have believed that if you'd shown up in one of your usual

ugly dresses," he said. "As it is...." He spread his palms on her breasts and squeezed them gently through the leather bustier. "Do you ever have dreams, Jackie?"

She tried to swallow but her mouth had gone so dry that her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "Dreams?"

His hands moved higher until his fingers were stroking her bare skin above the bustier, dipping a little further under the lace with each pass. Jackie gripped his arms, feeling suddenly weak-kneed.

"Dreams," he said, his fingers questing lower. "Sometimes they feel so real." He ventured into her bustier and brushed her aching nipples. They contracted instantly, sending a shudder through her.

"I've been dreaming of you for months," he said. "Over and over. Since last August. The first dream came before I had ever set eyes on you. How do you explain that?"

"I ... I can't."

He popped her left breast out of the bustier and rolled the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. "I've watched you all these months and wondered how a woman who seemed so insecure and shy could be the same woman who inhabited my dreams. Then you show up at my door, dressed like this. You wear exactly the same outfit when you visit me at night." He leaned down and flicked his tongue over her nipple. "Until I take it off."

He kissed a trail up her neck to her jaw, then caught the corner of her mouth. Jackie's mind reeled. Max had seen her in a dream, just as she'd

seen him? It was too fantastic. It couldn't be true.

The urgency of his sexual assault rose. He dragged her into his chest, slanting his mouth over hers and plundering with his tongue. His body pressed along every inch of hers. Her breasts flattened against his starched dress shirt, his cock prodded the fabric of his trousers into her belly. He held her so tightly she couldn't move her arms to encircle his waist, couldn't touch him as she longed to do. She could only open her mouth to his invasion. He plunged his tongue in and out in a slow, languorous rhythm, a hint of the deeper connection she'd always longed for but had never experienced in their dream.

Their dream. She shivered at the thought of it. Had they shared the same one? Or was his fantasy of their joining different than the one she'd had? She didn't know, and God only knew she wasn't going to embarrass herself by asking.

He was the one who broke contact first, shoving her away from him so abruptly that she stumbled on the heels and would have fallen if she hadn't grabbed the edge of the desk. His expression was like thunder, and his hands were clenching and unclenching at his side. His eyes were dark and furious, and his broad chest was heaving. Jackie looked up at him and felt a stab of fear. He was so much bigger than she, so much stronger. He could snap her arm like a twig. Right now she wasn't quite sure he didn't want to. What could have made him so angry?

He took a step toward her. She forced herself not to step back. Some

instinct told her that would make him even angrier.

His gaze raked over her, breasts to legs and back up again. "Your clothes," he said. "Take them off. I want you naked."

His voice carried a steely note of authority. No doubt he'd used the same tone to cower opponents in the courtroom. Jackie's first impulse was to obey the command. Her brain seized with the thought of stripping in front of a man she barely knew, even as her thighs grew wet with anticipation.

But the image of her dream pounded its way into her brain. She saw Max naked and on his knees, obeying her whims. A delicious charge of power raced along her nerves like an electric shock. How would it feel to control this powerful man?

She laughed, forcing bravado, but the sound that emerged from her throat was probably closer to hysteria. Still, she couldn't stop herself. She had to know if her dream could come true.

Deliberately, she pushed her exposed breast back into the bustier and refastened the buttons on her blouse. "No," she said calmly. "You undress first."

Something dark flared in his eyes--anger or satisfaction? She couldn't tell. He didn't move. A shiver of fear shot through her.

"Start with your tie," she said.

Another heartbeat passed, and then Max's hands went to his throat and unknotted his tie. He slid the length of designer silk off his neck. It

pooled in a red puddle on the floor.

"Now what?" Max asked, his voice hard.

Jackie's heart pounded in her throat. Did she have the guts to go through with this? Yes. She swallowed hard and took the next step up a twisting ladder that disappeared into the sky.

"Now, take off your shirt."

Max undid his shirt buttons slowly, sliding each from its hole with a sensual movement--no doubt to inflict maximum torment on Jackie's body. Her panties were drenched, her nipples stiff under the leather and lace. He tossed the garment on his antique desk chair. Jackie watched a ripple play across the muscles of his shoulders and back.

"Turn around," she whispered, then caught herself and forced her voice to take on a more confident pitch. "I want to see all of you."

He obeyed. She took in his broad chest, liberally sprinkled with curly dark hair. His stomach was flat and well defined. The fine fabric of his trousers clung to his hips, stretching tight over his enormous erection.

"Shoes and socks next," Jackie ordered. "Then pants."

The offending garments joined the tie on the carpet. His boxers were cut from a flimsy, silky black material.

"Drop them," she said, and he did.

She sucked in a breath at the sight of him, naked and fully aroused. He stood unnaturally still, watching her. After a long moment, he reached for her. She wanted that, but not yet. Not until she had explored his body at

her leisure.

She gave a soft laugh and danced a step away. "Stand still and keep your hands at your side."

Amazingly, he obeyed, though his eyes told her he didn't approve. Jackie moved closer, tingling with fear and excitement, as if he were some kind of wild beast, half-tamed to her hand but still dangerously unpredictable.

He was hard and soft at once. Warm, pliable skin stretched taut over muscles he hadn't let go like most men did once they hit thirty. She ran her palms over his chest, savoring the tingle of his hair. His stomach contracted under her fingers. She wandered lower and teased at the edge of his dark nest of hair. His cock was as magnificent as the rest of him. Long and thick and pulsing with heat. She was careful not to touch it. She wasn't ready yet.

His jaw locked and the expression on his face was one of pure torture, but he said nothing. His eyes bored through her, almost on fire with emotion. Lust. Need. A hint of desperation.

With a wicked smile, Jackie dropped to her knees and grasped Max's ass. She opened her mouth and ran her tongue over the broad head of his incredible cock, tasting the salty drop that hung on the tip. He was every bit as big as in her dreams, but he was real and hot in front of her. Her inner muscles clenched as she imagined him inside her.

He gave a groan as she took him into her mouth. She couldn't take

him all--he was much too big for that. She did her best, working the rim around his head with her tongue and lips.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, guiding her.

She tensed and pulled back. He let go immediately.

"No hands," she told him.

He cursed, but obeyed. She sucked him off until she sensed his orgasm closing in, then she backed him out of her mouth.

"Jesus," he rasped. "You're trying to kill me."

She smiled and moved to the desk, where she spread herself over the dark, shining mahogany. Her legs were open, dangling over the edge.

"My turn," she said. "Make me come."

A slow, hot smile spread across his handsome face. He stalked toward her, and she felt something shift. The glint in his eyes showed her the game had turned.

Oh God.

"When you're naked," he said. Without waiting for her reply, he stepped between her thighs. He shoved her jacket off her shoulders. Within seconds he'd unbuttoned her blouse and worked her arms free of the sheer material. He unhooked her bustier, freeing her breasts for his exploration. He saw the tiny star and his blue eyes went dark.

"A tattoo?"

"Do you like it?" Jackie whispered.

"Yes. Very much." He supported himself with one palm on the desk

and leaned over her, claiming her lips while he toyed with her nipples, first one, then the other. Jackie writhed beneath him, thrusting herself into his touch. She whimpered when he left her.

Chuckling, he pulled her off the desk and swept her clothes onto the floor. He found the side zipper on her skirt. Jackie blushed furiously as that article of clothing disappeared as well. Then he snapped the thin leather straps at her hips and tossed the ruined thong to one side.

She lay spread open to his gaze, wearing nothing but her thigh high stockings and stiletto heels. She should have been mortified to be naked before him, but with his hands roaming her body, she could feel nothing but aching pleasure.

He circled her clit with one finger, lightly, teasingly. When her hips rose off the desk, he moved his hand away. He leaned close and kissed her lips. "What do you want?" he whispered against her ear. "Tell me and I'll give it to you."

She wanted.... Something she'd never experienced before, except in a dream. Oh, God, would she be able to say it? She opened her eyes a slit and looked at him. He gazed back at her, a teasing smile playing on his lips.

Jackie swore silently. She understood the message his eyes were sending her. He wasn't going to touch her again unless she begged.

Heat flooded her face. She commanded him earlier--was this so much different? He would do whatever she told him. She saw that in his eyes, too.

His voice was low and coaxing. "Tell me what you want me to do."

She licked her lips and his pupils dilated. She thought she could drown in the sky blue depths of his eyes, or float away.

"I want you to--" She cut off, ashamed.

"Tell me."

She gulped air into her lungs. "I ... I want your mouth. On me." She felt her face flush scarlet.

A satisfied smile touched his lips. "It will be my pleasure." He knelt before her. His fingers pressed her thighs, urging them to open wider. His head dipped and his velvet tongue found her clit.

A strangled cry tore from her throat as he licked and suckled. Her dream had been the barest shadow of the sensations that now assaulted her. She spread her arms and pressed her palms flat on the desk. Her breathing went ragged as Max coaxed her up the spiral.

She climbed, only to have her goal recede before her, ever higher. She arched against his lips in frustration. "More. Max, I want more. I want...."

He left her then and she nearly cried out. Dimly, she realized he'd retrieved a condom from God only knew where. He sheathed his erection as she watched, her inner muscles clenching in anticipation.

He returned and slipped his hands under her buttocks, lifting and sliding her to the very edge of the desk. The wide, hard knob on his cock quested in her slick folds.

"You're so soft," he murmured. "I want to sink myself inside you and never come out."

She met his gaze. "Then do it," she whispered. "Do it now."

He obeyed, plunging inside her with one swift stroke that nearly drove her over the edge, all the time keeping his eyes fixed on her face. He withdrew until they were almost parted, then thrust forward again, slower than before, setting a languid rhythm.

"You're so beautiful, Jackie. Even more than in the dream."

"The dream never felt this good."

He smiled down at her as his hips flexed and his hands roamed over her breasts. "So you're admitting you dreamed of me, too?"

She ran her palms up his arms to his shoulders, relishing the feel of him. "Yes. Every night."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

He fell silent then, bending low over her and raining kisses on her neck as the tempo of his strokes increased. He filled Jackie's vision, surrounded her body. Perhaps she should have felt weak, or overwhelmed by his size, but she didn't. She felt powerful. Sensual. Beautiful.

With each thrust, Max's breath became a little more ragged, his movements a little less controlled. He gripped her hips, angling them higher. He sank into her, touching a hidden place deep inside her.

Jackie's orgasm hit like an earthquake, sending her senses hurtling

into the sky. She cried out Max's name and heard her own name spill from his lips in return. His cock went rock-hard inside her and his handsome face took on an expression that seemed part bliss, part pain. Then he sagged on top of her, his breath merging with hers as the shards of their pleasure faded. They lay like that, not speaking, still joined, for what seemed like an eternity.

Or at least long enough for Jackie's brain to kick back into gear.

The pleasant heat of her afterglow evaporated. Good God. She'd had sex with a man she barely knew, on his office desk, with his middle-aged secretary right outside the door.

All because of some crazy dream.

What kind of woman would do that?

She shoved at his shoulders. "Let me up."

Max propped himself on one elbow and smiled at her. "Sorry. Was I crushing you?"

She rolled away from him and lurched off the desk. She nearly twisted her ankle when her foot hit the floor. She'd forgotten about the stilettos. She still had them on.

Max was beside her, steadying her with one hand. "Whoa. Careful."

She didn't answer, or even look at him as she snatched her clothes off the floor and shimmied into them as quickly as she could. Her panties were ruined, so she balled them up and thrust them into the waste basket. Max shrugged into his own clothes. He looked as fresh and polished as he

had when Jackie had first stepped through the door. No wonder. He probably had a lot of experience with this sort of thing.

There was no mirror in Max's office, but Jackie was pretty sure she didn't look so well put together. In fact, she was certain she looked like a slut who'd been having wild sex on her boss' desk.

She had to get out. She all but lunged for the door.

Max didn't speak until her hand touched on the knob. "When will I see you again?"

Oh God. He thought she was available for sex any time he wanted. And the worst part of it was, he was right. Even after the earth shattering climax she'd had, she felt her body getting ready for more.

She gripped the doorknob. She'd climbed too far. She couldn't survive up here. She was falling, falling, tumbling out of the sky. The ground rushed up at her.

"Jackie?"

She shut her eyes. She couldn't risk looking at him. "I don't want to see you again. Ever. Don't you understand? This was nothing but a dream."

CHAPTER SIX

"You're quitting? You can't do that!"

"I can," said Jackie. "And I am. I got a new job."

Kelsey's brows shot up. "You didn't even tell me you were looking."

"I sent my resume out a couple weeks ago and I got lucky."

Kelsey tapped her fingernails on the desk. "This doesn't have anything to do with Max Patterson, does it?"

Jackie's pulse quickened. "No. Why should it?"

"I don't know." Kelsey leaned forward. "Are you sure there's not something you want to tell me about that Friday afternoon you went to his office? I know you said nothing happened, but...."

"Nothing did," Jackie said, hoping lightning wouldn't strike her for the lie. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, for one thing, the 'Who's screwing Max?' pool has been dead

in the water for a couple weeks. It doesn't look like Max has been getting any ever since that same Friday."

"Really?" Jackie asked, trying to sound casual. She'd avoided talking about the pool since that fateful day. It would have been just too painful hearing about Max's latest conquests. "And another thing," Kelsey was saying. "Ever since that day you've seemed different. More confident. Like a woman who knows what she wants."

It was true. For all that Jackie had bolted from Max's office--for all that she was sure she would die of embarrassment if she ever came face to face with him again--the encounter had given her a strange kind of freedom. For a brief time, she'd been powerful, in control. She'd asked for what she wanted and a powerful man had given it to her. It had been a dream, a heady trip to the clouds, and even now--three weeks later--the exhilaration of it hadn't faded. A newly acquired sense of self determination pervaded her life.

She walked a little taller now, dressed less conservatively. She didn't look away when a handsome man caught her eye. She'd sent out a resume and aced the interview. She was starting a new job on Monday morning as database administrator for a big insurance company. The salary was twice what she was making at PMP. No more help desk for her.

The erotic dreams of Max had stopped. Some nights, she wished they hadn't, because they were all she'd ever really had of him. But in her heart she knew it was for the best. She wasn't cut out for a life in the clouds.

From now on she was keeping her feet firmly anchored on the ground.

The only regret she allowed herself to feel was for her grandmother's ring. It was lost for good. By the time she collected enough money to redeem it from the pawnshop, it had been sold. There'd be no getting it back now.

She looked at her bare finger and sighed.

* * * *

She was gone.

Max stood at his office window, looking down on the city below. He'd thought it would be a good idea to give Jackie some time to come to terms with what had happened between them in his office that Friday afternoon almost four weeks ago. Obviously, he'd been wrong.

He'd returned from an emergency business trip just last night. This morning, he found out she'd quit. Just like that.

Max sighed. Maybe Jackie was right. Maybe it had all been a dream.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was Saturday--Valentine's Day, in fact--and Jackie actually had a date.

Well, okay, it was only a blind date, so maybe that didn't count, but Kelsey had assured her that her brother's friend was just the kind of guy Jackie would go for. Smart. Handsome. Down to earth.

He was coming at seven. It was only six, but Jackie was ready. She'd considered wearing the same leather skirt she'd worn to Max's office, but couldn't bring herself to put it on. She'd opted for the new dress she'd picked up on sale last week at Strawbridges. It was a simple sheath in blazing red velvet, topped by a short tailored red jacket.

The street buzzer went off at six-forty five. "I'll be down in a sec," she told her mystery man. She shrugged into her coat and made her way up the half flight of stairs to the street door.

She opened it to find Max Patterson on her sidewalk.

His coat was open, revealing a charcoal gray suit accented by a red

silk tie. A white scarf hung around his neck. Soft snowflakes nestled in his dark hair like a sprinkling of sugar.

"Oh," she said. She might have hoped for a snappier response, but her mind had blanked. Despite the frigid winter air, she felt a rush of heat creep into her face. What was he doing here?

"Shall we go?" he said.

Jackie shook her head, more to clear it than in answer to his question. He had some nerve coming here, assuming she'd be available on a Saturday night. He hadn't so much as sent her an email since that day in his office. Not that she'd wanted him to. They had no future. She knew that.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she told him. "I have a date."

He smiled. "I know."

"You know...." Her eyes widened. No! Kelsey couldn't have.

"Don't tell me--"

"I'm afraid so. I'm your escort for the evening."

His gaze turned heated and Jackie jumped back as if scorched. She grasped the door knob and tried to slam the door shut.

He blocked it with one hand. "Jackie--"

"I don't want to see you. I told you that."

"Oh, no. You're not getting off that easily." He stepped inside the door and pulled it shut behind him, trapping them together in the narrow passageway. "I've given you more than enough time as it is. Now we're going to talk."

Jackie flattened herself against the wall, trying to avoid his heat. "There's nothing to talk about. It was a fluke. A dream. I'm not like that in real life."

He tipped her chin with his finger and forced her to meet his gaze. "I can hardly work at my desk any more."

She gave a shaky laugh. "I couldn't have been the first to do it with you there. You have a different woman every week."

"You shouldn't believe every rumor you hear," he said. He waited a beat. "Or every email Paul O'Neill intercepts."

Jackie's eyes widened. "You know about that?"

"You mean the 'Who's screwing Max?' pool?" He grinned. "Yeah, I know. I've been feeding Paul fake emails for about a year now. Got to keep up my image." He paused, his eyes growing serious. "Truth is, I haven't been with anyone since I started dreaming of you."

Jackie tried to speak, but the words wouldn't move past the lump in her throat.

Max's palm came down on her shoulder, warm and steady. "I can't get you out my head, Jackie. I want us to be together again."

"Why?" she asked. "Just because of a dream? It's gone now. At least it is for me."

"It doesn't have to be."

She shook her head. "You hardly know me."

"I know more than you think." He pulled a small jeweler's box from

his coat pocket. "Here. This is for you." He flipped open the lid.

Jackie's breath caught. "My grandmother's ring." She looked up at him, bewildered. "You redeemed it?"

"I could tell it meant a lot to you. I went to the pawnshop after you left my office. I wasn't going to take the chance anyone else would get to it before you did. I know I should have sent it to you right away, but I wanted to be the one to give it to you. After you'd had some time to think about what happened between us."

"I hardly know what to think about that." She lifted the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. It felt so right there, but curiously, she felt no urge to twist it.

"Thank you," she said. "I know it would have been gone by the time I went back for it."

Max put the empty box back into his pocket. "Why do you think we dreamed of each other, Jackie?"

"I don't know. Fate? Magic?"

He was silent for a moment, until Jackie looked up and met his gaze. "Why did you run away?"

"I was embarrassed," Jackie said truthfully. "I could imagine what you thought of me after I came to your office dressed like that." She felt heat flare on her cheeks.

His lips quirked. "I love how you blush when you're embarrassed." He leaned close. "I'd like to embarrass you some more. Come out to dinner

with me tonight. Please."

"I'd like that," Jackie admitted. "Except...."

"What?"

"I'm not ready for more than dinner, and I know you expect--"

"Nothing," he said. "I expect nothing."

Jackie shivered as a wave of longing broke over her. If only....

"Please," Max said. "Give us a chance. I know it's crazy, but I've never felt like this before."

"Like how?" Jackie whispered.

A flicker of vulnerability showed in his blue eyes. "Like I could fall in love with you, if you'd let me. Jackie, I don't want to lose you. I'll take whatever you're willing to give."

His lips brushed her ear. "And I'm willing to give whatever you ask for."

His words sank into Jackie's soul and her heart spiraled into the sky. He was leaving the choice to her. He cared enough to give her that gift. Possibilities spread out before her like a view of the earth from the clouds.

She hooked her arm around his neck and smiled. "In that case," she said. "Let's start with a kiss."