



# **Falling Star: Angelfire Trilogy Book 1**

by Karen Wiesner

Hard Shell Word Factory

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*All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.*

For Kim Hansen, who took me under her wing when I was just learning how to  
“fly” and has since become one of my closest friends... Love, Karen

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# Chapter One

AFTER TWENTY–SEVEN years, it never failed to amaze her that nothing ever changed there.

Rori Mason sat stiffly on the worn cushions of a sofa that had been in her father's house as long as she could remember. He sat in his chair, a once–comfortable recliner with homemade, crocheted arm covers. The women in his congregation constantly tried to butter him up with gifts, hoping to get him to think about marriage again. Didn't they realize Pastor William Mason had no room in his life for that kind of love? That need had died with her mother twenty–three years ago.

He hadn't looked at her, really *looked* at her, since she walked in the front door an hour ago. He'd hugged her because she initiated it. Then he'd announced one of his favorite preacher's was on, and Rori knew nothing had changed. All the years she'd grown up in this house, that ridiculous radio—the one that looked like a prop from *Gilligan's Island*—had been on, playing all–sermons, all the time. The only time her father shut it off was at bedtime. Oh God, she remembered trying to talk over it and getting "Not now, Rori. Why don't you go play, sweetheart."



Expelling a sigh, Rori leaned her elbows on her knees, looking around the cluttered living room. Her father still competed with a library when it came to books. The mostly ancient volumes were tucked and stacked everywhere space allowed. Books, nonfiction books, were one of the few things her father actually put down hard cash for. They weren't all about God or religion either. Her father was interested in everything and how everything connected.

Even if he'd never been affectionate about it, Rori *remembered* affectionately the way he used to help her with her homework when she asked him to. It was the only time he spent with her that he'd turn off the damn radio. Somehow those times made her feel like she'd won.

She ran a finger over the cover of a book about Antarctica laying on the coffee table. Maybe she could sneak out for a smoke. God only knew how long this booming radio preacher would go on...

"Where are you living now, Aurora?"

Coming from such a close relative, the question could be considered odd. Not for Rori. She contacted her father. He never contacted her. Their communication was her choice, but she had the feeling he wouldn't call her even if he had her phone number.

Giving him a general location could be done with confidence. "Buffalo."

"How many miles is that?"

Rori clenched her teeth. She'd walked into one of his oldest traps. He'd do damn near anything to avoid her, although even he probably didn't realize he was doing it.

Nodding, rubbing her hands together slowly, she mumbled an estimate he'd go out of his way to prove wrong. Making her feel stupid wasn't premeditated either; it was just an unfortunate side effect of his disappointment in his only child.

Just as she knew he would, her father got out his maps, spreading them out on his work table. Rori watched him for a minute, wishing she had the guts to say "Daddy, what does it matter if I came more or less a hundred miles? I'm here. Don't you wanna see *me*? It's been six years."

But she didn't say anything, watching him hopelessly the way she had hundreds of times.

The last time she came home, after five years away, his once dark hair had turned completely white. He wore reading glasses too, but he still had the same expression of open warmth in his face and in his blue eyes.

Rori used to wonder if his detachment from her had anything to do with how little they resembled each other. Although she remembered very little of her mother, old photographs

revealed she had her mother's blond hair, ebony eyes, mouth and shape. Her father could withdraw from her because she looked nothing like him. Maybe he told himself she wasn't his child because of those differences.

Feeling desperate, Rori ran her fingers through her thick hair. If she moved now, she might be able to draw him out of his "research." Leaning over the arm of the sofa, she slowly decreased the volume on the radio. He didn't seem to notice this time. Then she got up, almost tiptoeing across the threadbare carpet to her tote bag.

Christmas was still seven days away. She had to work on Saturday and Sunday night, so she planned to leave Saturday morning. Her father didn't celebrate Christmas the way the world did anyway. There were no presents, decorated trees or special dinners. He celebrated by reading the accounts of the Messiah's birth in the Bible and he preached about it during the appropriate season, but it'd never been any different than other days during the years Rori grew up here.

The gift she'd gotten her father now would serve as a haven't-seen-you-in-awhile token. Instead of wrapping it, she'd tied a plain white satin ribbon around it.

He still measured and calculated, concentrating with such focus he took no notice of her pulling an ottoman over to the table near him. Straddling it between ragged denim thighs,

she looked up at him.

Rori felt very much like a little girl there. Sometimes, years ago, when she was quiet or feigned interest, her father let her sit near him while he worked. She still remembered the smell of the old books he'd referenced and cross-referenced with and the musky scent of his cologne. She'd wanted to burrow right into his arms until she believed in his love for her. But, even though he always held her when she made the first move, the love wasn't there.

Oh, she knew he loved her in his own way. He loved her in that altruistic, mourning—the-human-condition way he loved everybody. He loved her because she was lost and she needed his love desperately. But his love wasn't unconditional. From the very beginning, requirements were set down in his mind, unconsciously, subconsciously. He'd wanted a boy—Rori's first failure, and it hadn't mattered whether she had any control over it.

Besides, leaving her father's arms, she always wished she didn't need him the way he didn't need her.

"Daddy, I got you something. I mean, I saw it and thought of you, so I got it."

The first victory was getting his attention, and Rori couldn't help smiling as he turned his

head, easing off his glasses to look at her.

"You didn't need to get me anything, sweetheart. I don't need anything."

"I know." She held it up to him. "I wanted to."

After setting down his glasses, he took the leather-bound book from her. In truth, she went in search of it, not stumbled onto it. She certainly didn't frequent bookstores, new or used. One of her father's favorite books was *The Spiritual Man* by Watchman Nee, and his copy had been in tatters the last time she visited.

"I think it's a first edition or something," she murmured a little too hopefully. He pushed the ribbon off from the top.

When he turned back to the table to slip his glasses on again, Rori stood to watch him thumb through it. She was a sucker for her own disappointment because she knew he wouldn't initiate any affectionate gratitude outside of words, yet a little part of her held out for it.

"This is beautiful, sweetheart. Thank you. I may have to give this book another read."

His words, partial satisfaction, sent her hopes crashing rather than soaring. She'd asked herself a million times in her life *What were you expecting? Can't you be happy with half of what you want?*

Yet she always felt crushed—when she'd set herself up for it. After twenty-seven years, she accepted she wouldn't walk through her father's front door and have him hug her with tears in his eyes because he was so happy to see her, because he'd actually missed her. What she got were tears in *her* eyes hugging him. Her dream wouldn't happen, she'd always wish it could, and he'd always prove her worst fears.

She needed some time out. Time to work through her own silly feelings. They *were* silly. Not only had no one ever promised her a rose garden, the subject never even came up. If she hurt, she needed to deal with it on her own.

The phone rang, and Rori saw her out. Hugging her father's shoulders from the back, she said, "Daddy, I'm gonna go outside for a smoke. I'll be back in a couple minutes."

She'd stopped searching for his disapproval long ago, certain she'd find it every time. Besides, smoking was the least of her latest sins.

Getting her coat from the closet near the front door, she heard him answer the phone. How would she last for another forty-four hours? *Smoke break every hour*, she joked with herself, except she only had twenty-seven cigarettes with her. Well, sixteen hours of sleep in there somewhere, and she might just make it.

Rori slipped on her leather jacket, not bothering to zip it over her cropped sweater. Fresh

air would be a first kiss right now.

Closing the front door behind her, she stood on the steps. Her footmarks from an hour ago were covered with a virginal layer of snow. She'd been so conscious of them then. *Ten more steps, Ror, nine more and you can still turn back, five more, daddy, be glad to see me for once.*

Taking the pack of cigarettes from her jacket pocket, she started down the sidewalk, pressing new footprints into the snow with her snakeskin boots. Smiling, she experienced a moment of disbelief when she realized there were some good memories connected with Syracuse, her father's home. The good memories came so infrequently and even those turned on her eventually.

Rori remembered the snow here as a little girl. She remembered snowball fights, building forts and snowmen, making angels in the fresh-fallen snow. She remembered holding her arms up to Nathan Jovanovich, wanting him to pull her up and away from her angel so it wouldn't be ruined with hand- or footprints. She remembered wanting Nate to pull her up into his arms. His face would always get closer and closer, but then he'd let her go once she was clear of the angel and standing on her own.

God, he'd been destined to do that to her all his life.

Rori chose to come a week before Christmas just to avoid running into Nate and his wife.

The cold air made her breath form smoke before she lit one of the two cigarettes in her pack with the engraved lighter Brett gave her for her last birthday. She stepped out to the part of the sidewalk that formed a T, then performed a *fouette en tournant* with the grace of a ballerina. She hadn't danced in the snow since she was a little girl, and she was tempted to do it here, in front of her father's house.

Odd that a dozen ballet lessons had brought her to this point in her life.

Rori shook her head, embracing the lamp post with one arm and propelling herself around it a few times. She came to a stop and found she was facing the Jovanovich house. Nestled squarely in the middle of the block, it looked as cozy as a fairy tale.

The irony of that house being situated between the Mason house on the right and the Radcliffe house on the left had never been lost on Rori. Nathan Jovanovich had always been between her and Jenna Radcliffe, Nate's wife.

It wasn't supposed to be that way. It was supposed to be her and Nate. He'd been her only comfort each time her father told her to "go play."

*Rori stepped out of the house, turning her head immediately at the sound of voices.*



*Jenna had beat her to Nate's again. For a minute, Rori stood watching them together.*

*He was beautiful at seventeen, only a year older than she and Jenna. Oh, he looked like a Greek god with the tan summer gave him. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a pullover. His hands burrowed in his pockets as he listened to Jenna with a kind smile.*

*Rori had dreamed of him again last night. Her sexual dreams were out of control. And even if it hadn't been Nate she'd shared kisses and caresses with, it was forever him in her dreams. God, in her heart.*

*She wondered if Jenna ever fantasized about Nate the way she did. Looking at sweet little Jenna, with her short dark hair and prim sundress, Rori concluded her nemesis only dreamed of hand-holding with Nate, marriage and having his babies.*

*Rori thought of those things too, but they were for later. The hot fantasies of Nate were for now. Maybe today he'd kiss her finally. Then she'd never let Jace touch her again.*

*Hopping down the steps, she felt the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze caught her long, loose, honey blond hair.*

*Sublime satisfaction filled her from head to toe seeing Nate straighten from leaning on his porch railing at her approach. He no longer listened to Jenna with a gentle smile on his coveted mouth. The only person in the world he paid attention to was her...*

The front door of the Jovanovich house opened, and Rori realized with a start she'd been staring at it. Her boots made a scraping noise against the sidewalk as she whirled away from the house.

Nate came out of his parents' house. Nate was here! What was he doing here? She'd come early to avoid seeing him and Jenna.

She had reason to hate this man. More reason than he had for coming out here. The blood rushed to her head, harder and faster with each of his footsteps.

The rush of confusion, hurt, and, inevitably, blind anger were infinitely familiar to her where Nathan Jovanovich was concerned. When she'd come here five years ago to visit her father, that cruel lash of emotions made her say to him "Stay out of my life, you sanctimonious, cowardly motherfucker." No chance he'd misread the bitterness as unrequited love speaking, so why was he approaching her again?

Oh God, she couldn't breathe. Each oncoming footfall reverberated inside her stomach. She'd do something stupid. She always did stupid things over Nate.

Closing her eyes for a long excruciating moment, she tried to block out his voice, but his "Hello, Rori" greeting tumbled past any defense she'd constructed to keep him out. This was the boy who hadn't heard it when two cars crashed in front of his house twelve years

ago. He hadn't heard the horrendous racket because she was there, because the whole world faded around them whenever they were together. This was the boy she'd planned her entire life around. He was the reason all her dreams crumbled around her like a collapsing sand castle and she'd fled, leaving her home, her family, her friends at sixteen.

Her hand shook as she fitted her cigarette between tight lips.

*Don't self-destruct this time, Ror; don't let him get to you.*

But he did get to her. He always did, even after she'd accepted it was all over for her. Right now, she prayed for the very least—at the very least, she could pretend he didn't mean anything to her, that he hadn't made even a dent in her life, let alone her heart.

His boots crunched in the snow built up against the curb, then he faced her, demanding to be noticed. Avoiding him was torture for her. Rori reminded herself she was made of strong stuff. She'd left Brett, hadn't she? And she hadn't crawled back within a month, the way he predicted. She'd been on her own for *six* months. She didn't need him or any other man. Especially not this one.

"Wanna bum a smoke, holy man?" she asked in a bored voice, trying not to notice his still soft gray eyes behind the round scholar glasses...or how much more strength his face had than eleven years ago. Oh, but she'd thought he was beautiful then too. His face meant

perfection and love to her. She'd kissed every inch of his face once the opportunity finally came for her. *Don't remember it, Ror*, she commanded herself. But her fingertips and her tongue replayed the magic in her mind one more time. *Don't remember loving him with tracing fingers and don't you dare remember touching your tongue to that little cleft in his chin.*

Nate was developing a nimble ability in ignoring her barbs, though she'd only thrown one at him before, the sanctimonious one that shocked her perhaps more than it had him. Instead of paying attention to this barb, he did that damn thing he always did. He stared at her like he wanted to memorize her for later fantasies.

"You look good, Rori," he said softly.

God, she could have listened to his voice...for the rest of her life. He'd hypnotized her with just his voice, making her want him, love him, need him. And then he'd walked away from her as though it was all some horrible error, an accident like mistaken identity.

"Does that mean something to you?" she asked, dramatically curious. When it came down to a choice between her and Jenna, it certainly hadn't mattered.

The last thing she wanted was the way *he* looked to mean something to her, but she couldn't help staring at him helplessly, the way she had as a foolish little girl who could

find love in just his smile.

Snow fell on his dark, feathered hair, glistening once it settled. The contrast was precious, like something inside a glass ball.

*Oh Nate, how can I possibly look at you and want so much when you belong to her and I hate you for giving her what should have been mine?*

The fear of Jenna coming outside to join her husband kept Rori from weakening in her resolve to remain unaffected by him. But the rush came again as his gaze slid over her torso. He couldn't seem to help himself either. When Nate looked at her like that... Oh God, her insides become nothing more than warm butter. What he did to her was effortless, and the sensations rocked her.

He was married, damn him, to Jenna. *Jenna*. Not some stranger. He had everything he'd planned for his life. He had a good Christian wife, probably a couple kids, and he pastored his own little flock at some church in Niagara Falls. Double damn him because the only thing she had was an ounce of self-respect for the first time in eleven years.

"What do you want, choir boy?" she demanded, unable to keep back her anger.

The temptation to return to her father's house just to avoid him was strong, but she couldn't let him win again. She wouldn't waste half a cigarette for him either.

He took a step closer to her, and it was all she could do not to rear back at the effect he had on her. It went to her head the way an icy blast would...or a rush of intense heat. No middle ground existed with her emotions toward Nate.

He had to have seen her alarm because he scowled in confusion for an instant, then frowned. "What do you want, Rori? What do *you* want from me?"

"Exactly what I told you last time."

His smile surprised her—that he could find humor in those vicious words. His smile was also a heartache for Rori. She'd had those lips on her own once, and he'd smiled through their kiss for a few seconds before the need took over.

"Rather eloquently, as I recall," he murmured good-naturedly.

Rori watched him balance his foot on the curb and flex it. His hands burrowed in the pockets of his teal parka.

Watching him, it occurred to Rori he was nervous. Oh, not in any obvious way. Nathan Jovanovich was not a shy person. But he had been with her. He'd been shy about touching her, about asking her to hang out with him, about taking that first and only kiss.

Nothing about him made sense to her. Hating him, blaming him was easier than trying to understand the cold-blooded thing he'd done eleven years ago.

"So what are you doing now, Rori?" he asked, glancing up from his boot.

He was irresistible. A part of her used to wonder constantly if he knew that, if he had any idea how she and Jenna competed for him. They were so obvious about it, he would have had to be blind not to see the metaphoric Ping-Pong balls flying around him.

It annoyed her that she could find him irresistible after all he'd done. Nathan Jovanovich was not a hero or a knight in shining armor. He didn't deserve forgiveness for his crimes. What he deserved was to get a slap of reality. And she knew just how to do it.

"I work at Baby Dolls in Buffalo," she told him smugly, pushing her hair back with cold fingers.

"What is that?"

She anticipated his genuine interest and ignorance, and it gave her false courage to continue. "It's an upscale gentleman's club. A skin palace."

The snow came down more heavily now, melting against the increasing heat of her face.

"I suppose I should know what that is."

He seemed completely unaware of what was coming, and Rori took satisfaction in that before she laid it all out for him. "It's a strip joint. I'm a stripper, get it? I take off my clothes for a bunch of horny bastards, and I get paid damn good money for it."

Her cigarette burned down to the filter. She stepped around him, careful not to touch him, to toss the butt into the storm drain. Nate turned to face her instinctively yet had no answer when she baited, "Got any more questions, holy man?"

The look of disbelief on his face could have meant anything. It meant nothing to Rori—not bitterness and not satisfaction. Still, his expression of disappointment affected her. He had no right to be disappointed in her. He didn't know what she'd been through, what she'd overcome. Nate had made his choices, and she'd made hers despite the few options she'd been given.

Telling him was a mistake, Rori realized too late. Getting a jolt out of him wasn't worth the repercussions it might create. Like a juvenile, he'd tell his parents and his parents would tell her father what she did for a living now.

Yeah, it'd be another five years before she came home again.

*THAT WAS smooth*, Nate chided himself as Rori disappeared into her father's house. *Very smooth. You could apply to snake charming school with a little more practice.*

He rarely agreed with his mother, but she'd been right this time. He shouldn't have come out here to try talking to Rori. The last time should have been all the proof he ever needed.



She didn't want anything to do with him ever again. But he'd had to come out here. Since he arrived, he'd hoped Rori would show up.

*Hoped.* His fierce yearning matched how he'd felt after she ran away at sixteen. Every day he hoped she'd come back. Even after he'd tucked that letter into his pocket Bible and told himself he was marrying Jenna, in the deepest part of his heart he'd ached for Rori's return.

Aligning his boot with a print made by Rori, he shook his head in self-disgust. At twenty-eight, the gawky, starstruck kid feeling he got around Rori Mason should have been long gone. If she'd stayed the sixteen-year-old girl his mind preserved her as, maybe it would have disappeared.

Nate took a deep breath of air so cold his chest burned.

True, he was lonely. Jenna died over a year ago, and he'd had little opportunity to grieve for her. But this had nothing to do with loneliness or Jenna.

Unconsciously he started to slide his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket, searching for something that was no longer there.

Whether he'd loved Jenna wasn't up for debate. He'd loved her completely. He didn't feel guilt over seeing Rori again either. Seeing her and...and still being attracted to her.

Her beauty had softened as a full-grown woman. Its impact on him sharpened. She was all honey blond hair, heavy-lidded ebony eyes, and a mouth so generous and shapely it should have been a crime. And, OK, her body was beyond compare. If any question arose whether this man of God was as red-blooded as they came, his reaction to Rori's body removed any doubt. She looked so small and soft, so lush.

Nate let out a breath that created billows of steam in the cold air. No doubt about it, the memory of Rori would slip into his bed like a nymphet when he was alone in the dark.

Maybe it would have been better, for both of them, if sexual attraction was all he felt. Fantasies eventually went away—at least most of them did. But Nate also saw past Rori's beauty, her innate sensuality, her masks. He knew *Rori*. No matter what she'd been through, she was still all bark and no bite. Beneath the anger, the disinterest, the curse words and scandals lurked a tender-hearted innocent who'd been hurt too many times. God knew he'd given her a few scars.

The wind picked up. Without hat or gloves, he shivered against the chill and turned back to his parents' house. Besides, his mother was probably gawking out the window, trying to catch Rori in some sin or another. For the past four days, she'd been chewing Rori up and spitting her at Nate. He could give her a mouthful with Rori's meant-to-shock confession,

if he wanted to.

He didn't want to. She had enough problems with her father without adding more obstacles. His mother would run over there in a heartbeat if Nate told her.

Even the footprints Rori left a few minutes ago were covered when he finally trudged across the lawn. He'd watched Rori too, from inside the house, since she pulled up in a truck over an hour ago. He'd watched her come back out and dance on the snow as gracefully as a fairy.

Sometimes he wondered if his unintentional mission in life was to steal her joy.

Stepping inside the house, he shook his head to dislodge some of the snow. His mother would have a fit if he tracked even a drop of snow into the house, so he removed his boots on the mat before he went any further.

Down the hall, from the living room, he heard the excited chatter of his thirteen-month-old daughter.

Nate hung his parka on the coat tree, then followed the voices into the living room. His parents weren't strict about holiday traditions the way Rori's father was. They'd put up a tree, the four of them, the night he and Andrea arrived in Syracuse.

She perched on her grandfather's knee unwrapping an early gift. Enough packages

crowded beneath the tree to warrant one a day until Christmas.

Shaking his head, unable to prevent a grin, Nate sat in an overstuffed chair. His mother constantly advised him about how he spoiled his little girl, but she and his father were as much to blame.

Marilyn Jovanovich was a chronic worrier, to the point where everything that came out of her mouth was a complaint or criticism. For the most part, her only crime was loving her family too much. She was as harmless as her frail form suggested, but she had the strength of ten men if she was ever called upon to use it.

His father had the exact opposite demeanor as his wife. Maybe it meant the two of them complemented each other, maybe it didn't. All said and done, they loved each other. Henry was jovial and easy-going; he wouldn't dare tell anyone else how they should live. When Marilyn henpecked him to death, he barely noticed, offering teasingly "Years of practice" if anyone asked how he could stand it.

"How much did she promise you in exchange for a present?" Nate asked, fingering the snow from his hair.

Andrea tore the wrapping off the gift in little bits. His mother scooped them up, sometimes before they even hit the rug.

"Something along the lines of a lifetime's supply of hugs and kisses." 'Papa' collected a few of those from his one and only grandchild, tickling the back of her neck, beneath the silky black hair, with his beard until she squealed with laughter and his mother tried not to smile behind her stern expression.

Andrea's baby fine, black hair was the only trait Jenna passed on to their daughter. Her tiny face resembled Nate's more and more every day, right down to the dimple in her chin.

The glossy storybook from her grandparents was finally unveiled, and she crawled off Papa's lap, running over to Nate with it. "Da-dee," she said, pushing the book at him to read to her.

Nate touched a finger to her little nose. "Did you say thank you to Gram and Papa, munchkin?"

She bestowed gratitude on them with gusto. Watching her, Nate thought what he always did during special occasions, sadly rather than bitterly: *You should be here, Jenna. It's Christmas, and you should be sharing it with us.*

Andrea came back, tucking the new book in the cushion of the chair at his side, then scrambling onto his lap. Getting her to sleep wouldn't take much, Nate knew from experience. She was exhausted from all the excitement of having two sets of grandparents

fussing over her. Since they'd arrived on Monday, Andrea took her nap earlier each day. His mother frowned about it, though Nate couldn't imagine why. She was convinced he spoiled his little girl by letting her sleep when she fainted with exhaustion.

Naps weren't his mother's real concern, Nate figured out long ago. The fact that he raised his daughter by himself troubled her. As much as Jenna had been loved by his family, it didn't come down to love for his mother. What was best for Andrea, she thought, was a father and a mother, even if it meant Nate choosing a single woman from his congregation to marry. Never mind love. Never mind that the few single women among his congregation were all under twenty or over thirty-five. Pastor Mason had remained unmarried after his wife's death and he'd raised his daughter on his own. Nate's mother was certain the Pastor's widower status was the reason Rori turned out the way she had. In his mother's opinion, a man simply didn't possess the abilities necessary to raise a female child.

For the good of both Andrea and himself, Nate listened to his mother without heeding her advice. He wouldn't marry a woman he didn't love any more than he'd hand his daughter over permanently to someone else to care for her. The two of them were doing just fine on their own. And he knew best that Rori had more incentive to rebel than her father's lack of understanding for her.

Tucking the book into the cushion of the chair after he'd read less than five minutes' worth, he carried Andrea into his old bedroom, where his father set up the handmade crib from Nate's infancy. Andrea hadn't slept in the crib more than a couple nights since they arrived. She didn't like it, she wasn't used to it because it wasn't hers. When he moved to lay her in it, she predictably curled her fingers into his sweater, murmuring sleepily, "Daddy, ho'd you."

Nate loved those words. Somehow she'd confused "hold *me*" with "hold *you*", but he wasn't about to correct such an adorable request.

"OK, munchkin," he whispered soothingly, pressing a kiss to her shiny hair. The rocking chair his father brought out of the attic matched the oak crib. Nate sat in it, adjusting Andrea carefully in his arms, though he knew she wouldn't awaken for at least an hour.

Nate spent so much time watching his little girl, it seemed impossible not to perceive the changes on a daily basis as she grew. She was an angel, so sweet and innocent he could no longer imagine his life without her. Jenna dreamed about this. Dreamed about first smiles, first giggles, first words, first steps. Dreamed about the questionably mundane activities too, like watching their child sleep.

"She's going to be an angel, Nathan. We won't lose this one. She'll be the love of our

life," she used to say while they lay in bed together, each with a hand on her swollen belly. She looked up at him, always with a sheen of tears in her beautiful brown eyes. "I can't wait to hold her in my arms. I can't wait to see you holding her."

Jenna never held their only child. After five previous miscarriages, that was the cruelest twist of fate.

Blaming anyone was pointless. Maybe accepting it was easier because he'd held on so tight before it happened. He'd been angry for a while after Jenna got pregnant for the sixth time because she lied to him. Five miscarriages, five periods of mourning after so much hope, were enough. More than enough. Nate wanted to get a vasectomy. Instead of taking such a drastic step, Jenna insisted they'd be careful; she'd use birth control and they wouldn't get pregnant again. When Jenna found out she'd conceived again, she admitted she lied about taking precautions; she'd never been on the pill.

Four tormented months passed, and Jenna had been doing fine. All of her miscarriages came during the first trimester. Nate let go of his silent anger—99% fear for Jenna and another baby—and began to hope again that everything would be all right. Jenna would finally have the child she wanted so desperately, and he'd have his wife back and a family that wouldn't get any larger. He'd planned to go through with the vasectomy after Jenna



gave birth, whether she agreed with it or not.

"You spoil her," his mother said softly from the doorway of the room, bringing him out of bittersweet memory. She held a neat stack of clothing she'd just taken from the dryer.

The feelings behind his mother's words were written all over her face, though she could only express them with seeming criticism. He shouldn't be alone, Andrea should have her mother. True, no doubt about it. Just not possible.

His mother had loved Jenna. She'd praised his choice of wife often, but he knew the biggest part of that approval wasn't because of Jenna so much as because it *wasn't* Rori Mason.

She came into the room to put his and Andrea's clean clothes into his suitcase.

"Did Jenna ever talk to you about having kids, mom?" Nate asked.

"Of course."

Stupid question, his mother's tone implied. Jenna talked about babies with anyone who was interested.

"I mean, did she tell you why she wanted kids so much?"

He and Jenna had a solid marriage. They'd been close friends all their lives, and talking came easier to them than attraction had. That came with time. But she'd never talked about

why she wanted children. She'd talked about the ache of *not* having them.

"She wanted to give you something." His mother turned to him. "I told her it wasn't true over and over, but she was convinced that deep down you still harbored feelings for that trashy Aurora Mason."

Andrea shifted slightly, and Nate glanced down to see her breathing softly. She relaxed again.

He hadn't expected his mother's response. Jenna would have said something if she believed another woman held his heart. Wouldn't she? They'd talked about Rori during the ten years they were marriage. He'd always been the one to bring her up; Jenna always ended the discussion. Still, she never said anything bad about Rori, even when Nate told her everything about that relationship.

True, too, that everyone who knew the three of them realized he'd "harbored" a lot of feeling for Rori. A major clue were his grades in high school. Listening in class was impossible with Rori in the same room. He stared at her instead of paying attention to the lesson. Even when he, Rori and Jenna studied together at home his concentration was nil. How could he concentrate when Rori put the cap of her pen in her mouth, chewing on it with her straight white teeth, closing her soft lips around it, sometimes pressing it against

the tip of her tongue...

Rori was the girl who mesmerized him, yet he'd married Jenna. Didn't that speak for itself with Jenna—the choice he'd made? God knew it'd spoken for itself with Rori.

"You made the right choice with Jenna," his mother said with firm conviction, though he wasn't questioning whether his marriage to Jenna was a mistake. He'd shared too much with his wife to ever regret it.

But he did regret what his marriage did to Rori; he regretted his only option was to hurt his first love just so he could do what was best for everyone involved. And now Rori would never forgive him.

## Chapter Two

RORI AND HER father ate dinner together with the radio on. The only other noise consisted of forks striking plates. She could just as well be locked up in a padded room. Nothing to look at, talk about, nowhere to run. The scene was familiar to Rori—the dreaded meals with her father. Only rarely would he broach the silence with a question. Her answer punctuated an embarrassing silence.

Their entire relationship was based on no-trespassing zones. She could tell him no more than generalities about her life, and he felt little need to share his life with her. Yet every time she asked herself why she bothered coming here, the answer formed swiftly. She loved him so much she'd put up with anything to spend a little time with him...regardless of the fact that she was miserable all of the time she spent here.

"How long are you thinking of staying, sweetheart?" her father asked, not looking up. He cut into his pork chop.

Rori hadn't eaten too many "balanced" meals in eleven years. She didn't eat a lot of meat, just because it was easier and cheaper not to. The only time she ate a balanced diet was when her neighbor Annmarie invited her.

"I was thinking about leaving tomorrow." Earlier than she'd originally planned, but she doubted she could last until Saturday morning. Besides, the thought of running into Nate again equated being tarred and feathered. If she had to make a fool of herself, she could think of any number of people she'd rather do it for.

The doorbell rang after she cleared her plate and reached for her milk. A part of her waited for it since she left Nate out in the snow. The Jovanovich and Radcliffe families were members of her father's congregation. If her father hadn't told them himself, Nate would have told them by now that she was in town.

Whether either family would go out of their way to visit her was moot. Both had families of their own visiting. She wouldn't mind seeing the Radcliffes, although they'd ask too many questions she refused to answer about her life. Even when they rooted for their daughter to end up with Nate, they'd always been nice to her.

The Jovanovichs were a different story. While Mr. Jovanovich was harmless, his wife possessed the viciousness of a momma bear. She'd done everything in her power to keep her son out of Rori's reach. Fortunately, unfortunately her power didn't intimidate Rori. If she showed up here, it'd be to gloat because Jenna snatched her son right out of Rori's hands. Or to inform her father about her latest sinful vocation.

Shame didn't enter into what she did for a living. She'd had two options, and she chose the best one---the one that allowed her to stand on her own, financially and otherwise. Stripping wasn't something she planned to do for the rest of her life anyway. But until she had enough money put away, she wouldn't let other people's reactions to her job make her feel worthless. By not telling her father herself, she spared him grief and embarrassment. His disappointment in her was expected; not telling him *wasn't* about sparing herself his censure. Rori realized long ago she didn't care if her father was proud or ashamed of her. She just wanted him to accept her for who she was. Accept and love her no matter what.

Rori sipped her milk, trying to prepare herself mentally for the worst. Her father got up to answer the door.

Jason Radcliffe, Jenna's older brother and the black sheep of his family, had come calling.

Rori set down her glass, smiling in relief and welcome. Jace had never officially been her boyfriend, but he'd chased her nonstop from the time she turned thirteen. His goal in life was stealing kisses and copping feels. If not for her foolish crush on Nate, she might have given in to him. Rude and crude as Jace could be, he had a sweet side, a charming side...and he'd made her feel like she was special to him, even when he used her. She hadn't

minded being used by him because she'd used him too.

"Jason, maybe you should come back later---" her father started.

She needed a break. She hadn't smoked a cigarette in four hours. Pushing her chair back from the table, she insisted, "It's OK, daddy. I'm finished here, and I need a smoke."

Nothing about his expression changed, yet Rori recognized the disapproval radiating from him as she approached the two of them. His reproach wasn't just for her this time. Her father considered Jason Radcliffe a bad influence—and he was. Maybe she'd sneaked off with Jace a lot as a teenager, but she had no desire to get into trouble. Trouble always found her too easily anyway, without her looking for it.

Rori got her jacket from the closet, smiling slightly. Jace stared at her chest like he'd never seen one before. She knew for a fact he'd seen his share and then some. No surprise Jace wasn't going to do the Eddie Haskell bit for her father; he was too comfortable with himself, at seventeen and now at thirty.

"We'll be right outside," she assured her father.

Jace put his arm around her, and they walked out into the cold evening together. Darkness had already descended. Soft orange street lamps glowed, making it seem like the falling snow came out of nowhere.

"I didn't know you were gonna be here," she said, looking up at him once they hit the sidewalk. He still resembled a wild teenager to her, all shaggy dark hair and height. He smelled like leather and cologne, a wild scent she associated with him, with Brett, with the way she'd left this town at sixteen.

"Same here. I've been on red alert since the old man told me you were here." He pulled her closer with a squeeze of her shoulder.

They reached the road, and she walked around to the side of her truck not facing her father's house. She only had one cigarette in her jacket and Jace was always conveniently out. She kept an extra pack in her truck.

"How 'bout a hug?"

Jace's hugs amounted to copping a feel. She would let him because she considered very little erotic anymore.

Turning to him, she invited his hug. His hands slid inside her jacket. Leather mingled with leather, torso pressed to torso. Jace hadn't changed a bit. He still pushed every limit, seeing what he could get away with.

His cold mouth covered hers, but Rori eased away when his tongue tried to slip between her closed lips. "You want a cigarette?"



He refused to let her go so easily, whispering what he really wanted into her ear. She shivered at the sudden heat and laughed. "You still sweep me off my feet with all the romantic poetry, Jace," she teased, pushing him away. He let her go this time.

Opening the door of her truck, Rori leaned in to get her extra smokes from the coffee cart in the middle of the floor.

"There's nothin' to stop us now, Rori. We'd be good together."

She ignored most of Jace's begging, now and as a teenager. But she'd let him get away with a lot back then. Her hormones went off like firecrackers from age thirteen to sixteen. Though she loved Nate, he'd never given her a clue when, or if, he'd make the first move with her. Allowing Jace to kiss her and touch her everywhere he wanted to had partly been in anticipation and substitution of Nate.

The biggest reason was it felt good. Foreplay had been about actually becoming aroused. She didn't fake it then; she got turned on easily. She'd also enjoyed seduction back then, torturing and satisfying Jace with her own caresses. Giving less would have been cruel.

Yet she protected her virginity. Even when Jace begged her to let him go and when she just wanted to end the torment of halfway, she kept that intact. She'd wanted to give her virginity to Nate, as if it meant something. As if it would have meant any more to him than

it had to Brett, her first lover. He'd been insensitive enough not to notice she was a virgin, or the pain of it, their first time.

"Did you come alone?" Rori asked. She packed the cigarettes against the palm of her hand, then opened the carton.

He glanced away from her, always on the alert for a female trap. "She's nobody special. I've only been with her a couple weeks. You know I've always wanted you."

He took the cigarette she offered him, putting it in his pocket instead of lighting it. Inching closer to where she leaned against the truck door, he put his hands inside her jacket again.

"Your hands are cold." She jumped at the icy touch of them against her bare midriff, shivering as goosebumps rose on her flesh.

"I care about you, Rori. Is that what you need to hear? I never wanted anybody the way I want you."

His irresistible sweetness was nothing Rori hadn't heard a hundred times before—probably more. Brett convinced her to stay with him for eleven years because of three little words and what she'd wanted them to mean. Wising up included accepting Brett loved her but he didn't really care about her. And she didn't want any more of that kind of

"love."

"Much as I enjoy scandalizing Mrs. Jovanovich, I don't think either of us wants her screaming up and down the street this time of night."

Jace's hands raced up to her breasts as she tried to light her cigarette against the slight wind. His thumbs rubbed over her nipples, coaxing no physical response from her.

"You're insane, Jace," she murmured, trying to push him away.

Brett insisted a breast job was obligatory to fitting into the "glamorous" life they'd entered when she was eighteen. She'd eventually surrendered to his demands because it was easier than fighting him. When the doctor warned her she might lose sensation because of the implants, she laughed at him. For two years, sensation there, or anywhere, didn't exist. Nine more years certainly hadn't restored anything.

"How come your nipples don't get hard anymore?" Jace asked, taking a step back to look at her. His tone implied she'd turned into a freak of nature.

She'd chalked his insensitivity up to eagerness all her life. This time it hurt. It was too much of the cruelty Brett gave her. *"How come you're so stiff? Can't you even pretend you're alive? For my benefit at least? I could fuck a knothole and get the same emotion I get outta you."*

Rori's head twitched, remembering the slap that followed. *"Did you feel that?"*

She got mad at Brett because he hurt her on purpose so often. He liked it when she got mad at him. He liked manipulating a live puppet, one that kicked and screamed and eventually collapsed before him in defeat, accepting there was no way to win with him.

"How's your baby sister?" Rori asked in a tight voice, with her face turned away from him.

Jace stepped back from her, creating a welcome space between them. He took her lighter to catch up to her quarter-down cigarette.

Jace loved his sister, but he wasn't defensive. He understood the rivalry between Rori and Jenna. Embarrassing, but he knew how much Rori had loved Nathan Jovanovich.

Jace hadn't introduced her to Brett hoping they'd hit it off romantically. Meeting Brett happened at a time Rori needed something else. Nate and Jenna had become a couple, thrusting Rori out in the cold. All she'd planned for her life fell through. Brett Foxx, a struggling musician eight years older than her, asked her to join his band and come on the road with them. She hesitated only long enough to make certain Nate wouldn't change his mind before she ran away with Brett. Nate and Jenna's engagement announcement was all the proof Rori needed she was wasting her life here. Wasting eleven years with Brett wasn't

much better, but at least she'd gotten away from Nate.

Rori zipped her jacket against the chilly air, noticing Jace's silence.

"Your old man didn't tell you?" he asked with alarming seriousness.

"Tell me what?"

A thin stream of smoke came out through his nostrils. He looked down at her. "She died. About a year ago. She died givin' birth to Andrea."

Rori made a little noise, something between a gasp and a sob. One thing to bitterly despise someone your whole life, quite another to imagine them *dead*. If she and Jenna had been friends, Rori couldn't have been any more shocked.

"She was only a year younger than you," he murmured as if she hadn't considered it.

In one short minute, Rori considered everything. No triumph or sense of accomplishment came. Her feelings for Nate had never been about Jenna. Rori had no opinion about Jenna Radcliffe one way or another...until Nate chose her instead. Even then, Rori subconsciously realized Jenna was just an innocent bystander.

Her limbs felt weak and uncoordinated. Rori reached for Jenna's brother, hugging him fiercely. "I'm sorry, Jace," she whispered against the worn leather of his jacket.

He caressed the back of her head silently, as if she was the one devastated over his

sister's death. Crazy but true, Rori's grief devastated her. He'd had over a year to come to grips with it.

God, the unfairness of it! She'd never been out for blood from Jenna. Their cat-fight had gone from a few hisses to something much, much worse. Jenna's death made it as if Rori turned her back and someone else took revenge for her. Revenge a hundred times more than Rori ever wished for.

She finished her smoke quickly, hugging Jace one last time, then went inside. The need to be held was excruciating, but she knew if she crawled into her father's arms she'd only end up feeling worse.

Shrugging off her jacket, she watched her father in the living room. He hadn't looked up from his book at her entrance. *So damn comfortable with me or just don't care?* Rori wondered bitterly.

Knowing she prolonged her own torture, she walked into the living room. She could hear the soft hum of the dishwasher from the kitchen. The room felt cold to her, and she hugged herself, moving over to the built-in shelves on the far end of the room. Framed pictures lined the shelf on eye level. Every one of them was covered with a thick layer of dust.

Her father managed housekeeping a lot better than she did, but he obviously avoided this

side of the room. The pictures sat exactly as they had before Rori ran away.

She'd framed her tenth grade picture herself, the one Brett laughed about the only time he came into her father's house so she could pack on a Sunday morning. Brett laughed, saying "All you need is a little cleavage showin' and we could send this to Heffner."

Rori remembered her embarrassment. Brett mistook anger for camera seduction. The photographer who'd come to the school had made every excuse in the book to touch her—in places she didn't want him to. Jenna said he hadn't come near her...

The regular snapshot in a frame next to her last school picture showed her and her father at a church picnic. The look of desperation on her young face as she hugged him made her cringe now. God, she hadn't changed at all.

Although Rori studied the rest of the photographs on the shelf hundreds of times, it'd been so long she could regard them with new sight. Dusting each one off, she looked at her baby pictures. All of them up to age four were taken with her mother. The love between the two of them transcended the frozen moments.

"What was she like before the car accident?" Rori asked quietly. If he couldn't give her the love she needed, he could give her her mother's love through his memories. She knew he hated talking about it. The first time she'd asked where her mother was, he'd turned

away, mumbled "There was an accident...car..." and then he'd walked away and never told her any more than that.

The slap of a book closing made Rori turn toward her father. He stood. "I'm going to turn in for the night. Will you lock up?"

Damn him! Tears rushed into her eyes, angry and vulnerable and tired tears. He heard her. She knew he heard her. And now he walked away from it and her.

"Daddy." The instant the word tore from her throat, her emotions spilled over.

He stopped at the hallway leading to the bedrooms but didn't turn when he muttered, "She was exactly like you. She was a falling star."

Rori made no attempt to get an explanation from him. He wouldn't give one. He just left her in the cold room alone, fighting her demons.

Setting her parents' wedding photograph back on the shelf, she went to lock the front door. She turned off the lights before walking through the dark house to her bedroom.

Keeping the lights off, she curled up in the window seat facing the Jovanovich house, facing Nate's bedroom. A light shone from his room and a silhouette rocked slowly before the window. Nate. God, Nate was rocking his little girl. She knew it without confirmation.

*I didn't mean for it to end like that, Jenna. You won. I thought I hated you for it, but it*



*was just easier that way.*

Jenna didn't have an ounce of malice in her. Not when she saw how Nate completely forgot she existed whenever Rori approached them. Not when Jenna confirmed he was hers at long last.

The Jovanovichs and the Radcliffes took a vacation together that year, leaving Rori in limbo for two weeks. After Nate told her he was going, he'd done what she always dreamed of—he kissed her.

Their kiss involved all of her heart and her soul and her body. Nothing matched the perfection of it for Rori since. Yet, once he returned from the vacation, he'd had his arm around Jenna.

Rori confronted her only hours after she'd asked Nate what was going on.

"Nathan wants a sweet girlfriend, Aurora," Jenna had said softly, genuine sympathy in her eyes. "You're trouble. You couldn't love him the way he needs to be loved, even though I know you want to. I can love him the way he needs."

Striking back at Jenna had been pure instinct...and perhaps retaliation against the truth. "Fine, but just remember one thing. When he's in bed with you, it'll be *me* he's thinking of. He'll be with you, wishing he was making love to me."

Rori really didn't believe her own words, yet Jenna flushed a humiliated red. Jenna believed it.

Even in her victory, Jenna refused to be triumphant. "You can have any guy in the world, Rori," she murmured. "Nathan is the only one I want."

Rori's cruelty back then gave her no satisfaction. It gave her none now, watching Nate's lonely silhouette next door. Jenna may have lived with those false fears for the rest of her life. Eleven short years.

*Forgive me, Jenna. Forgive me, Jesus.*

"I'M REALLY NOT hungry, daddy," Rori said, lifting her gaze to him.

He looked at her for a few seconds, then put the freshly made pancake on his own plate. The way he stared at her reaffirmed what she already knew. She looked like hell. Even after a shower and a little make-up, her eyes were still red from last night. She'd fallen asleep on the window seat in her room...cried herself to sleep the way she used to the last few months before she ran away. She used to cry herself to sleep even after she went with Brett. In the beginning he'd held her for no other reason except she needed it. Then he got sadistic, tormenting her with her own weaknesses. She needed comfort now, but she had no

one. Thank God Brett promised he wouldn't come after her. She was vulnerable enough to do something stupid like get involved with him again, knowing she'd regret it almost immediately.

Her mood brought her to the conclusion, early that morning, that when her father said she was a falling star just like her mother he meant the both of them disappointed him. They'd fallen from his grace. So much for the perfect marriage she'd imagined her parents had before her mother's fatal car accident.

Her father sat down to breakfast. She sipped from a glass of milk. The infernal radio was on, playing commercials at the moment. Now was the best time to get his attention.

"I'm leaving."

He looked up at her, chewing and swallowing before saying, "Oh?"

*What did you expect?*

Glancing down, she ran her fingertips over the textured surface of the glass. "Yeah. I'm gonna leave right after breakfast."

"That was a long drive for a short stay."

His conversational tone held no trace of regret or disappointment. For the first time Rori *wanted* him to be disappointed.

"It's under two hours. I consider that a short drive." Especially considering all the touring she'd done in her life, from state to state in a claustrophobia-inducing bus with four males. Her father wouldn't consider two hours a short drive. He never left Syracuse. He went only as far as his books took him. That satisfied him completely.

No arguments or appeals to stay longer; the matter was closed. She was going, he didn't mind, and the radio took hold of him again.

Rori downed the rest of her milk, then pushed back from the table. "I'll get my stuff together," she murmured, uncertain whether he'd hear her.

In her bedroom, she shoved the few articles she'd taken out of her canvas tote bag back in. Glancing in the mirror, she saw the blotches around the eyes.

*You've really got abrasive tears, Ror. You'd think all the practice you've had would make you at least cry prettily.*

What did it matter anyway? She wouldn't see anyone until she got home. Annmarie and her little boy, Zak, would be there, and they always cheered her up.

She went to the bathroom one last time before she hit the road. Dropping her tote near the front door, she saw her father had gone into the kitchen. Without spite, she decided not to make the first move with the goodbye hug; it was no-win, hurts-when-I-do,

hurts—when—I—don't thinking.

"I'm gonna head out, daddy," she announced, pulling her jacket from the hall closet.

He didn't emerge from the kitchen. Rori almost gave in to the stinging tears then and there. She couldn't understand men. Why did it make them feel so powerful and masculine to be malicious toward women? All the men she'd ever loved seemed to thrive on purposely hurting her.

But her father finally emerged, coming over to join her in front of the door. "Drive safely."

He just stood there, making no move to get closer to her or to hug her. She wanted to scream at him, but what was the use? He wouldn't understand.

"Thank you for dropping by and again for the classic Nee."

Rori bit her lip, wondering all those things his distance always made her wonder on whatever subconscious level: *Did you hold me when I was born, daddy? Or were you so disappointed I wasn't a boy, you didn't even wanna hold me? Was momma happy to have me? Did she love me before she died? Were you different then? Why can't you look at me, daddy? Why can't you see how much I need you to love me as I am? You have to be able to see how much you hurt me.*

Rori decided only minutes ago she wouldn't make the first move, yet she regretted the decision now. If she gave in and hugged him first, he'd win. She'd be the spineless ragdoll she'd been with Brett.

Holding her breath because it sustained her control longer, she picked up her tote bag, turning to the door and grasping the knob.

She wouldn't get any sense of achievement from winning against her father. If loving him made her weak, then she was weak. He was all she had left. She loved him even if he could never love her the way she needed him to.

Dropping her tote, she whirled around and put herself in her father's arms. He took her in without resistance, but she saw the expression on his face. Nothing. God, he'd been willing to let her go without another word or regret.

"I love you, daddy."

He patted her back gently. "I love you too, sweetheart."

*Don't do it, Ror. Don't analyze it, don't judge the tone the words were said in, don't doubt it. Just accept it and forget it.*

But she knew she wouldn't do that. She'd torture herself because of her vulnerability and because she needed more than anyone could give her right now.

God, she missed Zak. He was always willing to hug her, for as long as she needed it. Just holding his little body made her feel better. Zak loved her unconditionally because he was so young, because the world still held magic for him, because she was pretty, smelled good and she liked to play with him.

Rori left her father's house, holding herself together mentally the way a person who'd been physically eviscerated would.

She stepped down on the sidewalk, breathing in the frigid air. The swoosh—swoosh sound of material rubbing against a surface caught her attention. Turning toward the Jovanovich house, she saw a little figure dressed in bright pink laying on the snow working her arms and legs furiously.

Rori couldn't resist the lure. She wanted to see Nate and Jenna's little girl. She sought redemption and only this little girl could give it to her.

Snow crunched under her feet as she approached the angel creating a snow angel. Rori stood over her, and the little girl stopped moving. She was so bundled up, all that showed of her were wide, gray eyes. She had her daddy's beautiful eyes.

Soft emotion rose in Rori, making her voice tremulous when she said, "That's a pretty neat angel you got there, short stuff."

Andrea held her arms out toward her, just the way Rori had with Nate as a little girl—so she wouldn't ruin her angel.

Easing the strap of her tote bag off her shoulder, Rori set it on the snow, then reached for the little girl. She took hold of her under the arms securely, then pulled her up and away. Once her pink boots touched the ground a safe distance from her creation, Andrea turned to view her angel.

"It's perfect," Rori proclaimed, kneeling beside Andrea. "I don't think I've ever seen such a perfect little angel."

Nate and Jenna's child was beautiful. Jenna would never see the little angel she'd created with her husband. Oh God, it wasn't fair.

Andrea faced her, tugging down on the scarf wrapped around the lower half of her face. She was adorable. Looking at her brought tears to Rori's eyes. She had a tiny nose and a sweet rosebud of a mouth. Her cheeks were almost as pink as her snowsuit.

"I'm Rori. I know who you are, Andrea."

Without inhibitions, Andrea stared at her in silence, the way only a child would. Zak stared at Rori that way the first time they met—as if he'd never seen anything like her. Andrea pressed one wet mitten to Rori's cheek. The gesture seemed to convey an



unbelievable understanding of Rori's sadness.

Trying to smile, Rori felt the guilt lodge in her throat, holding her captive.

"Ho'd you," the little girl murmured.

Rori had no time to comprehend the words before Andrea wrapped her thickly padded arms around her neck and pressed her babysoft cheek against hers. Rori's guilt released her in that instant and she took her escape. Jenna granted her redemption.

"Thank you," Rori whispered just before a screen door slammed nearby, and then a familiar voice screamed "Andrea, you come away from there right this instant!"

Rori drew back chuckling after the tenderness of the moment she'd shared with the little girl. She'd recognize Mrs. Jovanovich's voice anywhere. High and shrill, it always made her realize just how easily she could push the woman's buttons. She really didn't need to do anything to incite Nate's mother to hysteria. As far as Rori knew, she'd never shown up on Mrs. Jovanovich's porch waving a machine gun with a bandoleer strapped over her shoulder. She might as well have for the reaction she infallibly created in the woman.

Rori turned at the sound of a car door slamming. Nate came up the walk saying "Calm down, mom. Everything's fine."

Rori was unnerved to realize Nate saw her interact with his daughter. She hadn't noticed

him near the car parked in front of his parents' house. Rising, she retrieved her tote and wiped at her cheeks to remove any tears. She'd been weak with her father and she didn't regret it even if she should, but showing Nate she was vulnerable...she'd regret that. Her plan to avoid seeing him ever again went down the toilet. Nothing went according to her plans these past few days.

Rori rubbed her hand over Andrea's covered head. "Later, short stuff."

By the time she reached her truck, she accepted the certainty of facing Nate.

"She's in good condition," she said without bite. Nate came toward her with his little girl in his arms. "You can call off your watchdog."

The thought *Andrea could have been ours* came and went. It wasn't true; marrying Nate and bearing him children had never been a possibility. It'd simply been a utopia, something to believe in when she had little else.

Mrs. Jovanovich stood on the porch, her arms crossed over her thin frame, staring down at them with that  
if-I-had-any-say-you-two-wouldn't-come-within-a-hundred-miles-of-each-other  
look.

Nate took on yet another dimension for Rori. She'd watched him last night, watched him

rock his little baby to sleep. No wonder Jenna wanted him so much. He was probably an ideal husband. As a father, he showed so much tenderness and patience his child would lack for nothing.

Shaking his head, Nate started, "I'm sorry about that. She—"

Rori couldn't help smiling slightly. "—thinks I'm in league with Satan. I steal little kids from their front lawns and sacrifice them to my master." She tossed her tote inside the cab of her truck, then faced him again. "Am I wrong, holy man?"

Nate's reciprocating grin was sheepish. No, she wasn't wrong.

She was about to bid him a See-you-but-not-in-this-lifetime when he inched closer to her. Andrea stared again, full attention on her.

"I do have a name, you know," he said pointedly. "You used to use it frequently."

She didn't use his name for a reason, the same reason she didn't address God by His familiar name. *Except last night*. You were held accountable to the people you addressed personally. You allowed them to get inside you.

"You choose your battles and your concerns. Your name isn't one of mine."

Focusing on Andrea, she poked a finger against the thick snowmobile suit over her belly. "Nice meeting you, short stuff. Take care." Rori kissed her index finger and pressed it

against Andrea's tiny lips. The little girl smiled so sweetly, Rori wanted to cry again. But she turned away and swung up into her truck, trying to ignore the ache in her chest. The only thing that eased the tightness was seeing Mrs. Jovanovich still on her porch. If the woman could get away with it, Rori had the feeling she would have been flipped off by a Christian woman.

## Chapter Three

HE'D WAITED *all his life for this moment. Last night he'd decided they'd talked about everything there was to talk about. Rori knew everything there was to know about him. Now he'd finally tell her she was his best friend, his fantasy. The only girl he'd ever love. It was time to take the first step into fantasy. He'd finally kiss Rori Mason; no amount of fear could talk him out of it this time.*

You sweat any more, Jovanovich, and she'll think you took a dive in a puddle when she wasn't looking.

*Nate glanced over at Rori, who flipped through the tapes in the glove box. The only one she liked of his was PETRA's Come and Join Us.*

*Clearing his throat, he said, "We're going on vacation... We're leaving tomorrow morning."*

*Rori found the PETRA cassette and shoved it into the player. "So is Jace."*

*"I know. We're all going to Florida together. You get a discount when there's over five people."*

*The song Without you I would surely die started, and Rori leaned back on the seat. He*

*could smell her hair, baby shampoo, combined with her lip gloss and the mint she'd popped in her mouth. Rori's mouth was exquisite, like something designed for the sole purpose of distracting and tempting seventeen-year-old guys. It was wide and full, pouty.*

*Nate had been studying her face as long as he could remember, and he'd concluded perfect faces didn't interest him. Rori's face wasn't perfect. Her eyebrows were too thin, though they had a sultry arch to them he'd always wanted to trace with a finger. Her nose was too narrow, emphasizing the width of her mouth. Yet, combined with her exotic eyes, everything harmonized.*

*Looking at her now only made him more nervous. He wanted her too much; the anticipation was too great. God knew he could hardly breathe she was so close to him. Her shoulder and the ripe swell of one breast touched him.*

*Abruptly, he turned away, feeling like his chest would burst.*

*They were at a park they came to frequently, on foot as kids and now in his car. They sometimes brought drive-up food here and fed the squirrels french fries. One in particular (at least they told themselves and each other it was the same one), a fat gray one they called Dolly, came up to the car often to pick up the fries they dropped on the ground, nibbling on them an arm-length's away.*

*"There's Dolly," Rori said, pointing past him at a squirrel scurrying up an oak tree.*

*"Hope she doesn't spot us. We don't have any fries today."*

*Rori laughed adoringly. "She needs a diet anyway."*

*Instinctively, Nate turned to her with a smile. She was even closer now. Her mouth was barely two inches from his. If he thought about it, he'd chicken out again, so he just did it. He closed his eyes and dived in, hoping for the best.*

*First kisses were said to be the best, the most memorable of your life. This kiss was exactly how he'd fantasized it'd be. Her mouth was soft as a ripe peach, wet and pliant...*

*Nate opened his eyes to look at her. Her eyes were closed, and the expression on her face was excruciating...excruciating pleasure. He hadn't been fooling himself. Rori Mason did like him. Maybe she even loved him the way he loved her—so much no other girl interested him.*

*Closing his eyes again, he smiled against the light pressure of her lips. They'd have to stop soon..*

*"Nate," she whispered breathlessly against his mouth.*

*The sound of her voice alone could have made him lose his sanity. The breathless emotion matched how he felt watching her lick an ice cream cone or lean over to kiss a*

*child. The way he felt whenever she touched him, however inadvertently.*

*Her lips parted against his, and the tip of her tongue ran along the seam of his mouth light as a summer breeze.*

*Intentions of a sweet, tentative kiss changed course so suddenly, it was as if they took over where his fantasies left off. Because it was his first time, Nate had no experience in mastering his control. Control—every ounce of it—belonged to Rori. He simply followed because what she offered he needed as desperately as air.*

*His mouth opened to her probing; his tongue joined hers. The free-fall started with a rush, a whirl of colors, heat just under his skin. Nothing was enough. Sitting still wasn't enough. Getting his hands on her wasn't enough. He wanted to devour her whole.*

*Their mouths opened wide, heads tilting at whatever angle provided the most depth, the full taste. Rori's hands played in his hair. Oh man, he had to get closer.*

*Easing back for less than a second, he pulled off his glasses, tossed them on the dashboard, then they came together again, satisfying each craving that developed.*

*Nate followed her down on the seat, kissing her wildly. She tugged his shirt out of his shorts. His only thought was Yes, yes, it all makes sense now.*

*Bracing himself with one hand, he reached between them, groping for buttons, brushing*



*her breast and the hard peak of it. He unbuttoned her shirt and pushed the cotton fabric apart.*

*Rori's soft moan, her pleading "Nate, please, yes, yes" snapped reality back into him with cool reception. He jerked away from her, hitting the steering wheel squarely in the middle of his back. The pain was only slightly less sharp than his needs. In shock, he glanced down at Rori.*

*Oh man, she was beautiful. Beautiful in such an ethereal way, his chest tightened looking at her. Her face glowed pink, softened by the cloud of thick, honey blond hair. He'd always wanted to run his fingers through that pure silk.*

*"Did you hurt yourself?" she asked in genuine concern though her tone was huskily.*

*He shook his head, clearing it somehow in the process. Then he realized exactly what might have happened, exactly what was at stake.*

*Sitting up slightly, she kissed him. She didn't realize what he realized. She didn't know it was over. Yet he was helpless to resist her lush mouth tracing silken kisses over his face. Once she got to his chin, he felt the wet texture of her tongue. His tormented body, hard and aching for relief, knew this could never happen again.*

*"I love you, Nate," she said, her ebony eyes bright with trust...and, yes, joy.*

*He'd always wanted Rori to love him, always wanted to share the same with her. But now that the words were here, now that he'd felt the flames he realized it was more than he wanted. More than he could handle. Keeping this behind the bounds of hand-holding, short, sweet kisses, hugs until they graduated high school would be impossible torture. She'd be pregnant long before then if they continued. He couldn't remain true to his Christian views of morality with Rori in his life...unless they got married. Neither of them were ready for that, any more than they were ready for a baby.*

The sound of Andrea whimpering got Nate out of bed reaching for his glasses. She quieted instantly in the crib when he whispered to her and ran his hand gently over her tummy. She'd spent most of the day saying Rori's name over and over (much to his mother's displeasure) as if it was the most beautiful word she'd ever heard.

Rori's connection with children didn't surprise him. As a teenager he'd watched her with them. Her beauty attracted them first and then her personality. Andrea fell in love with her after only a few minutes. God knew she didn't give hugs to strangers easily, never the way she had with Rori.

Walking over to the window, Nate looked out at the night.

They say a fool was born every minute. The same went for cowards. Nate had been the

worst kind of coward eleven years ago.

On that summer vacation, he'd asked Jason if the locker room stories he told of repeated conquests with Rori Mason were true. Maybe a part of Nate had been searching for a good enough reason to tell Rori he'd changed his mind about her—

something that didn't sound as stupid as *Kissing you is as dangerous as a loaded gun*. His withdrawal came down to fear. She tried his faith and made his morals falter. It scared him to want something as badly as he wanted to follow Christ.

Jason admitted the stories were exaggerated; he and Rori only got to third base. *Only*. Hearing the truth hurt and infuriated Nate. Rori let another guy kiss her, touch her intimately. She touched someone else intimately. The truth about her gave him justification.

He didn't use the things Jason told him to explain why it was over when Rori asked if it was true that Jenna was his girlfriend. He'd just known if he didn't have Jenna to keep him strong enough not falter back to Rori, he'd be in trouble. All he'd done was nod to confirm Rori's suspicions, then he'd walked away before the devastation in her eyes swayed him.

Regretting his marriage to Jenna would never happen because he'd come to love her with all his heart. He just wished he hadn't been a coward. The least Rori deserved was to know

he was to blame eleven years ago. Not her.

Maybe there was still a chance to make amends.

THE SCENT OF gingerbread greeted Rori the instant she stepped into her apartment. Annmarie had been baking again.

The two of them swapped keys a few months ago. Since Rori's oven worked and she rarely used it, Annmarie had an open invitation to come in anytime to bake to her heart's content. As a trade, Rori could use Annmarie's *third*-hand washer and dryer whenever she needed to. Inevitably, Annmarie did Rori's laundry while she baked.

What Rori's apartment, and the rest of the apartments in the building, lacked in convenience it more than made up in affordability. Her apartment fit the description of a studio in every sense of the word. One large room comprised the whole thing, other than a tiny alcove some might call a kitchen and an even tinier bathroom.

Regardless of its size, it fulfilled Rori's needs perfectly. The former tenant had been a ballerina. The mirrors, the *barre* and the pine wood floor were already in place for Rori's use upon moving in. The building catered to wannabe entertainers, so the noise was expected and something that could be tuned out in time...even the opera singer above Rori.

Dropping her tote on the bare mattress, Rori walked over to one of the two giant

windows framing her modest dance studio. Snowflakes chased each other just beyond the glass.

Rori still chased old dreams herself. She couldn't get Nate out of her mind. After all he'd done to her, how could she think of putting her arms around him this morning? How could she consider his loneliness or his need for someone to hold him the way Andrea held and healed her?

Nate ripped her heart out with a jagged knife eleven years ago. Maybe time really healed wounds. Maybe Jenna's death or Andrea's presence closed the scars. The old pain didn't surface in those few minutes near her truck that morning.

No, she couldn't claim to have forgiven him. Too many questions remained to allow forgiveness. She just didn't want to spend the rest of her life hating someone. Hate required more energy than mere acceptance.

The glass was cold beneath her forehead, helping her to clear her mind. She'd promised Zak they'd go out and get a Christmas tree when she got back from Syracuse. She needed a workout before she went anywhere again. Her body ached from missing her daily exercise yesterday. She'd danced for a few hours every day since she left Brett. The need was in her bones now.

Dance lessons for her consisted of the classes she taught at a local school and the ballet ones she'd taken as a little girl. There she'd been the star of her "company," just like she was at Baby Dolls now. Despite being sidetracked with careers in music, choreography and modeling, dance was her passion first and foremost. Training and experience didn't get her the job at the club. Reputation and talent brought her that, but she harbored no illusions about how far she'd get in the world of classic dance.

After dressing in a cropped tank and French cut bottoms, she scraped her hair back into a scrunchie. Then she flipped through her music selections. Her taste in music branched out considerably since she was sweet sixteen. She listened to anything good.

Ridiculously, her love of classical and jazz music became a sore spot in her relationship with Brett. For some reason, he was convinced because his band DAY JOB had been hard rock, they couldn't listen to anything except that. Rori liked it too, but she couldn't see why she needed to defend herself for being open-minded.

Her choices were limited since she'd started her collection all over again. God knew what Brett was doing with her classical and jazz CD's, yet he'd refused to let her keep them when she left. Just more of his punishment, more annoying than hurtful that time.

She warmed up to Ravel. Her tension melted almost immediately. She wasn't in the

mood to go through the routine for her show tomorrow night, she decided long before she got through the series of stretches. She wanted to dance one for herself, one that Donnie—the club owner—would never allow her to perform at Baby Dolls.

She put Stevie Nicks' *Rock a little (Go ahead Lily)* in her bookshelf CD player, moving into an *allonge* pose, her arms raised over her head. The slow, sultry song suggested its own interpretation to Rori. Her upper body swayed, tight movements stemming from the balls in her shoulders and easing down through her waist and hips.

For the most part the dance was abstract combined with some loose ballet. Her arms lowered, then became her wings as her feet glided over the floor in turns, leaps, spins and pure flow.

Watching her dance once, Zak asked her if she was boneless. Rori remembered it so clearly because no one had ever captured so accurately how it felt to have the music claim her. She became weightless and each part of her body responded to the rhythm.

Friendships aside, most the girls at the club *couldn't* dance. Their skill stemmed from practiced seduction. The only requirements to being on the stage at Baby Dolls were plenty of hip gyration, breast job shaking and sensual masturbation.

Rori did more than that. She was a dancer, but stripping came naturally to her. She could

seduce an audience without getting involved personally. That part boiled down to performing her job. Her background and experience certainly provided the reasons she'd never experienced the rush of power the others did holding a roomful of men in the palm of her hand and becoming their ultimate fantasy. She knew men sold their soul for the woman behind the glass, but once she became real to them they made tracks like a jackrabbit. Men preferred the fantasy.

A spate of applause drowned out the fading music. Rori turned instinctively in that direction. Annmarie clapped from the bed with seven-year-old Zak on her lap. Tears ran down her friend's face.

They'd come in unnoticed by her. She'd left her door open, the way she usually did during the day. Besides, a helicopter could land in her apartment and she wouldn't notice during a dance.

She performed a *reverence* in gratitude of their lavish applause, then went to turn off the music.

"Guess I don't have to ask how it went with your father, since you're back early," Annmarie said, wiping her eyes.

Through the mirror, Rori watched her get up to take a sheet from the laundry basket on



the floor in front of the bed.

At twenty-three, Annmarie Flanders had lived twice the hell of anyone her age. She'd started life with an abusive father, got pregnant at sixteen when her first boyfriend raped her, then her father had beat her severely after she refused to abort her child. Annmarie ran away, eventually making her way from California to New York.

Zak came racing across the floor to Rori. He was small for his age and so sweet she'd fallen in love with him on sight over five months ago.

Lifting him into her arms, she covered his face with kisses, then hugged him close. Her fierce love for Zak was still a new emotion to her. She'd never loved anybody so purely before; no one ever returned her love unconditionally. To make Zak happy, to keep him safe, she'd do anything.

"Missed me, didn't ya?" he said confidently, pulling back to look her straight in the face. He tucked her hair behind her ears, the way he did when he wanted to make sure she told the truth. How could she ever lie to him? He was impossibly irresistible with his big blue eyes and missing front teeth.

"You better believe it, slugger."

She slid an arm under his little butt to support him easier. "Your mom's been cutting

your hair again."

His honey blond hair looked exactly like someone set a bowl over his head and cut around it. Knowing Annmarie, who saved a couple bucks any way she could, she'd done just that.

Zak grinned at her. It wouldn't matter if Annmarie completely botched the haircut—nothing could make him less adorable.

"You didn't have to do my laundry and you don't have to make my bed," Rori scolded Annmarie lightly, walking over to her bed with Zak in her arms.

Annmarie had been, subconsciously, paying Rori back since she'd gotten her a waitressing job at Baby Dolls five months ago. While it paid twice what the job she'd been working before did, making ends meet was still a struggle for Annmarie. Rori offered what she could to help her financially—since she had just herself to care for—but Annmarie only accepted legitimate gifts, like on birthdays and Christmas.

"I didn't know you were gonna be back today." Annmarie shrugged. "I was doing laundry anyway."

Annmarie was a born mother and homemaker. She loved all the things that came with both. Unfortunately she had no choice about working outside the home. She left Zak with

the sweet old widow at the end of the hall or with Rori if she had the night off. Annmarie worked all the overtime Donnie threw her way, meaning she had few nights off.

"Do you wanna go get a Christmas tree? There's plenty of time before you have to go to work."

Zak's loud and enthusiastic "Yeah!" made Rori laugh.

Both of them looked at Annmarie. "You heard the man," Rori said with a grin.

Annmarie ruffled her son's hair tenderly. "After all the work you put into those beautiful ornaments, how can I say no?"

Before Rori left for Syracuse, she bought Zak an assortment of construction paper, glue, markers, stickers and glitter to make decorations for the tree. The money saved came in second to Zak's love of creating.

"I can't wait to see what you made, slugger, but let me take a quick shower before we go." She kissed his nose before letting him down. Bursting with the Christmas spirit, he bopped out of the apartment behind his mother.

Rori's only experience with the Christmas spirit had come the year she met Brett. The band wasn't touring yet, so they'd spent a quiet Christmas just the two of them. Since Brett invited his friends to everything, *everything*, the fact that he'd wanted to spend time alone

with her meant a lot of Rori. They'd put up a tree, gone shopping to get each other a ton of presents. A romantic dinner led to lovemaking. Despite the differences in their ages, Brett never seemed, or came off, like an older man. In the beginning, he was the close, caring friend she needed him to be desperately. A few months later, he'd taken her virginity. Things changed between them. His true nature started to show. But that Christmas, the way he cared about her and tried to make her happy was special to her. It made sex emotionally satisfying, if nothing else.

Before Brett, Christmas qualified as just another ordinary day. Her father didn't celebrate the holiday. Nate invited her over for the season often, but with his mother glowering at her the whole time Rori had been torn between laughing and fleeing the whole time. She'd spent some holidays with the Radcliffes, but she and Jace ended up getting bored and cutting early every time, to smoke a cigarette or fool around.

Christmas would be different this year with Annmarie and Zak. Working through the holiday was a given. But her free time would be spent with the two people who'd become her family.

Her shower took only minutes. She didn't get her hair wet and she'd learned to make it snappy with the fickle pipes of torture that delivered her water.

She threw on a pair of old jeans and a cable midriff sweater. By the time she sat down to pull on her boots, Zak was yelling for her to hurry up. Rori smiled...and hurried.

Zak raced ahead of them, down the three flights and out to the parking lot. They hopped in her truck. Annmarie, understandably, considered a vehicle unnecessary luxury. She caught a ride to work with Rori whenever they shared coinciding schedules. When they didn't have like schedules, Annmarie walked the handful of blocks to Baby Dolls.

Once they arrived at a Christmas tree seller, Rori gave Zak free rein to pick out any tree that looked best to him.

Thank God the apartments boasted high ceilings. After meandering between the aisles of trees, looking each tree over carefully for flaws, Zak picked out the tallest, fullest tree left on the lot.

Getting it into the bed of her truck was no small feat, even with Zak's expert directions: "Careful! The angel's gotta go there!"

"Mom, you broke a branch! A branch saved is a branch decorated, you know."

"Snap it up, chickies! Places to go, trees to put up."

Rori and Annmarie switched places. Rori got up into the bed, grabbing onto the tree trunk to yank it up. The front got jammed on something. Pushing forward, pulling back in

an effort to free it, Rori ended up flat on her butt when it eventually gave.

"How're we gonna get this up to the third floor?" Annmarie muttered, putting the tip of her tongue between her teeth. "Cuz I wouldn't take that elevator if my life depended on it."

"What's the hold-up, chickies?" Zak demanded, sounding more like a munchkin than a rough and tough foreman. He couldn't even see over the gate of her truck.

Rori started laughing, hauling herself to her feet. They'd get this into Annmarie's apartment if it took all night. They'd do it for Zak.

The top hung over the tailgate even after the tree trunk reached the cab. Rori tied it down the best she could, looping it from one side of the bed to the other, then binding the trunk of the tree against the cab. Zak watched her progress from the back window inside, his eyes filled with excitement.

The seller asked her if she'd make it home, and she told him to cross his fingers as she jumped out of the back of the truck from the side. Annmarie was buckling Zak securely in the middle when Rori opened the door and slid inside.

"Think you made enough ornaments for that giant, slugger?"

Zak rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I may have to make a few more."

"I could give you a hand."

She started the truck, backing out carefully from their parking space. The tree seemed secure. The seller gave her a thumbs up.

"OK, but I have a theme in mind. There's a few rules."

Rori glanced at Annmarie to see her trying to conceal her smile.

"Whatever you say, boss."

Zak grinned up at her, hugging her from the side. "Thanks for getting' me a tree, Rori."

Lifting her arm, she put it around him, rubbing the top of his silky head. The soft yet fierce love in her heart assured her she'd have paid a million dollars for the tree if it meant making Zak happy.

"Thanks for lettin' me have it, mom." Zak hugged Annmarie, and she used her free hand to squeeze Rori's shoulder in gratitude.

The two of them looked so beautiful together. It made no difference that Zak looked nothing like his brown-eyed, curly-haired brunette mother.

Glancing at the two of them made Rori think of Nate and his little girl. The memory created a lonely ache inside of her.

Brett once asked her what she thought of kids. By that time, Rori sensed his traps a mile away; he'd wanted her to answer *Yes, someday*.

If anyone in the world shouldn't produce offspring, Brett Foxx was that person. He couldn't stand the sound of a baby crying or the noise that came naturally from two kids playing together. All of it drove him nuts. The time he dragged her out of a restaurant in the middle of a meal (without paying) because a kid somewhere in the place wouldn't stop crying was all the proof she needed why he shouldn't conceive with any woman.

Rori lied to him when he asked if she wanted kids, telling him she didn't think about it; she wasn't the type. A lot of people would agree Rori wasn't the type to be good with kids. Mrs. Jovanovich would be the first in line to declare it. Regardless, Rori had ached for her own baby most of her life. The past few years only increased the volume on her biological clock. Especially witnessing the unconditional love between Annmarie and Zak.

The worst part of Rori's ache came down to accepting she'd never have anything like they shared.

In the parking lot of their building, they got out to start their trek inside. Rori leaped inside the bed to untie the rope. Hearing a truck pull up nearby, she glanced toward Annmarie. Based on her friend's expression, Rori didn't need to confirm his vehicle parking next to hers to know it was Wayne Kominski.

Other than Annmarie and the older lady who babysat Zak, Wayne was the only tenant in



the building who harbored no dreams of grandeur. He was a simple construction foreman who had no family...but had a major crush on Annmarie. Burly, a little bit shy, Wayne was one of the last good men.

At the moment, Wayne suffered for a fatal error committed two months earlier. He'd asked Annmarie out.

Rori felt sorry for him, sure it'd taken him months just to get his courage up to ask—only to be shot down without mercy. Annmarie's wariness of any and all men stemmed from her past but didn't stop Rori from thinking the two of them would make a good couple. Wayne would take care of Annmarie and really love her. Plus, he was a natural with Zak. Certainly didn't hurt that Zak was crazy about him too.

Rori never mentioned any of those thoughts to her friend. How could she lecture anyone about trusting men? She didn't trust even one of that sex either. To Rori, the idea of getting involved again equated bringing home a client from Baby Dolls. She'd made a vow to herself after she left Brett—she'd be independent and strong and she'd do it all without a man.

"Need some help there, ladies?" Wayne asked, coming around his truck to view the tree. Zak craned his head way back to view him. "Rori got us a BIG tree, Wayne."

"Sure looks like it." He ruffled Zak's hair, grinning at him like the boy was his own.

Rori and Annmarie spoke at the same time. "Sure. Just up to the third floor—"

"We're doing just fine on our own—"

After months of Annmarie's rebuffs, Wayne learned quickly how to tune them out. God knew she'd given him all the incentive in the world to avoid her, yet he refused to give up. Rori admired his tenacity every time he was in the same place as Annmarie.

"I sure hope you're not planning to take it up in that elevator. I could get it running for you, but it might be easier just to grab an end."

The humor in the situation wasn't lost on Rori. Wayne stepped forward to relieve Annmarie of her half of the burden. Predictably, she shook her head. "I've got it."

Rori picked up the tree trunk, walking it forward with Annmarie's help, then handed her end to Wayne. Smiling despite Annmarie's glare, she vaulted down to close the tailgate of her truck. Holding hands and grinning at each other, she and Zak followed the two of them into the building and up the stairs. Wayne made every effort to keep up with Annmarie's breakneck pace. Annmarie's pace was no doubt a product of her anger and a demonstration of his patience. She was obviously testing him. Of course her fury increased when Wayne managed to keep up with her.

As the two of them attempted to fit the spruce through Annmarie's door, Rori went to get the tree stand she'd bought before she left for Syracuse Thursday morning. Zak's moans were audible from the hall every time a branch snapped or bent.

"You know how to get this thing set up in that stand?" Wayne asked, setting his end down in Annmarie's living room/dining room/bedroom.

Rori watched Annmarie's mouth tighten in refusal...or panic. "We'll figure it out," Annmarie assured him haughtily.

"It's a little tricky. You might need an extra pair of hands for a tree this size." Wayne shoved his hands in the pockets of his worn jeans, endearing Rori if not the woman he wanted to endear himself to.

Playing Cupid wasn't her game though. The last thing Rori wanted to do was screw around with an unwieldy tree and a stand she had no experience with attaching to the trunk. She handed the new box over to Wayne. Annmarie stalked out of the room grimacing.

Within fifteen minutes, Wayne had the tree in the stand with a little help from Rori. Zak watched the process closely, an expression of awe on his little face. The tree filled the tiny apartment, crowding it but adding the scent and atmosphere of Christmas.

"Mom baked gingerbread men today. Want one I decorated?" Zak said, glancing up at

Wayne.

Zak was a smart kid, Rori had figured out within five minutes of meeting him. In his own way, he sensed that, because the tree was up, the reason for Wayne to stay was over too.

Annmarie stood in the kitchen archway, keeping her distance from the man taking up space in her crowded apartment with his big, muscular shoulders. Zak's offer couldn't have pleased her, but she probably figured a few cookies was a much easier trade than inviting Wayne to dinner for helping with the tree. She brought a plate of cookies and a jug of milk out to the table in the living room, then went back into the kitchen.

Rori poured milk into plastic cups. Zak bit the head off one of the gingerbread men after giving Wayne one he'd decorated.

"So you working over Christmas?" Wayne asked Rori.

Wayne knew where she worked and what she did there. He'd come in a handful of times, but Rori realized he wasn't interested in the dancers. He came to see Annmarie and to leave her big tips. That extra money was too much of an incentive for Annmarie to ask one of the other waitresses to take his table for her.

"Yeah. Lot of lonely men on Christmas," she said with a you-know-how-it-is grin.

Wayne would be lonely on Christmas, without family or even a girlfriend. His only company was a 200-pound Saint Bernard with the uncharacteristic name of Killer.

Sipping milk, Rori wondered what Brett would do for Christmas. God knew he'd never lacked for companionship, female or otherwise. Rori learned the hard way to never leave him alone for more than an hour if she wanted to be the only woman in his life. But she knew he would have cheated on her even if she kept him company twenty-four hours a day.

What would Nate do? Would he spend Christmas with his family or did he have to lead the church service in Niagara Falls?

Considering his little girl's age, the truth struck Rori like a blow. Jenna must have died about a month before Christmas last year. God, Nate's hell then, alone with a newborn baby, had to be intolerable. Her heart ached for him. She remembered the lonely silhouette against the window shade at his parents' home.

One more thing that wouldn't allow her to continue hating him. Nate more than paid for his sins against her. He'd paid a price she'd never wanted of him. But, since seeing him ever again was unlikely, she couldn't tell him none of it mattered anymore...

Thinking the past didn't matter was a lie. It mattered because wounds were still open,

questions went unanswered, uncertainties multiplied like rabbits. Nate hurt her eleven years ago, only a short time after he'd made all her dreams come true. A lifetime ago, yet she was still raw over the contradiction.

Wayne ate a few cookies and finished his milk before Annmarie conceded him the thank-you that meant more to him than material gratitude. Zak begged him to stay, but Wayne knew when to hold and fold for the moment.

"God, I'm mean to him," Annmarie said shaking her head in self-disgust as the sound of his boots in the hall faded. "It's like a reflex or something. He's male and therefore the enemy..." She shook her head again. Apparently her logic and her actions baffled even herself.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Annmarie murmured, "Well, you understand. You've had your share of creeps too. It gets to be easier to lump them all in the same category just so you'll be safe."

Zak listened to his mother as he chewed the last mouthful of his cookie. At this point in his life, he had no idea he'd grow up to be in the category Annmarie referred to. He was in a category by himself as far as he was concerned.

Annmarie glanced at Rori again. "Well, you're staying for dinner, no arguments."

"No arguments." Rori lifted a peace-guided hand. "I'll be right back."

She went across the hall to her apartment to get the string of Christmas lights she'd bought along with the tree stand. Annmarie would balk even if Rori admitted they cost less than three bucks.

Easing the surprise out of the closet where she kept her Christmas presents for her friends, she decided to take the string of lights out of the box. Maybe Annmarie would believe they weren't brand new then.

When she returned to Annmarie's apartment, she said, "I'm just loaning these to you."

Zak wiped his face hurriedly with the washcloth his mother handed him, then raced over to watch Rori put the lights on the tree. The string was the longest she could buy, yet a lot of unlit areas remained on the tree. The three of them hooked Zak's precious ornaments on the branches together with paper clips while listening to Christmas carols on the radio.

Viewing the tree when all the decorations were in place, Zak decided they needed two more ornaments. He and Rori went to work making them while Annmarie prepared meatloaf for dinner, taking it over to Rori's apartment for baking.

Together, they put their creations on the tree, then stood back to view the majesty.

"It's the coolest tree on the face of the earth, slugger. I don't know how you're gonna

outdo yourself next year."

Zak snapped his fingers, shaking his wrist. "Gotta move with the times, chickie. Next year this'll look stupid."

His favorite phrase, accompanied by the snap and shake, always made Rori laugh. She assured him "Never. This'll always be special."

They ate dinner an hour later, washed the dishes together, then Annmarie went to get ready for work.

Zak sat in front of the tree, looking tiny as a bunny next to the giant spruce. His contentedness rivaled that of a kid immersed in Saturday morning cartoons, something he only got to watch if the widow down the hall babysat him. Annmarie and Rori didn't have TV's.

Annmarie came out of the bathroom dressed in her pink uniform. "Can I ask you something?" she said to Rori, motioning with her head toward the kitchen. She turned up the radio before following Rori to the cramped alcove.

"What's up?"

The way she shrugged into her black trenchcoat, avoiding her eyes, told Rori she had more in mind than babysitting rules.



"This isn't new. I mean, I've been thinking about it for a couple months, but to you it'll seem out of the blue."

"OK," Rori said carefully, trying not to reveal the impatience she felt. She hated surprises. Bad news—as this surely would be, based on Annmarie's reluctance—became worse news when a person dragged it out in some misguided attempt to soften the blow.

"I drew up a will. Had it drawn up. It's all ready to go except I need to have it signed and notarized."

Rori's heart stopped for a second. Why would Annmarie draw up a will, something that had to be incredibly expensive? Rori stepped closer, grabbing hold of her shoulders. "What's wrong?" she demanded in a harsh whisper. "Have you seen a doctor? Is it terminal? I've got mon—"

"No, you're going off the deep end. I knew I was gonna screw this up." Annmarie shook her head. "Nothing's wrong with me. I just want to put you down as Zak's guardian if something should ever happen to me."

In hindsight, Annmarie's point in telling her about the will was a huge relief. But, at the same time, her request had its own impact on Rori.

Zak's guardian. God forbid anything ever happened to Annmarie, but *guardian*. She

loved Zak to pieces, no doubt about it. What did she know about taking care of a child full-time? How could she make ends meet? How could she respect herself and her reasons for what she did for a living then? It'd no longer be a matter of doing what she had to to survive independent of Brett.

"I know I'm asking a lot of you. But I can't take chances with him. He deserves the best, somebody who treats him like the miracle he is." Annmarie's tone forced Rori to face her. "You love him like he's your own. I'm not just imagining that, am I?"

Annmarie was the best friend Rori could ever claim. They understood each other on a level that transcended the short time they'd known each other, transcended neighborliness. From the minute Zak—the cute kid Rori saw in the hall often—introduced them, they'd seemed to know each other inside and out. No surprise Annmarie sensed the depth of Rori's feelings for her little boy.

Rori shook her head, anxious at the expression of extreme hope and relief that crossed Annmarie's face. "You're the only person I can trust him to. We'll never need to put the will into effect, I'm sure, but I'd feel better knowing it's there. Tell me you agree, you'll be his guardian."

The bottom line was Rori would step in even without the will if anything happened to

Annmarie. She just wouldn't have considered it this soon. The idea of letting Zak be tossed into a ring of sharks would have her holding onto him like SuperGlue.

Slipping her arms around Annmarie's shoulders, Rori hugged her close. "Nothing's gonna happen to you, babe, but I'm always here for you. And I'll always be there for slugger."

"Thanks, Rori." Annmarie returned the hug fiercely. Though they weren't facing each other, Rori knew she was crying.

"Promise me you're OK."

Annmarie laughed a little, pulling back. A line of tears tracked down both of her cheeks. She rubbed them away. "I promise. Stack of Bible's I'm fit as a fiddle."

"Mom, what's a fiddle?" Zak called from his position in front of the tree. He sat up now, his legs crossed pretzel-style.

Despite the volume of the radio, nothing was wrong with his hearing. Annmarie moved over to him, scooping him off the floor and into her arms. "It's an instrument, like a violin. It's the healthiest instrument."

Rori watched Zak tuck his mother's hair behind her ears. Annmarie could never lie to him when he did that either. She had to be telling the truth about her health. "I'm glad.

Nothing worse than a sick fiddle," Zak said.

Annmarie laughed, squeezing him close and kissing him. "You be good for Rori, sweetie. I'll miss you."

"I love you, mom."

"I love you too."

After another hug, she let him down. Rori and Zak followed her to the door.

They watched until Annmarie disappeared down the stairs with a final wave.

Understanding the adjustment it was for him to have his mother leave, even temporarily, Rori gave him a hug before closing the door.

It'd take a little while for her to come to terms with the way Annmarie left this time too.

## Chapter Four

"EVEN SECOND semester honor students are entitled to Christmas vacation, you know," Nate teased when he saw the jumble of textbooks and magazines on the kitchen table.

Jeremiah glanced up from the jumble. "Not if they wanna keep a 4.0 average."

Since starting SUNY at Buffalo, Jeremiah had needlessly proven over and over that the high school dropout and former gang leader could be a success. Nate never doubted it.

Moving over to the desk nook, Nate retrieved the telephone directory. He'd returned from Syracuse that morning in order to do the Sunday service for the church he pastored. Monday he, Andrea and Jeremiah would head back to Syracuse for Christmas with his parents.

Jeremiah cleared a space for him at the table, and Nate sat with the phone book

Jeremiah had headed up the first street gang Nate infiltrated. Fresh out of seminary and pastoring a small church in Niagara Falls, Nate had gone into the heart of the gang armed with indestructible conviction. The River Raptors had been as curious as they'd been wary of the intentions of a "man of God." Once in the inner sanctum, he'd met the reputed

soulless leader Bullfrog. He'd talked to him and his followers for over an hour, answered their questions, then left them with his business card. Bullfrog had been the first to call, and they met alone in Nate's office. That day he'd met a frightened, seventeen-year-old kid who'd been on his own since his mother died and his father abandoned him. A kid who'd already seen too much and done too much.

More so than any of the gang members he'd talked with since, Nate felt a connection to Jeremiah "Bullfrog" Lansky. He and Jenna took him into their home, became his legal guardians and loved him like a son. Jeremiah decided on his own to go to college, into a profession similar to Nate's—psychology.

"You're not bringing any work, extra or otherwise, to Syracuse," Nate said, feigning severity.

"No. I'm not." The nineteen-year-old gave him a half grin that'd probably caused countless females to swoon. Danger used to hang in the air around him and permeate even his dark good looks. He was tall, muscular and moved like an animal toward prey. The only thing that changed about him physically was the openness of his expression. That soulless, streetwise mask had come off in Nate's office that day long ago and never returned, thank God.

Nate nodded, assured Jeremiah would leave his Type A personality home, at least for the holiday. Then he opened the phone book only to realize he didn't have a clue how to find what he was looking for...short of calling information. He grinned to himself. *Somehow I'd rather figure it out on my own.*

Jeremiah got up to get something from the fridge, and Nate skimmed the directory index until he located the entry he wanted. Flipping to the yellow pages, he ran his finger down the entries. Exercise equipment, exercise and fitness programs...

"Thinking of joining a health club?" Jeremiah asked over his shoulder, startling him. His reaction stemmed purely from concentration. He had nothing to hide, especially from Jeremiah, and he was doing nothing to be ashamed of.

Shaking his head, he turned the page and found what he sought. Under Exotic dancers, Baby Dolls was the first entry. The entire advertisement at the bottom of the page was devoted to the club. "Hottest dance club in the country!" it boasted. "Everything comes off, every night! Guaranteed headline act that has to be seen to be believed!"

Nate located a pen and scrap of paper to jot down the Buffalo address. "Actually, I'm going to Baby Dolls to see an old friend tonight."

Jeremiah walked around the table to face him. "*Baby Dolls?* Baby Dolls as in

"Everything comes off every night"?"

Hearing the underlying bedeviling, Nate turned it back on him. "Have *you* ever been there?"

Jeremiah laughed in disbelief. "\$25 cover charge and a hundred percent inflation on drinks—no way. The strippers are like celebrities over there, so we figured they were off-limits anyway."

Nate understood the "we" meant the River Raptors. He didn't understand what Jeremiah meant by "off-limits" though. When he asked, the streetwise kid who'd lived—if not in *the* world—then in *a* world like Rori's told him: "In the cheaper skin palaces, a couple bucks'll cop you a feel or a friction dance. In the real low down ones, a couple hundred can get you the whole package. At Baby Dolls, a single throwdown goes for a couple grand."

Any amusement he'd felt dissipated as Nate stared at Jeremiah. "*Throwdown?*" "You don't mean prostitution?"

Barely inclining his head, Jeremiah went on, "Nobody'll admit it, of course, especially a "respectable" place like Baby Dolls, but it's there too, underground just like the others."

For a long minute, Nate sat there contemplating what he'd heard. Only now could he admit his mind went to work "softening" what Rori revealed in Syracuse. There was a



difference between teasing a customer and resorting to prostitution. A fine line made the difference, but it was there nevertheless. What was he getting himself in to? And why did he already know he wouldn't change his mind about going?

"So is your friend a waitress or a baby doll?" Jeremiah teased once more, his eyebrow raised suggestively.

"She says she's a stripper." *But you know she likes to shock you.* Nate closed the phone book, again recognizing his mind already at work tempering the jagged edge of Rori's lifestyle.

"You just might shock your congregation into a heart attack with this mission."

Nate managed a chuckle, though his congregation wouldn't need to know about this. A lot of the church members warned him of the danger in penetrating the so-called "dens of iniquity." They worried about him. Maybe there was danger involved, but in Nate's opinion the end result justified the risk every time.

"Rori's not my mission," he said carefully, getting up to return the directory to the desk. "She's someone I cared about and hurt when we were younger."

"And you wanna make amends?"

What *did* he want? What was his plan, other than going to her place of employment to

find her? "I don't know," Nate admitted, leaning back against the rounded edge of the desk in order to face Jeremiah. About the only thing clear in his mind was that he couldn't let Rori disappear from his life again. He couldn't let her run away from him. This time he'd go after her; he'd follow her and no one would talk him out of it.

"She was my first love," he said out loud and in response to his thoughts. He watched Jeremiah's eyes widen.

"I thought Jenna was your first love. You married her right out of high school."

*Funny how things work out.* Funny or just sad because explaining with "I did marry her and I did love her, but it was Rori first" was much too simple for the reality of what happened.

"So what's gonna happen if you show up at Baby Dolls? Think she'll wanna see you?"

Nate couldn't help laughing as he shook his head. He couldn't say for sure what would happen, but he had a pretty good idea. "She won't like it, I'll say that much."

Nate could practically see the psychiatrist-in-the-works mind analyzing the situation. "Can't imagine anybody hating you," Jeremiah said finally.

"I don't know if she hates me. She just thinks I'm...self-righteous." *Nice save. But not exactly one of the choice words she used, is it?*

Nate had spent a lot of years telling himself Rori didn't hate him. That she hadn't been permanently scarred by the choices he'd made. She'd run away for her own reasons—reasons that had nothing to do with him.

"She doesn't know you then," Jeremiah said suddenly and forcefully, driving Nate out of his thoughts. "You never go in preaching like you're the saint out to save every sinner. I'll never forget when you told me not to "become" anybody else but who I was. That God made me unique and He wants me to stay that way. If you were self-righteous, you would've said I was on my way to hell until I conformed to "Christian" standards."

The only part Nate applied to himself was that Rori didn't know him. He wasn't the same person who'd believed his attraction to Rori was wrong, who'd run from it telling himself it came down to a choice between Rori and God, who'd allowed his mentor to convince him he and Rori were better off apart. He'd mellowed, wised-up. But maybe that wouldn't make any difference. God knew Rori had no reason to accept amends from him.

Even knowing that walking into Baby Dolls tonight would put Rori on the defensive, Nate had made up his mind to go, come heaven or hell.

"WHAT DO YOU have when you've got two green balls in your hand?"

Rori shook her head, and Donnie leaned over the bar toward her again so she could hear clearly over the throbbing music. "Kermit's undivided attention."

This time Rori couldn't help laughing in spite of herself. After rolling her eyes and groaning through a half dozen of Donnie's abysmal source of tasteless jokes, she usually ended up laughing at some of the sillier ones.

Relaxing before her show wasn't easy. From the beginning, it'd been Donnie's jokes that got her over her nervousness, enough to make it to the stage. Nearly all the dancers had their own psyching techniques: music, exercise, drugs, liquor, meditation. One of them, Gina, even had her boyfriend come in every night, just before her show, so they could have sex.

"OK, here's one: What's the difference between like and love?"

"I don't know. What?" Rori said warily.

"Spit or swallow."

Donnie laughed, and she groaned. That one was a bit too much like Brett's tired favorite—What do you call a woman with PMS and ESP? A know-it-all bitch.

Donnie was good looking, charming and absolute poison to the dancers he employed. One too many of them had succumbed to his dime-a-dozen lines promising the moon.

He'd come on to Rori relentlessly when she first took the job, and she considered herself one of the few to convince him she truly wasn't interested in him. She found little difference between him and Brett; she wasn't about to make the mistake of needing love and taking what she could get again.

Courtney made her way through the "dancer's private ring" at the end of the protracted bar and behind the gate to Donnie. He put his arm around her.

"Telling more of your vulgar jokes?" the redhead guessed. She wore a silk robe over her costume just as the other dancers waiting for their time slot did. Rori could see she'd just come from having her hair and make-up done by the professional staff.

The twenty-one-year-old college student started working at the club only a couple months after Rori. The money she made was helping her through college—something Rori was sure her parents wouldn't be too thrilled about if they found out. Donnie had zeroed in on the kid right away, and, finally, in her naiveté Courtney surrendered.

Seeing the innocence in her, Rori befriended her immediately, but no amount of experience could talk Courtney out of, first, working here, and, second, falling in love with the King of the Uncommitted. Nevertheless, Courtney looked up to Rori because her dancing had more classic overtones than any of the other strippers. She took Rori's classes

at the Julius Dance School every Thursday too.

When Donnie kissed Courtney, Rori had to look away. The man was almost fifteen years older than her—so OK, the fact that he had few morals came as no shock—but God! the kid wore her heart on her sleeve. Couldn't he see that and let her go while there was a chance she'd get over it fairly easy?

Gina's boyfriend appeared out of the crowd of men surrounding the dancer's ring trying to get autographs on the Baby Dolls calendar or publicity booklets. As one of the bouncers let him through, he gave a salute to the dancers. "Good evening, fine ladies. Sex Slave reporting for duty. Where's my geisha Gina?"

Lighting a cigarette, Rori couldn't help her smile. None of the people she'd met through the club were typical.

"She's in the dressing room, waiting," Courtney told him with a giggle and a return salute.

"I am on the job! You suppose I deserve a cut for warming up one of your dancers, Don my man?"

Donnie held up a hand in defense. "I don't get involved in any of that stuff. I could lose my license."

True, Donnie didn't get involved, but he knew all about the seamier stuff that went on at the fringes of his business. Rori had been let in on the "perks" of the job her first day. Back alley prostitution went for \$3000 a throwdown. She still remembered the tone of voice used to tell her—like it made them special to be worth so much. Even though the novelty of her own body wore off long, long ago, she refused to sell herself right down to body, heart and soul. She needed self-respect, however meager the amount.

One of the crowd vied for her attention, extending her the exclusive Baby Doll calendar open to June. As she signed her spread, he asked, "Can I buy you a drink after your show, Rori?"

She glanced at him. Most of Baby Doll's clients were three-piece suits on the outside. Not that it made them any more civilized than the other patrons. This guy looked like a good old boy, complete with a blue collar job and lonely nights. He was moderately good looking, sporting blue eyes and dark hair that didn't seem to know whether to cower or rise up and declare mutiny.

"Sorry, Blue Eyes—against the rules." She returned the calendar with a propitiating smile.

When she turned back to the bar, she had butterflies in her stomach. After six months,

the thought of getting up there shouldn't have made her so uptight. But it did.

Annmarie came down to her end of the bar. She was dressed in the required pink and black lace waitress uniform. Tendrils of dark hair framed her face, but the length was caught up at the back of her neck. All the other waitresses looked as trashy as French maids in the uniform. Annmarie somehow managed absolute propriety.

"How you doing?" Rori asked. Instead of sleeping all morning, Annmarie got up after only a couple hours sleep to spend time with Zak, since neither she nor Rori could be with him tonight. He was with the widow at the end of the hall.

Annmarie shrugged, denying her worry. She trusted the widow completely, but she was too old to play actively with Zak. The two of them usually watched TV until he fell asleep. "How 'bout you?"

Rori laughed a little. "Hey, it's a living. We do what we can, right?"

One of the bartenders yelled something at Annmarie. She patted Rori's hand, then got back to work.

Glancing out at the crowd, Rori told herself she'd be fine. The clients always got anxious around ten. She didn't go on for almost an hour. By then, the music would seem louder, the smoke would be thicker, the men would lose any manners the civilized world had taught



them... Nothing to get jumpy about. After all, she was a professional.  
Taking a deep breath, she glanced at Donnie. "Tell me another joke."

## Chapter Five

A THICK FOG of smoke greeted Nate as he entered Baby Dolls a little after ten p.m. His eyes stung, even behind his glasses, contending with music so raucous to the ear...he actually felt a moment of familiarity. Each time he met with gang members as a whole rather than individually, they'd tried to intimidate with the commonly accepted "sins." They seemed to think all preachers kept a list of deadly sins tucked into their Bibles for quick reference.

Nate didn't preach against sin, though he made no bones about the fact that it was alive and well. But no soul had ever been lost on account of smoking, personal choice in music, or even a profession. The only thing Nate preached was Christ.

However, he reminded himself almost carelessly, he wasn't here to preach anything. He was here for Rori.

"With calendar, \$30," the large man standing outside an archway said in a monotone.

Nate gave him \$30. Jeremiah had tipped him that Rori probably wouldn't go on until after ten. She was something of a celebrity and that gave her clout. And supposedly a customer's hold on his wallet loosened the more alcohol and stimulation he absorbed.

"Hey," the guy at the door called just as Nate was about to duck through the beaded curtain fringing the archway. He tossed a calendar from the stack by the entry. Nate caught it awkwardly. "Ya paid for it, buddy. Might as well take it."

As he entered the club, Nate glanced at the full-size calendar. The cover was a cartoon depiction of an overly voluptuous nude woman. *Official Baby Doll Calendar--not sold anywhere else!* was scrawled at the bottom. Nate rolled it in his hand, then made his way through the seated but enervated crowd. He found a small table in the back, where the shadows accumulated. He started to remove his overcoat, but decided not to despite the warmth of the room.

A waitress eased through the tables, stopping at his once he sat. She was dressed the way most waitresses did, with her dark hair pinned up. "What can I get you?"

"Oh. A diet soda. Whatever you have." Before she could disappear into the crowd again, he asked, "Rori Mason works here, doesn't she?"

"She's the headline act." The waitress' tone bordered on suspicion.

"Will she perform tonight?"

"At 10:45, as usual."

The curly-haired waitress gazed at him with the same expression she might finding a

peppercorn in her soup more resembled a bug.

"I'm an old acquaintance of hers."

"Uh-huh."

She didn't believe him obviously. Nate watched her walk away, aware now that in a place like this security would have to be top notch. A person who walked a tightrope, the way Rori did dancing here, had to expect a few lunatics to step out on the wire after them.

For a minute, Nate considered Rori's situation in another light. A lot of these men would assume they could take liberties simply because the dancers teased them sexually. And something like that lacked fulfillment. Had men done that to her? Why would she put herself in this situation? Certainly endless alternatives existed for her.

The waitress returned with his drink, took his money and left again. A man had taken the stage, roaring into a microphone to announce the "licentious Gina Grace."

Silence pervaded the room for an instance as the man left the stage. Loud music began, the crowd cheered, and a woman dressed in leather appeared in the spotlight. She was undeniably attractive, in an exorbitant way that didn't appeal to Nate.

She danced, and he found himself more interested in the audience. Most of the men were...well, not what he would have anticipated, if Jeremiah hadn't given him some

prospective on Baby Dolls' clientele. These men were well dressed, well groomed, obviously well off. Yet something about this woman stripped them of refinement. Their reactions, as she undressed, verged on barbaric. The more she revealed, the more crude her movements became, the more primitive the audience got.

Nate told himself his distaste stemmed from what he was used to. Jenna had been sweet, shy, fully responsive about making love. She seduced him in subtle ways--the scent of her perfume, a look in her eyes, the graceful way she moved. She'd never had to go out of her way to seduce him...although he would have been receptive to her. Their lovemaking had been both romantic and, at times, reckless. Always, they came together in love. This display had nothing to do with love and that turned him off completely.

Nate watched the nude woman swinging on a pole for only an instant before he had to turn away. Whatever this was, it required little talent and absolutely no self-respect. He would respect the dancer by *not* watching her sad exhibition.

*Rori, why do you and these women think so little of yourselves? Who made you feel you don't deserve more? More self-respect, more than this empty, so-called love from these uncaring men?*

The world she lived in made no sense to Nate. He didn't want to see her emerge in the

spotlight and throw off her dignity as if it was worth no more than a couple pennies. Unfortunately, getting to her would be impossible once she got on stage. Too many guards stood around. If there was any way he could talk to her, talk her out of it before she went on, he would.

Instead of viewing the rest of Gina's show, he unrolled the calendar. The monthly photographs varied from complete nudes to near misses...until he got to June. Rori's photo was simple and subtle. She wore oversized overalls, her back against a wall. The only sexual hint came from a teasing glimpse of an undercurve of full breast, a peak of nipple and from her natural sensuality. Her purposely mussed, glorious hair framed her beautiful face spilling over her golden shoulders. A strand of her hair was caught in her lipstick. The photo was extremely arousing because it was somehow delicate instead of cheap.

*You think men like you because you're sexy. So you have no idea just how beautiful you are. How can you not know it isn't only skin-deep?*

Nate traced the curve of her cheek in the photograph, shaking his head. It was clear to him that few people had treated her fairly since she'd left home at sixteen. Life had taught her false lessons, given her too many scars to see herself correctly.

He wondered if her father made her feel worthless. Was that why she'd run away? The

man was a saint in many eyes, including—at one time—Nate's, but he'd always worried about his lack of warmth for his only child. If she'd lived up to all the rumors of her youth—drugs, sex and sundry other dirty deeds, (most, no doubt, spread by his mother) he could sympathize with Pastor Mason's frustration raising her. But Rori, wild yes, had sought outside for what she hadn't been given inside. Her father pushed her away, however blindly. Rori did everything short of beg him on her knees to love her, to pay attention to her.

*But you know her father isn't the only one who hurt her.*

The heat in the room was all-consuming, and Nate drank from his glass in an attempt to cool off. He shouldn't be here. His reasons escaped him. Convictions as strong as the ones that led him to enter dangerous gang turf had brought him, but now...now he had doubts.

Amends? Had he come to make amends? Rori wouldn't give him the chance, and she had no obligation to.

Another dancer took the stage, but Nate scanned the smoky room instead of watching. The dim lighting prevented him from recognizing anyone.

How would Rori react to his presence in her world? They'd parted yesterday, if not amicably then cordially. Nate suspected that partly had to do with Andrea and partly had to

do with Rori's belief she'd never see him again. Would her shock make her defensive? Or embarrassed enough to allow him to explain? Jeremiah seemed to think "getting her where she was at" was a good thing. Nate wasn't so sure this time.

Ten minutes before Rori was scheduled to go on, he had to take his coat off. The combination of a room full of fired-up customers and his own recriminations made the heat unbearable. His heart thudded against his chest. Telling himself it was the lack of oxygen didn't explain why he was on full-body alert when the announcer introduced "the sweet, the sexy, the spellbinding and rare Rori Mason."

A soft red spotlight bathed a figure completely clothed in a hooded robe before slow, sultry music pulsed around her. This robe was gauzy, giving a hint of the shadowed curves beneath. When Rori lifted her head, the crowd seemed to explode with anticipation as well as the thrill of discovering it was indeed Rori.

*An angel*, Nate thought with a lump in his throat, just before she started moving and the robe was shed very slowly to reveal a white satin costume. Her bare arms and legs were as silky as warm caramel. Nate found himself caught up in her beauty, the sheer poetry of her body flowing to the hypnotic beat of music. The room seemed hushed at her grace, sharing Nate's feeling. Hushed until she peeled her costume off, one little bit at a time.



He couldn't look away. How many times as a teenager had he imagined what Rori would look like naked? How satiny her skin, her breasts would feel in his hands? How she would respond to his touch, how she would *taste*?

No, he hadn't imagined making love to her romantically. He'd imagined both of them wild and free of fear. He'd imagined her undressing in front of him, just like this, slow torture that would push him past reason. Except in those fantasies, Rori never looked away from him. She didn't meet anyone's eyes now, yet managed to seduce them all individually.

Mesmerized by present and past visions, Nate stopped breathing when Rori brought her hands to her top.

The audience was on its feet, springing up like a collective jack-in-the-box caught up in chaos. Nate went from a smoldering fire under his skin to a cold sweat. Only sheer moral force kept him from joining them and craning to get a look at Rori. They blocked his view of the stage completely. They saved him from his own treacherous desires.

Removing his glasses to wipe his face with a trembling hand, Nate confronted a personal demon he'd never considered upon setting foot in this club. He didn't know whether he could have looked away on his own if the crowd hadn't made the decision for him. He'd respected the other dancers' privacy, yet nearly denied Rori the same courtesy.

*Not so noble now, are you?* he chided himself. *Not so easy to point the finger when you discover how easy it is to get caught up in this soulless world.*

Nate slid his glasses back on, ashamed of his lack of control and his inability to squelch the need—even stronger now—to see her. If he had any nobility left, he'd walk out of here now before he made things worse.

A SIGN OVER her lighted vanity read: Never eat before you go on stage. You never know what else you'll unload on your audience.

A lot of the people who entered her private dressing room found the advice amusing. For Rori, it was too accurate to be anything but a serious warning.

Her stomach churned in ninety-nine parts revulsion, one part relief to have it over once more. Shivering, she pulled on the jeans and top she'd arrived in hours ago.

*Breathe, Ror. In. Out. That's good. It's over again. Put it behind you. Remember Brett and your options. And then remind yourself that, oh God, this was your only option.*

She sat at the vanity, opened a jar of cold cream, then started to remove the heavy make-up with a wedge. Looking herself in the eyes through the mirror...

*After six months, you still haven't quite got yourself to do that. Because yesterday you danced and moved your best friend to tears and tonight you dance and can't even look*

*yourself in the eye.*

Her stomach had begun to calm, but her own self-pity brought the churning back. Rori rubbed the sponge at the blush on her cheeks with a vengeance.

When the usual knock came on her dressing room door, she got up to get her costume. Taking it from the bouncer, she mumbled a thanks and started to close the door.

"This guy says he's an old friend of yours, Rori," the bouncer halted her need for escape. He backed up slightly, and she panicked. She'd dreaded this day. *God, don't let it be Brett...*

Her plea cut off at the sight of Nate Jovanovich stepping into the door frame. Was he better or worse than Brett? She couldn't think because her mind already raced to shocked questions. How long had he been here? Did he watch her show? Oh God, oh God, no.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Her tone betrayed her surprise, fear and increasing anger. *Or is it shame?*

The bouncer must have assumed her "old friend" was acceptable because he left them to return to his post at the end of the hall.

Nate stared at her, his eyes, behind his glasses, filled with... something she couldn't place in her current state.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, hearing a sob trail out after her inquiry and

afraid he'd caught it too. She turned away, moving to her freestanding clothes rack with the sequins on her costume biting into her clenched palms.

"About an hour," he said softly.

*No! You humiliated me enough eleven years ago. You wouldn't do this. You wouldn't come here wanting to see blood this time.*

But his silence confirmed it for her—he'd seen her strip and now he'd make her pay for it.

"I want you to leave." She reached for the hanger to replace her costume on the rack, but once the plastic was in her hand she couldn't perform the simple task. Nate moved—out of the room or closer, she was afraid to look. But then she *felt* him, she smelled his spicy cologne, now mingled with the smoke and alcohol from the bar. He could have been touching her, pressing his body to her back for the effect he had on her. Her senses whirled like a merry-go-round out of control.

Afraid her legs wouldn't hold her, she closed her eyes to find her center of balance.

*I hate you, she thought. I hate you, but I'm just stupid enough to want you to put your arms around me now and tell me it's OK, you'll take care of me.*

He stood at her side, watching her with concern, when she opened her eyes. "Why are

you doing this to yourself, Rori? You don't belong here."

Nothing but sadness emitted from his tone, yet she knew him too well. He'd never come to a place like this for any other reason except to condemn and save. And she had to protect herself, protect what she knew of herself and what he'd never consider.

"Look who's talking, holy man," she scoffed. Her anger overwhelmed her, making her dizzy with its bitterness. "What made you come here? Did you need proof of the reputed bad girl? Or are you on a sacred mission to save one more sinner?"

Taking no care, she hung her costume and slammed it on the rack. She turned back to her vanity and cold cream, catching his frustration in the mirror.

"You tell me why you sell yourself on the cheap here, and I'll tell you why I'm here."

Still no condemnation in his tone, but it no longer mattered to her. God knew the man was a consummate actor. How else had he convinced her for so long that he wanted her, not Jenna? She couldn't let that go despite everything that happened since.

"Don't you think you're worth more than you give away out there?"

Rori faced him, thinking she'd set him straight. "I'm special out there. I'm not a falling star or a disappointment or a loser who oughta take what she can get, which ain't much. I'm what everybody wants and can't have." The heat in her face increased at the sense of déjà

vu. Her taunt to Jenna: *"He'll be with you, wishing he was making love to me."* She didn't believe herself now any more than she had then.

"I could see that," Nate said so calmly, she felt tears gang up on her. It didn't bother him in the least that he'd watched her undress down to a tattoo. Somehow he'd justified it in his mind the same way she had to every damn time she entered and exited the spotlight.

"You make a lot of people happy when you're up there, Rori, but are *you* happy when you're down here in the real world?"

His aim was bull's-eye, but pure chance had gotten the dart through her armor. He didn't know anything about her. "You'd love it if I said no."

He lifted his hand, inches from touching her face, and she pulled back sharply. "Believe it or not, all I want is for you to be happy."

*Oh no you don't. Don't think your concern can make me forget. You can't expect me to believe you were thinking of my happiness when you ran to Jenna. You were thinking of yourself then and nothing's changed now.*

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair, mussing it slightly as she glared at him.

*And don't think you can endear me with those wayward strands of hair on your forehead or the way your jaw tightens when you're trying to say something and it's not coming out*

*the way you want it to.*

But her fingers tingled with the need to brush his hair back into its flawless feathering, to smooth out his taut expression.

He jammed his hands in the pockets of his black overcoat. "You're a beautiful dancer, Rori," he said anxiously, and she almost accepted he believed that. "But it's not your talent they care about. All they want from you is your body. That's what you are to them. How can that possibly be enough for you?"

Rori stared at him, then through him.

*"You think you'll ever find somebody who'll give you more than I will, wildcat?" Tossing his cigarette onto the dirty plate on the table, Brett shook his head at her with that "poor baby" expression he loved to patronize her with. "You're just a piece of ass to the rest of the world. You got a great ass too, so consider yourself lucky. It's the only thing you got goin' for ya."*

*Rori crossed her arms over her chest. She was sick of this dump motel they'd lived in for the past two weeks, sick of the messes Brett left, sick of cleaning up after him and his friends. She was sick of looking at him.*

*It was after one o'clock in the afternoon. He'd woke up less than an hour ago, told her*

*to get him some food while he showered, and now he was responding to her innocent inquiry of when they'd move on because she didn't want to stay here anymore. Maybe he'd read her mind. She had thought of leaving him while he slept.*

*"Sorry to burst your bubble, babe, but you're no prize yourself."*

*His dark eyes, bedroom eyes she'd thought the first time they met, narrowed in pity. He brushed his wild hair out of his eyes. The black strands spilled over his shoulders like a lion's mane. "So why do you stay? Why do you keep crawlin' back" His cruel mouth formed the same overconfident grin that had incited her to break his nose the first time she caught him in bed with some stupid bimbo while she was out, like some servant, getting him cigarettes.*

*Moving like an animal, an atavistic beast who reacted more out of instinct than purpose, Brett started toward her. And like any sensible prey, everything inside Rori told her to run.*

*Before she could do more than turn in the direction of the bathroom, he caught her arm. She threw her entire body into escaping him, and he laughed at her struggles, finally yanking on her hair until she stood quietly. One of his arms cinched around her waist, jerking her back against the bare wall of his chest. He didn't need to bend to put his mouth*



*to her ear. Brushing her hair back, gently this time, he murmured, "You need me."*

*His hand slipped under her short top, curling around her breast. Rori closed her eyes against smarting tears. I need you to love me, you bastard, she thought desperately. I need you to make me forget him. But all you ever do is make me remember everything I'm not worthy of.*

*"You can't live without me because I'm your wild child and you get off on that."*

*Rori felt his erection growing against her behind and found herself struggling again out of pure instinct. He held her easily against him, squeezing her breast ruthlessly. "You try to run too far, and you'll fall flat on your face. And one day, wildcat, I won't be there to pick you up. Then what would you do?"*

*Hate for him expanded in her chest as he rubbed himself against her, breathing harshly in her ear. She believed him. How could she doubt it? She'd tried to walk away from him countless times and every time she ended up tripping. She had no where else to go, no one to take care of her. He'd tell her she fucked up again, he'd humiliate her, and he always took her back.*

*Pressing his mouth to her neck, he inched her spandex skirt up and over her hips until it bunched at her waist like a rubber band. He grasped her panties, wrenching on them with*

*a fierce growl.*

*She was prepared when he turned them toward the bed and pushed her face down on twisted sheets. The need to fight him rose and dissipated almost as quickly. She'd welcome physical pain, even if it was sexual, but he'd never raped her. He was rough, he hit her sometimes—she could take all that. She couldn't take his need to, his effortless skill in making her cry. He knew exactly how to hurt her where it counted most.*

*The sound of a zipper, then the rustle and fall of denim made her press her face into the sheet. His weight trapped her against the mattress before he flipped her over. He shoved her legs apart looking down at her naked, feral, so aroused she couldn't help remembering how Nate looked down at her after their first kiss. Hiding anything would have been impossible for him. He'd stared at her as if worlds had collided and shattered all around them. God, she'd needed him to love her.*

*The touch of lips against hers, and she closed her eyes, lost in a memory even now she responded to.*

*"I love you, wildcat."*

*The voice wasn't Nate's. Her eyes flew open to see Brett, watching her with that look of disgust and betrayal.*

*"Nobody in the world is ever gonna give you love like I do," he said softly, between his teeth. "So quit thinkin' someone else will."*

*When he kissed her again, she couldn't respond as tears slid recklessly out of the corners of her eyes.*

Nate came back into focus, and it required all of Rori's concentrated anger and pain to keep the tears swimming in her eyes from falling. She shook her head at him. "You don't know anything about me. So don't come here, giving me that "poor baby" speech. You don't give a damn about me and you never have. I *don't* need you."

She grabbed her jacket from the back of the vanity bar stool, then rushed past him out of the room. As soon as she reached the hallway exit, she saw the usual crowd of "fans" surrounding the dancers' ring. She also saw the guy who'd asked her to have a drink with him. Thinking, *Hell no, I can't do that, not in this state!* was as much of a luxury as logic. She walked over to him, saw his smile and somehow feeling rewarded because of it. "How 'bout that drink, Blue Eyes?"

"Sure. Now? Here?"

Again, no thought. Instinct. At the moment, she felt certain she protected herself. "My place. Do you have a car?"

He nodded, and she said she'd meet him in the foyer. Annmarie was behind the bar, and Rori pressed the keys to her truck into her hand. "I've got a ride."

The surprise and confusion in her friend's expression reached Rori for a second.

"Rori, what's wrong? Are you—?"

Annmarie knew her too well, that was all there was to it. She wasn't giving anything away to anyone else. No one else could see the alarm going off in her head like a tardy bell in school. No one else knew the *deja vu* of that alarm. The first time she'd heard it, Nate and Jenna had gotten out of his parents' car after two long weeks of vacation. Rori had stood on his porch all morning, waiting for his return. Before she could raise a hand in greeting, he'd put his arm around Jenna, hugging her close to him. The love on Jenna's face said it all.

And Rori ran.

## Chapter Six

NATE TRAILED behind Rori, out to the parking lot of Baby Dolls, in a state of shock. He'd watched her in her dressing room as she fell into some trance-like state, watched tears crowd into her eyes, watched her erupt at him, then pick up the guy in the bar.

Not one part of it made sense to him. He felt like he'd walked into a movie an hour late. Whatever drove Rori, Nate had to conclude he'd made a mess of things and now she hurt herself to get back at him.

The man she walked with unlocked the door of a metallic blue '57 Chevrolet, let her in the passenger's side and slammed the door. As he walked around the back of the car, he made a gesture with a fist that seemed to say "I got the prize! I did it!"

Nate's first instinct was to haul Rori out of the car and take her somewhere he could talk some sense into her.

That instinct was quickly shot down. *Haven't you done enough for one night? For one lifetime? Face it, you try to tell her you're sorry and you end up making her feel like she's a lost cause.*

He'd gone back to see her—hard to believe now—with the purpose of asking her if they

could start again. Become friends the way they'd been as kids. He couldn't blame her for missing his intention entirely. He'd missed it too, the instant he saw her holding the costume she wore on stage, imagining her without it. Thank God he couldn't fill in the gaps of his imagination with real memories.

His car was parked in the next row behind the Chevy. He got in and didn't bother fighting the urge to follow them.

She'd been thinking of someone else during those trance-like moments in her dressing room. A man who'd hurt her. It was that man she'd said "*I don't* need you" to. But she was talking to Nate the rest of the time. After eleven years Rori ripped away the wool he'd put over his own eyes. He'd convinced himself there were a dozen reasons Rori ran away at sixteen. Her father's inability to show her love, her boredom with school and the slow pace of life in Syracuse, her rebellion and wildness. He'd even told himself she just got sick of his mother gossiping about her. Maybe he'd known the truth all along and buried it to protect himself. Maybe he never allowed himself to admit it because that would mean facing his own cowardice. And he'd have to face that maybe his mentor lied to him just to keep him away from Rori.

Rori had run away for one reason and one reason alone. She'd run away because Nate

hurt her deeply with his decision—*betrayal*—to marry Jenna instead of her. She'd run away, hurting herself to hurt him.

*What have I done to you, Rori Mason?* Nate thought helplessly, then admitted to himself he wasn't sure he wanted to know the truth of how much he'd meant to Rori. He didn't want to know he had the power to make someone self-destruct.

Five blocks from the club, the Chevy turned off, into the parking lot of a hulking relic that looked more like an abandoned warehouse than an apartment building. The sign on the side read "Studios for rent. Call..."

Instead of pulling in to the lot, Nate parked at the curb, shutting off his lights. Did Rori live here? Or the Chevy?

Nate sat with his hands clenched around his steering wheel and watched Rori and the guy walk into the building. They didn't touch. Small comfort, since he knew she hadn't picked this guy up to have him fix her sink.

A few minutes after they disappeared inside, he got out of his car and walked to the front door they'd entered by. It was security access. Nate scanned the names on the buzzer panel. R. Mason, 3rd Floor, C. This was her building.

He tried the door and found it unlocked, but couldn't get himself to go in. He'd stopped

thinking clearly the instant Rori stepped onto the stage tonight. His thoughts were even more chaotic now. He couldn't see her, couldn't afford even one more sin against her.

No matter what he'd done or what she did, she affected him too. She'd never stopped affecting him. Ninety-nine percent of his reaction in the dressing room had been about her influence on him. He'd been smug enough to believe nothing in a place like Baby Dolls could unground him.

Rori had. Seeing her, watching her dance sensually, gracefully bathed in that soft red light had turned him on more than anything had in a long, long time. Long before Andrea was born—because he'd lived in too much fear to consider desire for Jenna. He'd thrust Rori under the microscope in her dressing room because his own motives had been in question. That hadn't been fair. Confronting her now for any reason would be heartless cruelty. Rori deserved her revenge. She deserved to blame Nate for this in the morning, whatever happened.

He turned away, walked back to his car and drove home haunted by the memory of tears crowding in Rori's wounded, vulnerable eyes.

A light was on in the living room, Nate saw as he pulled into the parsonage driveway.

In the stillness of the cold night, he missed his wife as sharply as he had the first time he



brought Andrea home. He missed having Jenna greet him at the front door with a kiss and hug that enveloped him in love and her sweet perfume. No matter how late he got in, she was there to make him a cup of homemade hot chocolate, to sit with him while he drank it and listen as he talked about his day. He missed hearing about her day, missed the way she'd watch him undress from their bed, the way she rubbed his head when the weight of the world descended at random. He missed sliding under the covers and taking her warm form in his arms, where everything was right. Oh, and he'd never forget how easy it was to make love to Jenna. Enter her body, enter her heart.

*How can I know with every ounce of conviction inside me that I followed the right path with you, Jenna...and still feel like I made a mistake?*

What he'd done to Rori was a mistake. He couldn't deny that.

Shutting off the car in the driveway, he reminded himself why he'd made a mistake. Because he'd been a coward with Rori. If he'd told her the truth then, how could he be sure she wouldn't convince him to give them a try anyway? He'd had a seventeen-year crush on her by then. Being strong to her face would have been as impossible as telling himself he was over her when he still dreamed of her every night. Closer to the truth, every time he closed his eyes after he'd chosen Jenna, he dreamed of Rori. By the time he'd come to his

senses and decided on his course, he'd wavered just long enough to ask someone else's opinion on what he should do. And he'd taken that advice because it was the easiest thing to do.

*Coward.*

Nate walked into the house, shedding his coat at the threshold. Cigarette smoke had invaded the material in only a few short hours, he noticed as he hung it in the closet. He walked through the hall to Andrea's bedroom first and found her sleeping soundly. Nate stroked her hair, so light she wasn't disturbed.

"Munchkin," he whispered, wanting to hold her. No regrets here, not at all like the ones crushing in on his conscience after seeing Rori.

He left the room quietly, moving into the living room. Jeremiah lay stretched out on the sofa with a battered copy of Stephen King's IT.

"Hey," Jeremiah said as Nate sank into a chair and kicked off his shoes. "Water's still hot." He indicated the steaming mug of hot chocolate on the coffee table.

Nate shook his head. Tonight those "just add water" packets would make him feel his losses more.

"So, how'd it go?" Jeremiah sat up, absently pushing a coaster into his book to mark his

place.

Though only two lamps shone, Nate wished for a darker place to hide than the corner of the small room. But Jeremiah had been a lifeline for him since Jenna died. He'd become his closest friend as well as a son.

"I crossed the line," he admitted heavily. "I really..." One of Rori's choice phrases came to him, so fitting for the situation. He shook his head and finished with "...screwed up."

Jeremiah reached for his chocolate, waiting for Nate to go on instead of asking "What do you mean?"

"I thought I was prepared for anything. Thought I'd walk in there like I was in some glass bottle and it couldn't touch me—"

"You got turned on, is that what you're trying so hard not to say?"

Jeremiah seemed to be teasing him; Nate had to set him straight, as if it made any difference in the grand scheme of everything. "Rori turned me on, yes. Even before the crowd prevented me from seeing her..." The heat of color filled his cheeks, and Jeremiah chuckled.

"Come on, man, you may be a saint, but you're human. So you got turned on. Stronger

men might've too."

"I don't think I would have looked away if I'd had a choice."

"Did you see anybody else strip?"

Nate nodded solemnly, rubbing his hand over his mouth.

"So'd you look away from them?"

"Yes, but—"

Jeremiah set his mug down. "You had feelings for Rori. It's my guess you still do or you wouldn't be going out of your way like you are. Of course you're gonna find it hard to apply the same rules to her."

The excuse offered came nicely packaged. Nate had no desire to accept it. He'd spent too much of his life excusing his own actions, finding justifications where none qualified.

"It's more than that. I hurt her. I can't seem to do anything *but* hurt her. She's like...Michelangelo's statute of David. Something like that...solid marble, and yet when you think how easy it'd be to destroy, it seems too fragile to still be in one piece." Nate talked now, out loud and to himself more than to Jeremiah. "I spent eleven years convincing myself she was strong as marble, even though I knew—*I knew!*—she wasn't, and then tonight..."

He glanced up at Jeremiah and almost despised the faith this kid had in him. Sitting forward, Nate removed his glasses with one hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose with the other. "I'm no saint, Jeremiah. I betrayed an innocent girl." *With a Judas kiss*, his mind filled in the appropriate analogy. "I was the only person she ever trusted, and I let her down. I won't blame her if she never forgives me."

He didn't kid himself about that either. Accepting his guilt wouldn't keep him away from her. *And it probably won't stop you from screwing up again either.*

Jeremiah said nothing as Nate slipped his glasses on then got to his feet. When he reached the archway leading to the bedrooms, he glanced back. "You knew Rori's name. Do you know of anybody she was romantically linked with?" Asking was unfair and none of his business, but his life was all about concerning himself with just those things. Turning it off wasn't so easy.

"Yeah. The leader of the rock band she hung out with. Brett Foxx."

The name, the last name at least, was familiar to Nate. A family by the name of Foxx lived in their neighborhood in Syracuse. He wondered if Jason Radcliffe knew of this guy Jeremiah mentioned.

More that was none of his business, he told himself on his way to bed, where he knew he

wouldn't sleep tonight. But he'd concern himself with finding out all he could anyway.

*PROTECTING yourself? This is what you consider protecting yourself? Breaking a vow to yourself not to get involved with any man associated with Baby Dolls? Any man period? So much for self-respect.*

Rori stood in a moment of absolute panic as she locked her apartment door behind them.

How did Nate always do it to her? He put her in a state of temporary insanity where she did stupid things meant to strike out at him...only she ended up hurting herself while he felt no pain.

She was here now, with a guy who expected a hell of a lot more than a drink. Bringing him to her apartment had practically been an invitation into her bed. And she couldn't go through with whatever promise she'd made under duress.

As she turned to face her already-regretted mistake, she found herself mercilessly backed against the door with a frenzied ape on her front. She narrowly managed to avoid his mouth, but that didn't deter him. He attacked her neck. Her panic swelled again, followed quickly by reason. The only way she could get away with this was by being calm first of all. Thinking of an escape plan required a clear head.

*You're a smart gal, Ror. Prove it to yourself again, the way you did when you finally left Brett for good.*

She pushed on the ape's shoulder, smiling falsely when he faced her. "How 'bout that drink, Blue Eyes?"

He grinned, but his eyes were on her mouth. "I don't need it, sugar."

"I do." She forced her way around him saying, "I'll be right back" without glancing over her shoulder at him. She shed her jacket on the floor.

For once she was thankful her kitchen was so small. Only one person could fit in it at a time. She opened one of the two cupboards, got down two plastic tumblers, then went to the other cupboard for the liquor.

The bottle of whiskey was unopened. She and Annmarie had a long, depressing talk about men one night and both had wished for something to drown their sorrows in. Rori bought the bottle the next day, but they hadn't used it.

She looked at the label. *One hundred proof. That oughta do it. Let's just hope this stuff puts Snow White to sleep instead of kills him.*

Once the seal was broken, she poured the alcohol in the green tumbler, to a quarter inch of the rim. Blue Eyes had quite a few beers in him already—probably a Saturday night

confirmation he was alive after the work week—so it wouldn't take much more than this depending on his constitution.

She glanced back into the living room and saw him fiddling with her stereo. While he was occupied, she got an open can of diet root beer from the fridge. She'd opened it before she left for Syracuse and put it back after a few gulps. Relieved to see it was flat as she poured it into the pink tumbler, she started to hope this might actually work...if Someone Up There was willing to help her save herself from her own rash stupidity.

After tossing the soda can in Annmarie's recycling bag, she gathered up the tumblers and the bottle to take out to the main room. Blue Eyes had turned on some music and turned the overhead light off in favor of the lamp near her bed. She didn't mind the darkness. There was less chance he'd notice his drink was a little lighter in color than hers.

Rori set the bottle on the window sill, then handed the grinning, good old boy his drink. "Down the hatch." She gulped hers straight down, trying not to grimace at the disgusting lack of carbonation.

Her guest had to quit at a fourth of liquid swallowed. His eyes watered profusely as he whispered hoarsely "Shit burns, doesn't it?"

Smiling, Rori watched color creep into his cheeks. The alcohol hit him already, and she



understood he was embarrassed because she'd had no reaction to the alcohol. He felt like less of a man or something.

"The good stuff burns," she said, setting her glass on the sill next to the bottle. "While you finish that, I'll take a quick shower. Make yourself comfortable and help yourself to more if you feel like it."

Before she left the room to lock herself in the bathroom, she read his expression word for word. This wasn't at all what he'd expected. He made no effort to stop her though.

As she turned on the shower, Rori felt a stab of guilt. No, offering a drink didn't entitle a man to her body. Even leading him on obligated her in no way. But she'd never been coy with men before.

Too late to regret now—most of her life, she'd found it easier to give them what they expected, letting herself be used instead of insisting they'd misunderstood. She'd used men too, searching for something she never really believed she'd find in them. God knew she wasn't an innocent.

Blue Eyes didn't seem like a bad guy, but if her plan to put him to sleep didn't work she wouldn't sacrifice what little self-respect she had to save herself some embarrassment.

She sat on the toilet seat, glancing at the water. *So much for a warm shower tomorrow,*

she thought.

The room was cramped and windowless. Roughly the size of a storage closet, the room was taken up mostly by the tub against the back wall. On either side of the door were the toilet and small sink. Both stood scant inches from the tub.

The steam from the shower made her sweat like she did on stage. How long did she have to stay in here? If he drank the rest of that whiskey in his glass, would he pass out in fifteen minutes? Or longer?

She rolled up the sleeves of her shirt, breathing in the steam. She'd turn on cold water, but the pipes did whatever they wanted. This time of night they usually served up scalding hot.

*This is what you get for letting Nate Jovanovich get to you.*

Remembering he'd seen her naked,—a man of God had watched her strip probably while shaking his head in pronounced sentence—she could barely stand the heat rolling into the room from the shower.

She got up and started pulling off her clothes.

She'd dreamed of Nate's reaction to her body a million times as a developing teenager. She'd imagined him being wildly turned on by it. Convincing herself he felt anything like

that tonight would be futile. He'd watched and confirmed she was the bad girl everyone told her she was all her life.

Oh, Rori had heard all the rumors (and believed Nate's mother started them.) Some were true. She had sneaked out of church to smoke cigarettes with Jace Radcliffe and Darlene Foxx. She'd drank some. Fooled around with Jace in the backseat of his father's car and on school grounds after dark. But she'd never taken drugs, never slept with the entire football team and half of Syracuse's bored husbands. She never went skinny dipping at camp, then screwed a couple of the counselors all at the same time. And she didn't take one red cent from her father's wallet when she ran away from home with Darlene's much older brother. Darlene had told her that was the current rumor when they ran into each other in New York City years ago.

Down to her underwear, Rori slipped into the robe hanging from the back of the door. The shower had run for at least five minutes. She couldn't keep this up much longer. Blue Eyes would think she'd drowned and might try to rescue her.

Reluctantly, Rori turned off the shower, then reached for a towel.

Blue Eyes' voice, a little too close to the bathroom door for comfort, startled her. "How much longer's it gonna be, sugar?"

With her heart racing, Rori bent over at the waist, wrapping a towel around her dry, albeit limp, hair. She thought about splashing water on her face to make it look like she'd just come out of the shower, but she was covered with sweat from the steam. Anything else was unnecessary.

She grabbed her hair dryer. After fumbling with the stupid lock, she poked her head out, making sure the dryer was in sight too. "Just give me another couple minutes. OK?"

Blue Eyes had obviously been pacing her floor. As luck would have it, he'd also downed the rest of the whiskey in the tumbler. The empty glasses stood, together with the bottle, on the window sill.

*A little more pacing and maybe he'll tire himself out,* Rori thought hopefully, closing and locking the door again. *Or he'll psyche himself up for...*

Rori pulled the towel off her head, using it to wipe her face and neck. She'd have to turn on this hair dryer to make everything authentic. Damn, she might pass out herself—from heat stroke. She sat on the toilet seat again, once the dryer was plugged in, and faced it toward the sink.

*Had to be cheap and buy one without a cool air setting too.*

Feeling the grim set of her own mouth, not her thoughts, almost made her burst out

laughing. This whole situation was ridiculous. She'd practically poured a fourth of a bottle of hundred proof whiskey down a man's throat, now she sat in her bathroom pretending to dry her already dry hair, sweating like a horse in a neck-to-neck race. The only thing that could make the situation more ridiculous would be if she put on a clown suit and make-up and went out there doing flips.

Rori pressed her hand against her mouth to keep herself from giggling. God, old Blue Eyes would really wonder what she was doing if he heard her cracking up in here. Maybe he'd think she was a homicidal lunatic and go home.

Figuring he'd believe she just had thick hair, she let the dryer go almost as long as the shower had. She heard nothing from the other room then, but got out her make-up case and made a little bit of noise anyway.

She held her breath, counting past five thousand in her head until she knew she couldn't keep it up anymore. Now or never. If he hadn't passed out, she'd send him on his way.

Holding her beltless robe together, she unlocked the bathroom door as quietly as she could, tiptoeing out. The studio side of her apartment was dark and empty. Her bed was around the corner of the bathroom near the door.

*Please, please...*

She crept around the closet and glanced at her bed. Blue Eyes lay on the left side, furthest from her, naked...and snoring loud enough to be an accompaniment to the opera singer upstairs when she went at it in the mornings.

Rori reached over to click off the lamp, not disturbing him, then allowed herself to feel relief. Another mistake incited by a reaction to Nate...averted. And it hadn't taken eleven years this time.

She glanced around the room. Since sleeping in her own bed wasn't an option, she could either sleep on the hard wood floor or on the drum chair with little back support. Neither were very inviting.

She walked over to the window sill with her ashtray and looked down at the street.

*You're OK*, she insisted, and let herself believe it.

## Chapter Seven

SLEEP THAT night came hard and never deeply for Rori. She woke in the drum chair freezing and so uncomfortable she was afraid she'd have to let herself fall to the floor before she could move normally. This despite having moved the chair against the far wall, where she could prop her back.

Glancing at her bed, she saw her guest wrapped in her blanket, toasty and comfortable as could be. She glared at him before checking the time. Zak usually came over early, regardless of what time she got home. He wouldn't understand why the door was locked at 7:00 a.m. She'd kept it open for him and Annmarie long enough for it to become a ritual.

Damn, she had to get Blue Eyes out of here before that happened.

Rori sat up, placing her bare feet on the floor. A chill ran through her body, making her long for the steamy, suffocating heat of the bathroom last night.

She stood and started gathering the guy's clothes, not caring if she made noise. When his belt buckle scraped across the floor as she grabbed his pants, Rori turned to see him put his hands on his head. His hair was definitely declaring mutiny this morning.

If she wasn't so panicked about Zak appearing, she might have thought he looked kind of

cute with that grizzly bear face and disheveled hair. She might have remembered how deceptively harmless Brett looked while he slept and how she'd get soft feelings for him watching him then.

"Look, I've got some stuff to do today. Why don't you go?" She didn't care what he thought of her this morning—if he accused her of being hot one minute, cold the next. She'd never forgive herself if Zak witnessed this.

Blue Eyes sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes as if he had all the time in the world. He swore softly. "I've got a bitch of a headache. Don't s'pose you got any coffee?"

Rori had been in this scene enough to know coffee wasn't the only thing he was looking for. He was hoping to hang around long enough for a second throwdown—if he was even convinced they'd had a first.

He looked at her now, and she could see everything in his sleepy eyes. The temptation to snug her robe to keep his prying gaze out was so strong only logic kept her from it. If this guy realized he'd gone to sleep without more than a little whiskey, he might try to make her feel obligated to put out. She didn't have time to argue with him.

"There's a coffee shop around the corner. I really need you to go," she said, stepping forward as he swung his legs out of bed on her side. She shoved his clothes at him before



he could stand. God, she didn't want to see him naked again.

He glanced down at the bundle, then at her again...her breasts anyway, where the robe revealed the inside curves.

"Can I see you later? After your show tonight?"

*Don't feel sorry for him, Ror. He's not looking for a relationship. He saw an easy lay and wants something to tell his buddies. You're nothing special to him. And you're not desperate enough to take whatever you can get anymore.*

She shook her head, grabbing the pack of cigarettes from the table next to the bed, then walking away to light one.

"What the hell was last night?" Blue Eyes demanded behind her. "You know, I've had better lays with myself."

A part of her wanted to laugh. *If you got laid last night, old boy, you did lay yourself.* But Brett had insulted her too many times when it came to sex. *"Why do you think God gave you a body like that, wildcat? You look like you could lay a guy until every fuse is blown. But you waste it like a nun."*

When she saw her hand tremble, her anger flared with the flame of her lighter. She let a man make her feel worthless again, dammit.

Behind her, she heard the rustle of clothing sliding on.

"You're not worth the three grand I hear you girls make a night. So if you think—"

*Not such a nice guy under that good old boy exterior, are you, Blue Eyes?* "I don't want your money. I just want you to get out," she said softly, turning when she heard a strange noise. Yup, just as she'd thought. He looked into his wallet, counting the bills and checking for credit cards. When he was satisfied nothing was missing, he looked at her hard and repeated "You're not getting my money."

She moved over to the window sill, carefully balancing her cigarette on the edge of the ashtray, then stalked over to pick up the guy's boots. Hell, she might have been talking to Brett. This jerk was just as dense. She threw the boots at him, missing him with both. "I DON'T WANT YOUR GODDAMN MONEY!" she said with infuriated emphasis. "Now get the hell out!"

He pulled his shirt on yet didn't button it under her glare. As he bent to pick up his boots, a knock sounded on her door.

Rori froze. *Oh God, no, don't let it be Zak. Spare him. Punish me.*

Not sparing Zak would be the worst punishment she'd ever have to bear. Damn that there was no back door or a fire escape near one of her windows. The front door was the only

way out.

Rori bundled the flaps of her robe together, then moved to the door. She unlocked it, opening it just a crack. It wasn't Zak. It wasn't even Annmarie. It was Nate. Nate again!

She let the door open wider, and Nate's gaze was drawn immediately to her half-dressed guest. Blue Eyes had gathered the rest of his stuff. Rori turned to let him out.

Pushing his face so close to hers she could see the red in his eyes and smell the whiskey-hangover stench of his breath, he sneered. "Fuck you, you cheap whore."

Time to prepare herself had come and gone. Her face flamed in humiliation and anger as Blue Eyes shoved past them both and stalked down the hall. She hadn't rectified her mistake last night for Nate's benefit, but... She didn't want to know what he thought of her now, between watching her strip and believing she'd slept with a complete stranger who didn't think too much of her the morning after. Unfortunately, the only way to get rid of Nate was to play along with his assumption.

"How long have you known him?" Nate turned back from watching her guest disappear on the steps.

His gall didn't surprise her. He seemed to think he had every right to butt into her life.

"I *don't* know him. All I know is he's got a ten-second delivery."

She tried to slam the door in his face. He stepped in the way, catching it with his hand.

His expression hadn't altered from last night's sad "poor baby" one. It was worse than being tried and hung without a fair shake. At least condemnation was choosing a side.

He moved closer now. They shared the door frame with only an inch gap. He looked and smelled like a million bucks. She felt like loose change kicked into a gutter.

Damn him. What right did he have to come here and check up on her? What right did he have to make her consider how much warmer an inch closer would be?

"Why are you doing this, Rori?"

He seemed to forget he was on her turf, not vice versa. "I'd ask you the same thing, but then you'd still be here."

She let go of her robe, intent on pushing him out of her apartment with both hands and all her strength. He braced his arm against the door, curling a hand around the side. The energy he expended was less than half of hers, yet he managed to keep her from shutting him out.

Both angry and...churned up by his show of strength, she let go and walked away in defeat. He'd obviously come to say something and wouldn't leave until he'd accomplished his vital undertaking.

"How did you know where I live?" she asked, retrieving what was left of her cigarette from the window sill ashtray.

He'd come in and closed the door behind him. "I followed you last night." His confession held no apology.

"I'm not your mission, you bastard! Quit sticking your nose in my business." Her hand shook again. *Calm down! Don't let him get to you. Don't let him win that way.*

"Do I have to have a mission to care about you?"

How he got the nerve to say it, she couldn't guess. All that strength wasn't limited to physical muscle. Shaking her head, she put her cigarette out. "Look, you made your choice long ago. What a trip that must've been for you—having that choice."

Straightening, she looked right at him in time to catch the unmistakable color steal into his face. So it was true—he'd known all along that she and Jenna competed for him. He'd known and took full advantage...

It occurred to her that Nate wasn't looking at her in penance. No, he just plain looked at her. Gawked was more like it. His gaze crept past her neck to the gape of her robe. Standing straight, she became aware of the cool air on her skin and knew the inner curves of her breasts were exposed. But a minute ago, she'd leaned over to put out her cigarette...

The color of his face seemed to intensify, so much like when he was a teenager and spent more time watching her than paying attention to Jenna reciting some bit of homework they were supposed to be doing. The way he used to look at her mouth...

His heat flooded the room and crashed over her, into her, wave upon wave.

*You haven't, Ror. You haven't lost all feeling, the way you told yourself you had with Brett.*

Her nipples hardened, for the first time in years, to painful, stabbing points. She didn't have to look at herself to know they'd risen against her robe in shameless erections. No, she didn't have to look. Nate did, and she could see the intimacy in his eyes. She wanted to run, to get away from this, but he seemed to hold her in his sights, unyielding and timeless.

"I'm not immune to you, Rori," he said so softly, so hoarsely she was lost in it. In him. In what he'd done to her effortlessly.

When he moved toward her, terrifying her, she managed to speak if not run. "Didn't you get a good enough look last night?" Her tone didn't cooperate. It refused to bite. Instead, it shook as if the world came apart. Maybe it did. Maybe he'd touch her and she'd shatter like glass. She wanted to shatter under his touch, just the way she'd always dreamed. *You could love me that way, Nate, the way no other man ever has.*

His fingers captured the lapels of her robe, she felt without seeing. Her gaze locked with his. Then he took her hand, bringing it up. He hadn't touched her bare skin beneath the robe at all, she realized as he guided her to hold her robe together on her own. He hadn't touched her and yet her body had never felt so alive.

"I didn't go there last night to make you feel defensive or ashamed. I watched you dance, but I didn't watch you undress. Not watching wasn't my choice... You tempted me."

He hadn't watched her strip. Her relief was tainted by an overload of sensations and emotions she'd convinced herself were long dead in her—no reason, no rhyme for why. Now she knew better. Her sexuality had been born with his man, died without him and could only be resurrected by him. She wasn't frigid or incapable of sexual feelings the way Brett told her she was. She was simply made for one man, and now the tingle of moisture between her thighs was as sharp as the sting of tears behind her eyes.

*Why, Nate? Why did you reject me? Why did you make me believe you loved me as much as I loved you and then you went to her? Why?*

At first she thought he read her mind as he cradled her cheek in his hand so gently. Then she felt her own tears wet her face. Her vulnerability would punish her later, but she couldn't fight him when he leaned his forehead against hers, stroking her damp cheek. "I

hurt you. I know that, Rori. I seem to hurt you no matter what my intentions are. But don't hurt yourself to get back at me anymore. *Please*. It's not worth it."

Rori closed her eyes, surprised he blamed himself for what she'd supposedly done with the blue collar worker, done to spite Nate.

She couldn't forgive him for all the hurt. She couldn't hate him either. And this time that inability to hate him had nothing to do with Jenna's death or his little girl. She couldn't hate him because she couldn't hate someone she'd never stopped loving.

HOLDING A woman again, even if it wasn't nearly close or tight enough, was heaven. But it was so much more than that. Holding *Rori* was heaven. The last time he'd had her in his arms, he'd been so aroused dying became a real possibility. Looking at her beneath him, he'd thought she was an angel then too, soft, loving, so beautiful she scared him.

He held that angel again, but her openness lasted only minutes. She slipped away from him, mumbling "I need coffee."

Nate turned his head to watch her enter the small alcove to the left.

The instant he woke this morning, 4:03 a.m. to be exact, he knew he had to see her. He'd



vowed this time he wouldn't inadvertently condemn her, wouldn't put her on the defense. He'd expected her to believe both; he hadn't expected her to have company.

All indications were that Rori slept with the stranger, which didn't go far to explain the man's attitude toward her this morning. Why treat her so unfairly if he'd gotten what he wanted?

Nate pivoted, glancing at the bed. It'd been slept in, no doubt about that. One side still held the impression of a body. The other side wasn't as mussed and the pillow was fat. No head had slept on it recently. But it wasn't a basis for any conclusions, especially if she'd slept with her head on his chest...

No, he didn't want to think about it.

Turning back to the kitchen, he heard a click as Rori set a cup in the microwave and spun the timer.

Her apartment was...sparse, to say the least. High ceilings, roomy—she hardly had any furnishings. He wondered how long she'd lived here as he gazed at the *barre* and mirrors between the windows.

"Don't you do the church service in Niagara Falls this morning?" she asked just as the timer on the microwave went off.

Nate swung back to face her. "It doesn't start until 10:45." He planned to go to the church from here.

She moved into the archway of the kitchen holding her mug with one hand, her robe together with the other. He wouldn't easily forget the tempting peek of golden, silky skin the gape in her robe had revealed, let alone the lush breast exposed when she'd leaned toward the window sill.

Her exposure had been an accident, Nate seeing it had been just as much so. Invading her privacy by deliberately watching last night would have given him plenty of guilt, but he couldn't feel it this time. He didn't feel guilty for wanting her either. Wanting Rori wasn't superficial or easily satisfied. He felt that desire with his heart every bit as much as with his body.

"Andrea's with your parents?" She didn't look at him, bringing the mug to her lips.

She was beautiful. Even if some other man had shared her bed, Nate couldn't deny how beautiful she was mussed and make-up free. And he could still see the spots of color her arousal put in her well-defined cheeks a few minutes ago.

The image of any other man putting color there...

*She thinks you've got a lot of guts barging into her life. Imagine if she knew you were*

*jealous.*

The only way he could handle the sudden anger he felt was by telling himself that guy left in such a huff because she'd said no last night. It didn't explain why he'd been half-dressed, why she was and why the bed had been slept in overnight. But Nate didn't want to believe Rori had given herself to a stranger.

"She's with Jeremiah," he murmured carelessly, reminding himself of his vow. If he demanded an explanation for her sleepover guest, he'd put her on the defense for sure.

"Who's that?" Rori gazed up at him, not completely open like before, not trying to throw him out either.

"He's... We took him in when he was sixteen. He's been like a son to us. He's nineteen now, in college."

Rori mouthed "Oh", and Nate realized what little he'd said had alienated her again, reminding her that 'we' was him and Jenna.

Instead of getting her guard up or asking him to leave, she moved out of the kitchen, stopping far enough from him to keep them both safe. "I'm sorry about Jenna. I had no idea until Jace told me Thursday night."

Her voice was filled with compassion and sorrow for him. He'd assumed her father told

her of Jenna's death long before this. Despite all the reasons Rori had to be justifiably unsympathetic, she was big enough to offer her condolences. He'd expect no less from the tender-hearted girl he grew up loving. Still, there was a lot he didn't know about Rori the woman.

"It means a lot to me to hear you say that, Rori. Thanks."

"It must've been hard for you..." she murmured, not holding his gaze. "Alone with a newborn, no time to grieve..." She tapered off as if embarrassed or speaking out of turn.

No one else had seemed to understand how hard it was not to grieve, not to give up. Nate appreciated the help he'd gotten, accompanied by awkward sentiments. Yet a part of him wanted them to go away and leave him alone with his and Jenna's baby. Andrea was all he'd had left of his wife. It was only when they stopped coming, stopped calling, stopping trying to help that he could mourn.

"I don't know how I could have gotten through it without Andrea. All those cold, dark nights... She needed me. I needed to be needed."

He saw Rori's instinct to reach out and touch him and wished she would give in to it. Instead, she seemed to realize she had no right, let alone empty hands to do it. She offered softly, "I'm sorry." Her expression was the touch he needed.

*You cried for me, didn't you, Rori?*

The thought, the somehow-known fact stunned and humbled him. It explained why she'd been softer the morning she left Syracuse. Why she'd hugged his daughter on the front lawn. She'd reacted to Andrea and to him—all they'd lost.

Nate couldn't do or say anything to show his gratitude. 'Thank you' sounded useless and petty for everything she'd expressed.

The door opened, interrupting their mutual gaze. Both of them turned. A little boy walked in snapping his fingers and shaking his hips. A pair of headphones engulfed his ears—and most of his head. He held a walkman.

Nate's shock was so intense, he opened his mouth but nothing came out. The boy had honey blond hair and looked so much like Rori... Did she have a child?

He glanced at her, but her attention was on the boy. She grinned, walking the few steps to set her mug on the kitchen counter. Then she went to the angel-faced boy. She pulled on one end of the headphones. "You've been practicing, slugger."

Nodding in time with the music in his ears, the kid did a few Michael Jackson imitations, hitching his knees up and bumping his nonexistent butt back and forth.

Rori laughed, pure joy, and Nate couldn't help a smile.

She knelt by the little boy. "I knew you were gonna be my best student, Zak. What do you say—a lesson after breakfast?"

The boy shook his wrist, then pointed to her, saying "You're on, chickie."

Rori ruffled her fingers through the back of his silken hair. "I'll be over right after I get dressed."

As abruptly as he'd appeared, the boy sashayed out of the apartment.

"Who was that?" Nate asked as Rori rose to her feet.

"That was the incomparable Zak."

"Is he your son?"

Clearly it wasn't the first time someone had asked. She shook her head. "I could only wish. He's my neighbor's kid."

Nate didn't know whether to be relieved or... How could he be disappointed? Rori loved that little boy as much as he loved her.

"You're good with him."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Not in the least. My mother and I rarely agree about anything, especially when it comes to you. You've always been good with children. Andrea fell in love with you in five short

minutes."

"You've done a good job with her," she offered, but her gratitude was in the soft expression in her eyes.

Nate wasn't sure what they'd accomplished here. A truce? A new beginning? He wasn't sure, if he asked her, what she'd say. So he didn't ask.

"Well, Zak's waiting for me. And you don't wanna be late for church."

She lowered her gaze before turning away, as if she was embarrassed. As if realizing they would either end this visit with "See you later" or "Goodbye"—and maybe she wasn't sure anymore which she preferred.

*A man can hope*, Nate thought, watching her go to the closet between her bed and the bathroom. It was his cue to leave.

Striding to the door, he decided not to say anything. Not "See you later", certainly not "Goodbye."

She stopped him, when he grasped the door handle, with the confession he'd wanted. "I didn't sleep with him."

Nate turned. She laid a pair of jeans and a fuzzy sweater on the bed. "I got him drunk and he passed out on the bed." She glanced up long enough to add "But I don't expect you

to believe me."

Nate had known she no longer trusted him. He had no right to be hurt at her confirmation of it. Still, the hurt worked its way through him like slow poison.

"I do believe you, Rori," he said quietly. "I think I knew it before you said it out loud."

Her widening eyes were the last things he saw before he walked out the door.



## Chapter Eight

SIPPING MILK, Rori watched Zak color in the dog he'd drawn. The dog looked suspiciously like Wayne Kominski's Saint Bernard, the harmless Killer.

When the apartment door opened, Annmarie came in wearing oven mitts, holding a loaf pan she'd taken from Rori's oven. "I'd toss a load of laundry in for you, but the washer isn't working."

Rori waved her hand, unconcerned. "All I need washed is some bedding. It can wait."

"I'll call the super tomorrow."

Though the washer and dryer hadn't come with the apartment, the superintendent rarely kept track of things like that. Every apartment in the building was different. Some came with washers and/or dryers, dishwashers, microwaves. Some didn't.

Donnie had called about an hour before to ask Annmarie to fill in second shift for another waitress. She'd be working both second and third shifts today. Since she wouldn't be working Christmas day, she'd taken the extra hours gratefully. Annmarie had also worked last night. She had to be exhausted, yet she was up by ten, baking pumpkin bread.

Rori worked last night too. Going on-stage hadn't been easy, never was, but last night in

particular had been a nightmare. She kept looking out at the audience, expecting to see Nate again—this time giving in to the "temptation" to watch.

She hadn't seen him at all yesterday, and a part of her was disappointed. She'd assumed when he left Sunday morning, he wouldn't be back. There was no reason for him to return, a *million* not to. Apparently he'd come to tell her he hadn't watched her strip, he did that and that was the end of it. She could go on with her life. She could go on if she could just put it out of her mind.

"I forgot to tell you. Saturday night, some guy I waited on asked about you and said he was an old friend. Is he the one who gave you a ride that night?"

Rori didn't get the chance to talk to her friend on Sunday. After Annmarie woke and spent some time with Zak, she'd asked Rori to watch him while she went shopping for Zak's Christmas presents.

"I'll tell you about some of it later, but that "old friend" was Nate Jovanovich."

Annmarie eased the loaf of bread onto a cooling rack sitting on the table. "I expected him to look different. Less...conservative."

Unable to help herself, Rori laughed. She'd always wondered what Brett would think of Nate, who'd make him look like a Neanderthal.

"I just mean he doesn't seem like your type," Annmarie tried to rectify her statement unnecessarily.

"It's OK. Conservative is exactly the word I'd use to describe Nate." *But he's got his moments of recklessness*, Rori thought, remembering the way he'd stared at her before closing her robe. A purely conservative man would have asked her to close it herself instead of doing it on his own.

Rori sipped her milk again, trying to hide the flush of heat that memory brought to her face.

"He looked like one of those *mankins* in the stores," Zak said without lifting his gaze from his picture.

"Mannequins," Annmarie corrected automatically.

Rori stared at him in surprise. Sunday morning, he hadn't seemed to notice Nate in her apartment when he bopped in, and he hadn't said anything at breakfast. She wondered now what he thought of seeing a man in her apartment.

"Actually, he did look like a well-dressed, every-hair-in-place mannequin," Annmarie agreed with her son. "But when did you meet him, sweetie?"

"Yesterday mornin'. He was at Rori's."

Rori had hoped to tell Annmarie herself. God, she must be thinking her son walked in on a compromising situation. From the widening of her dark eyes, Rori was sure it.

"Want some more milk to go with the bread, slugger?"

She didn't wait for him to answer. She picked up both of their glasses, giving Annmarie a 'come with me' look. Annmarie didn't need an invitation. She followed so close behind, she practically pushed Rori forward.

After setting the glasses on the counter, Rori turned up the radio, knowing Zak's hearing was probably too keen to be fooled even if she whispered.

"I didn't sleep with anybody. Nate showed up at the club Saturday night, which you know. I let him get to me like I always do..."

Annmarie nodded as if to speed her along to the good part. "I ended up picking up this guy who wanted my autograph before I went on. I realized what I was doing as soon as we got here...realized how stupid I'd been. And so I got this guy drunk. He passed out on my bed." Rori held up her hand solemnly. "Don't worry, I'm still a virgin."

Annmarie grinned.

"Nate showed up yesterday morning as I was trying to get this guy out. He was still there when Zak came over."

Leaning toward her, Annmarie whispered, "So what happened with Nate? Why was he there?"

Rori shook her head. "I don't know. To apologize or... something."

"Did you accept?"

Accept? She'd cried in front of him, something she promised herself she'd never do. Not with Nate. It was bad enough with Brett, who'd done everything to bring her to that point. But she never wanted Nate to know how much he hurt her. He didn't deserve the satisfaction...

That thought was old, and she wasn't entirely sure it was true anymore. Imagining Nathan Jovanovich as a cold-blooded manipulator wasn't easy, despite the cruel things he'd done. When he said he knew he'd hurt her unintentionally, a part of her—maybe a foolish part—believed him.

"I don't know. It was all so weird. I don't know what happened. But I'll probably never see him again, so it doesn't matter."

Zak marched into the kitchen. Rori saw him first. He held up his picture. "What do you think, chickies? I call it *Nude Dog Reclining on a Couch*."

Rori never considered controlling herself. She burst out laughing, putting herself at odds

with Annmarie's motherly frown. "You've been spending too much time watching the widow's television." She knelt by him to look at his picture while Zak grinned up at Rori.

With compliments from both of them, he accepted another glass of milk and they all had a slice of the warm bread.

"I think I'd live on yogurt if you didn't cook," Rori said in satiated gratitude.

"You should eat more, with all the dancing you do to keep in shape. Don't you have to teach a class today?"

Rori shook her head. "Closed for the holidays."

She'd started teaching at the school after taking a couple refresher courses. The owner, Charlene Julius—a fifty-year-old fountain of youth—had noticed Rori right away. She wondered why she bothered taking classes when she was better than her instructors. She'd asked Rori to teach a class for adults and one for little kids. The money she made wasn't much of an incentive; being there was what interested Rori. She liked being around classical dancers and those who aspired to be.

As the daughter of a rich business mogul, Charlene had been a member of the New York City Ballet for five years, but dropped out because she finally admitted to herself she believed dance and emotion were synonymous. She'd opened her dance school based on

that philosophy, foregoing her own potential as a *danseuse étoile*.

Someone knocked on Annmarie's door, a rare occurrence since she knew very few people in town. Rori wondered momentarily if Nate had decided not to leave things the way they had yesterday. She didn't get a chance to analyze her feelings on it, thankfully, when Annmarie opened the door to Wayne and his toolbox.

"Zak mentioned your washing machine's on the fritz."

Before Annmarie could insist she planned to call the super tomorrow, Zak got up and pulled Wayne into the apartment. "It's over here."

"I'm sure he's got other things to do—" Annmarie started predictably.

"Nothing. I've got the day off," Wayne told her, looking at her over his shoulder as Zak led him to the washer and dryer set up in the what—once—was a closet near the kitchen. "It's no trouble."

"I can't pay you much—"

"We're neighbors. I don't need to be paid for what's probably just a plugged drain."

Rori could see her friend rapidly searching her mind for reasons to say no, but in the end she said nothing, just mumbled she had to get ready for work.

As Wayne opened the lid to see the undrained water, Rori got up to stand next to Zak,

who watched Wayne in fascination. "Working Christmas?" she asked Wayne.

He pulled the machine out, peering behind it. "Yeah. Thought the guys with families should have the day off."

No need for him to say he'd hoped Annmarie would invite him—Rori suspected he'd switched days at the last minute when he realized the woman he loved wouldn't even consider it, no matter how much Zak might beg. Or maybe he hadn't wanted to put her in the position of breaking her kid's heart in order to protect her own.

"You too?" he asked, squeezing himself into the small space around the machine.

"Yeah. But I don't have to go in til ten, so it's still like I got the day off."

She looked forward to spending Christmas with Zak and Annmarie. A nice quiet Christmas, not one of Brett's bar blowouts.

"Hand me the flashlight, will you, buddy?"

Zak got it eagerly from the open toolbox, then handed it around to Wayne. There wasn't a light in the closet and the windows didn't penetrate around the corner with sunlight.

Annmarie came out of the bathroom in her uniform a few minutes later, ignoring Wayne as she passed him on the way to the kitchen to make herself a sandwich for her dinner break at work. Rori brought the glasses and pumpkin bread in.



"There's a casserole in the fridge. Heat it for about twenty minutes."

Rori didn't bother claiming she could have thrown together something for Zak. Cereal and yogurt about covered her culinary skills. She rinsed the milk glasses.

"Zak probably asked him to Christmas, didn't he?" Annmarie whispered.

"Wayne's working Christmas."

Her friend's relief washed over her taut features. "Why does he have to be so nice?" she said between her teeth, but her tone was more the weary fighting the persistent.

Rori didn't tell her what Annmarie would kill her for saying out loud. Maybe she did know Wayne was crazy about her instead of chock-full of ulterior motives. Maybe that was more frightening to her.

Wayne said something from the other room, just an incomprehensible murmur in the kitchen, then Zak appeared to report "Like I figured, drain's clogged. Just needs to be gunked out." He said it importantly like they couldn't guess he'd quoted Wayne word for word.

"Pretty smart, slugger." Rori ruffled his hair before he went back out to assist and watch Wayne.

Annmarie left for work shortly after that, thanking Wayne grudgingly for going to the

trouble on his day off.

"Me and Rori are going over to the park," Zak announced their plans, knowing Rori wouldn't mind, after the washer was running again and Wayne put his toolbox back in order. "Wanna walk with us?"

"I'd love to, Zak, but I was thinking of going over to where your mom works."

Zak seemed to consider it for a moment, then, despite his disappointment, agreed it was a good thing. "Can we take Killer then? Dogs need walks."

Wayne grinned at him. "Sounds like a good idea. He's always eager to get out of the apartment." He picked up his toolbox, directing "Think you can handle him?" at Zak, but really asking Rori.

She nodded as Zak assured him he'd have no trouble. "We'll put on our coats and be right over to get Killer," Rori said.

While Zak ran to get his coat, hat and mittens, she walked across the hall for her jacket. As she locked her door after her, Zak hurried out with his *Nude Reclining* picture.

"Whatcha doing with that, slugger?" She locked Annmarie's door too.

"I'm gonna give it to Wayne for a Christmas present. Do you think he'll like it?"

Rori reached down and took his gloved hand, squeezing it gently. "You bet he will."

Wayne had left his door open at the end of the hall near the stairs. They walked in without knocking. He washed his hands in the kitchen, then came out. Killer lay on the sofa, his muzzle between his paws, and watched them without much interest.

"I made you something, Wayne." Zak went to him while Rori stopped to pet the dog. "Since I might not see you on Christmas."

Towering over the little boy, Wayne took the picture, saying, "What's this?"

"I drew it myself."

From across the room, Rori thought she saw what looked like tears in Wayne's eyes as he gazed at the picture. He was choked up, no doubt about it, and it made Rori teary too. Kneeling, he hugged Zak. "I love it, buddy. I think I'll have it framed and hang it on the wall."

Zak grinned, his face as radiant as an angel's, when Wayne pulled back. "So, did you get me anything?"

Rori stifled a chuckle. His mother would have scolded him, but Rori had no doubt Wayne did have something for him.

"I was going to ask your mother if it was OK first, but..."

He went to the dresser on the far side of the apartment and got a wrapped box from the

top drawer.

Zak's eager tearing revealed a toy bulldozer. She'd bet Wayne had wanted to get a monster bulldozer toy for Zak, but wasn't sure Annmarie would let him accept it. She couldn't balk at this one.

"This is so cool!" Zak shouted joyfully, pulling it from the box and running it over the coffee table while making vroom sounds. "Thanks, Wayne."

Wayne smiled, pleased with Zak's reaction.

"Can I bring it to the park with me, Rori?"

"kay, but just make sure you don't lose it."

She took the dog leash from Wayne, which got Killer excited. Going outside was the only thing that interested him. Killer was not an apartment dog.

Wayne pulled on his coat and the four of them went outside together. "You can come over and get him when you get home," Rori said, and he nodded before getting into his truck.

"Do you think Wayne would marry you and mom?" Zak asked as he drove away.

"Both of us?"

"Yeah. So we can be a family."

Rori smiled, saddened a little by Zak's obvious desire to have Wayne for a father. "Well, for him to marry both of us is an illegal little thing called bigamy. Besides, he really likes your mom."

"Mom's been hurt."

Where he'd heard that, Rori couldn't guess. Annmarie certainly wouldn't tell him anything about how she'd been hurt. Had Zak asked Wayne the same questions he asked her now?

"Yeah she has, slugger."

"Wayne wouldn't hurt her. He'd take care of us."

Rori believed the same, but she wasn't going to play Cupid. "Your mom already takes care of you," she said gently, trying to stand still while Killer tugged eagerly on the leash.

"I know. But somebody needs to take care of mom. She works too hard. 'Soon as I get tall enough, I'm going to get a job so she doesn't have to work anymore.'"

She'd reached the end of her experience. What could she say to Zak? "Why don't you talk to your mom about this stuff, slugger? You know you can tell her anything."

Zak glanced at his new toy, somehow managing to look old and wise despite every indication of youth and innocence. "Then she'd worry that I'm not happy. I just want her to

be happy."

"She is happy." *A little gun shy, but happy.*

"Really? You think she is? All the way happy?"

How could a person miss what they didn't know? Annmarie had never had true love with a man. So Rori didn't feel like she was lying when she said "I think she's all the way happy, slugger."

For a minute, he thought about it, then seemed to take her at her word.

As they turned toward the park, a car pulled into the lot. Rori only recognized the vehicle because, yesterday morning, she'd gone to the window facing the street to watch Nate leave.

Somehow she'd known he wouldn't leave it the way they had the day before.

The car pulled into an open slot, and Rori watched Nate get out while both Zak and Killer pulled her toward the park.

"Forget something?" she asked. She didn't smile, but she wasn't mad either.

He was dressed in jeans and the teal parka he'd worn in Syracuse. He still looked like a "mankin."

Shaking his head with a sheepish grin, he met the three of them in the middle of the

parking lot. "Just heading back to Syracuse for Christmas and thought I'd drop by."

"Rori, we're going to the park," Zak insisted impatiently. His tone made it clear he didn't want to stand around talking to Nate. Maybe he thought Nate was a threat to Wayne marrying both her and his mother.

"I-90 is that way." Rori pointed east.

*Why are you here? Do you even know?*

Their eyes met accidentally. Rori saw an answer there. He didn't know why he was here either. But he'd come because he couldn't stop himself.

*Oh God.*

"Mind if we tag along with you?"

We? Rori glanced past him. Andrea had to be with him. The guy in the front seat must be Jeremiah—Nate and Jenna's "like a son."

"We're walking," she said unnecessarily, somehow unable to tell him it probably wasn't a good idea. What was the point of any of this? But she didn't look at Zak, knowing his expression could make her say no to Nate. He'd get over his disappointment when he saw Andrea. Zak loved kids, maybe because he'd moved around so much he never got a chance to make friends.

While Nate went to round up his family, Rori tried to get herself untangled from the leash Killer had wound around her legs in his eagerness to set off. She glanced at Zak to see him tight-lipped. Annmarie had raised a polite son.

"Hey, he's got a little girl. Look, Rori." Zak pointed to Andrea as she emerged from the backseat encased in her bright pink snow suit again. Zak's excitement, like with his new toy, returned.

"Yup. Her name's Andrea. Why don't you go say hi, slugger?"

He was off like a shot. Nate had set his little girl on her feet and reached into the backseat for something else.

"Hi, Andrea. I'm Zak. Wanna see my new toy?"

Andrea's fascination with slugger warred with her shyness. He jabbered on with her, not noticing or caring if she understood a word of it.

Nate straightened, draping a small diaper bag over his shoulder as if it was the most natural thing in the world. His little girl turned her face into his pant leg, only to zero back on Zak with an irresistible smile a second later.

The guy in the passenger's seat lumbered out then, looking every inch the bad boy type Rori knew so well. They exchanged "Hey" and "How ya doin'?" once Nate introduced them



formally.

They started off toward the park, which was in the opposite direction as Baby Dolls. Jeremiah walked ahead with the two kids, Andrea in the middle holding their hands on either side. Zak talked to Jeremiah now too.

Rori had her hands full trying to keep Killer from taking off at a dead run. But it didn't keep her from wondering when Nate would speak. What he could possibly say. He hadn't just "dropped by." You dropped in on friends, past and present. They were neither. They might not be dire enemies anymore, but they didn't share any mutual ground. Nate had a purpose for coming here, and she didn't imagine it boded well for her.

Killer tugged hard suddenly, dragging her forward a couple inches. Nate's hand covered hers. He was trying to help her, so the dog wouldn't haul her off on his whim. The feel of his skin against hers was anything but helpful. Killer's tug or Nate's touch; she wasn't sure which put her more off-balance.

She couldn't look at Nate--afraid of confirmation he felt it too? or didn't?--when she said, "I've got it."

"You keep this dog in an apartment?"

"A neighbor does, yeah. But Killer's not too thrilled about it."

"No, I imagine he's not."

The inane chatter managed only to tense Rori more. This wasn't a hi, how-you-doing? pleasant conversation drop by. So why did he act like it was? Did he want her to relax before he unveiled his bomb/purpose?

They made it to the park without further touching or conversation. Jeremiah took the kids to the merry-go-round, making Rori wonder if he was in on it, whatever "it" was. Zak held onto Andrea during the gentle spin.

Rori watched them with a smile before glancing at Nate. Best to get it over with. Hooking her end of Killer's very long leash to the cemented-in bench leg, she let the pooch go as much as the leash allowed. Then she sat on the bench, keeping her eye on the kids instead of on the fit of Nate's well-worn jeans.

After a few seconds, he sat next to her, too close for comfort. She could smell his cologne, and it surprised her to realize he didn't wear the same brand he had as a teenager. Yet there was something familiar about his scent all the same.

*You're smelling him, the boy, the man, the essence. God, if that isn't pathetic—to know someone the way animals know each other. And then not even trust them to keep their words from attacking you.*

"Look, you want something. You didn't come here to play tea party. Spit it out and get it over with."

She turned to him once the words were out. The way he looked at her...as if he'd never looked away since he arrived today.

"I did come just to see you. But I want to talk. To understand you."

No one had ever said anything like it to her before. The urge to laugh was strong. Almost as strong as the need to cry. Fortunately, they counterbalanced each other.

Shifting her gaze back to the merry-go-round, to Andrea's giggles and Zak's big grin, she clasped her hands together tightly. "There's not much to understand. You live in the jungle, you find a way to survive. That's all there is to it."

As if he hadn't heard a word she said, he demanded, "Why do you work there?"

How could she blame him for not understanding? The world he lived in was about redemption and second chances and fair shakes. She didn't know that world. Her world was like a merry-go-round—fast, slow; either way you couldn't get off and nothing ever changed. It kept going around and around.

"Maybe I like my job."

He leaned forward with a little snort of disbelief that irritated her. He was so close now,

their shoulders brushed together. "If you enjoyed it, you'd make eye contact while you dance. But you don't. Not the way the others do."

Rori cringed at his aim. Since the first time she stripped, she'd made a conscious effort to avert her eyes. Somehow it hadn't mattered if the audience thought she gave to them personally. She didn't want them to think she did.

"Don't you know you have a choice?" he asked softly.

She turned her head to look at him, floundering only a second to find him near enough to kiss. Then her anger took over. "I had a choice, yeah. I had a choice between living on the street or taking a decent-paying job—the only job a person like me is capable of getting. Don't you dare talk to me about choices, Nate."

He didn't believe her, no surprise. "You had successful careers in the last eleven years. Didn't you make any money from those?"

Laughing under her breath, she let him get away with the too-personal nature of his questions again. She'd never been successful. She'd followed Brett around when he went from one job to the next. They rarely knew where the next paycheck would come from. What they lived on was the meager savings Brett managed from his band's three albums and the modeling and music video gigs she landed almost everywhere they went. None of it

was enough to launch a career on, or to make her rich.

"The money I have, I made from stripping." She shook her head. "God, what do you want me to say?" Did he honestly expect her to put herself in a trap or, worse, to try to justify herself? Damn, he had nerve.

"I want to know why you think this is the best you can do."

*Looking at the world through rose-colored glasses again, holy man?* Rori thought, a hair's-breadth away from strangling him.

"You don't know anything about me. You think I didn't try to get a nice, respectable job? I applied at restaurants, maid services. You name it. They don't give jobs to people with no diploma and no experience. You know how hard it is to go into every damn business in New York and hear the same thing over and over?" Tears suddenly filled her eyes, and she fought them with her anger. "You sit there thinking 'You're right. I've got no experience. I've got no goddamn experience making a bed or taking out the trash or cleaning a toilet. I've lived in a fucking cave my whole life. You got me pegged.'"

Blindly, she glanced ahead of her and swiped at her eyes. "Can you believe there's a such thing as a professional *maid*? Like they went to school for this."

"Rori..." she heard Nate's voice. She refused his sympathy with an emphatic shake of her

head.

"I had no choice. Because I'd rather live on the street than crawl back to Brett. He took everything I owned when I left. All I had was what I was wearing. So when Donnie offered me a job at Baby Dolls, a job that paid a hell of a lot more money than I could make as a maid or a waitress, you're damn right I took it."

The strength of her feelings somehow dissolved the tears, and she could look at him again. "If you expect me to apologize for it, you're gonna be disappointed again. Because, believe it or not, I respect myself for the first time in eleven years. I won't let you take that away from me."

Leaning down, she unhooked the dog leash. Killer came running and joined her over by the kids. Rori knew what she'd said revealed far too much. And her only consolation was Nate couldn't seem to say anything. She'd finally rendered him speechless.

## Chapter Nine

"DOES THE FOXX family still live at the end of the block?" Nate asked his father nonchalantly as he studied the chessboard between them. The Christmas tree lights reflected in the window, but he could still see Jason Radcliffe outside, could see the glow of his cigarette.

"Most of the kids have moved away. The Mrs. had a stroke a few years ago. Doesn't get around much anymore."

Nate's mother murmured something following her husband's words.

"Do you remember any of the kids?"

His father glanced up from the board for only an instant to say, "I know there were a lot of them. Five, I think. Most of those were on their own before they moved here."

"Darlene Foxx--she was as trashy as that Aurora Mason."

Nate wasn't surprised his mother had been listening from a few feet away, where she did cross-stitch. "God forbid you ever take up with girls like that, Jeremiah."

Nate and Jeremiah's eyes met for a don't-get-her-started moment. His mother knew Jeremiah came out of a gang, knew he had "taken up" with many girls she wouldn't

approve of. But, since she accepted Jeremiah as her grandson, she never mentioned his past. In ways, she seemed to have blocked it out.

"You haven't been seeing Aurora Mason, have you? Is that why Andrea was saying her name again last night?"

How his mother made the connection between Nate's questions about the Foxxs' and Rori, he'd never know. He did know if he confirmed it, he'd spend the rest of the holiday hearing no end of it.

"Oh dear God—" she started a minute later, taking his silence as confirmation of her worst nightmare.

His father turned in his chair to look at his wife. "Don't you even think of it, Marilyn. The boy's old enough to know what he's doing and plenty old enough not to be henpecked for it. You just keep your opinions to yourself."

Nate and Jeremiah were as startled by Henry putting his wife in her place as she was. For a full minute, no one uttered a word, then his father nodded. "Now, Jeremiah, why don't you come over here and relieve my son. I think he's lost interest in this game."

So his father had seen his repeated glances out the window. Nate hadn't had a chance to talk to Jason since he arrived yesterday, hadn't even been sure he was still in Syracuse until



he saw him come out of the house a few minutes before Nate asked his father about the Foxxs'.

Nate stood. "Think I'll go outside for some fresh air."

His mother started to protest, but a glance at her husband and she quieted immediately. In relief, Nate went to put on his shoes and coat, hurrying in case Jason decided to go in soon.

Yesterday Rori confirmed Jeremiah's information about a man named Brett in her life...and confirmed that that man hurt her in some ways too. Hurt her enough to make her believe she had so few options becoming a stripper was actually a good thing.

Nate didn't begrudge her her self-respect. He could see she really believed everything she said, could see that the world hurt her too with their opinions of her. As much as he wanted to take her in his arms and promise her he'd care for her, he knew Rori would accept very little from him. She had to work her life out on her own, but it didn't mean he couldn't do everything in his power to prove to her that, while taking the job at Baby Dolls initially gave her self-esteem and independence, eventually it would steal everything she'd worked toward if she kept at it. And she deserved so much more than that out of life.

Jason walked up and down the sidewalk in front of his parents' home when Nate moved

out of the house and onto the porch. He and Jason got along well despite their differences. Nate talked to him often during his years of marriage to Jenna—

about his life, the paths he chose. He didn't judge Jason since almost everything he heard was second-hand news.

Jason had gotten in a lot of trouble as a teenager and that really hadn't changed since he became an adult. Like a true vagabond, he went from job to job, town to town, woman to woman. He admitted it all to Nate without inhibition, agreed with nearly everything he said, yet couldn't seem to shake his own restlessness with life. Nate had stopped trying to "make him change" long before Jenna gave up trying to get him to do it. Jason was Jason, he knew he had family who loved him and would always be there for him. He wouldn't settle down until he was good and ready to.

"Hey, Jovie," Jason greeted him the way he had for as long as Nate could remember.

The air was chilly despite the lack of wind or snow. "Wasn't sure you were still here," Nate said, shoving his hands in the pockets of his parka.

Jason grinned boyishly. "Sure. I stay around until they're tired of supportin' me. I figure I got another week."

Nate knew what that meant. Jason stayed until his father started asking him when he'd

get a job.

"You take up smokin'?" Jason teased him, and Nate shook his head.

"Just needed some fresh air." *And answers you might have.* Uncomfortably, he shifted, glancing around at the moon. No matter how he justified it to himself, asking Jason everything he wanted to qualified as invading Rori's privacy. He had no right to do it, but it never stopped him before.

"Do you remember the family who moved in at the end of the block?" He pointed west. "Their last name was Foxx."

For a long minute, Jason stared at him in disbelief, as if he'd read his mind somehow. "Darlene Foxx," he said under his breath. "Yeah. I went out with her. Still see her whenever I'm in New York City."

"Did she have any brothers?"

"Four of 'em." Jason's eyes were as dark as the night around them, but he didn't seem suspicious of Nate's intentions. In fact, he seemed down enough not to notice.

"One of them was a musician?"

Jason nodded. "Brett. He was on his own before they moved here. Cool guy."

"So you knew him? Do you know how Rori knows him?"

Jason took a last drag of his cigarette, combining smoke and cold air in his exhale. As he dropped it on the sidewalk and stepped on it, he said, "I introduced 'em. Never thought she'd take off with him, but..."

No one in the neighborhood was quite the gossip Nate's mother was. So when Rori ran away, no one ever confirmed whether or not she went alone. No one had been all that upset about it either. Once she called her father—a couple days after she'd left him a note to say she was going, not to come after her and that she was fine—he basically let her go. As far as Nate knew he was the only one who'd been horrified about it. When he confronted Pastor Mason, the man had simply said "I can't hold her. As long as she's fine, I won't hold her back."

"So you knew she ran away with him back then?"

Jason shook his head. "Hell no. Me and Darlene kinda thought so, but it wasn't til I ran into the two of them in New York City when I was about twenty that I knew."

Glancing away, down the street toward the Foxx house, Nate realized this Brett had to have been quite a few years older than Rori. Didn't the man have any qualms about taking such a young girl out of her home? Even if that girl could have passed for twenty-five instead of sweet sixteen?

"What's he like?" Nate turned back to ask. So far, he found little to approve of, but he had the feeling he wouldn't like the man no matter what he was really like. He'd hurt Rori bad enough to make her take an unredeemable job just to be free of him.

*What about you? You hurt her bad enough to make her run off with a stranger just to get away from the pain you caused.*

Jason shrugged. "Like me, I guess. Can't settle down in one place for too long without goin' crazy."

"I mean, how did he treat her?" Despite his guilt, there was no sense being coy now. His brother-in-law had to realize he was sticking his nose in where it didn't belong anyway.

Jason thought a second, then gave something of a gruff laugh. "Man, he was crazy about her the first time he met her. Kept askin' her to run away with him. He's kinda like me—got too many women after him, but doesn't want any of 'em 'cept the one he can't get. He was like a hungry dog after a bone. But you know she only wanted you."

When Jason glanced at him, Nate was glad for the darkness capable of hiding his increasing shame.

"Guess when we got back from Florida and you and Jenna announced you were engaged, Rori figured you weren't worth it and took off with Brett."

*Sure you want to hear this?*

Nate barely noticed the cold as he absorbed his own remorse. A lot still didn't make sense, but he couldn't deny Rori ran away because he'd rejected her. The only contradiction was, why would she let Jason touch her if she loved Nate so much? It wasn't enough to make him feel justified now any more than it had back then.

"So he cared about her?" Nate asked, his throat tight.

Almost unconsciously, Jason reached into the inside of his leather jacket for a cigarette. "Suppose he did in his own way. The couple times I seen 'em, well..." He paused to light the smoke. "...he's not Mr. Romantic or Faithful or anything. And he's got a mean streak a mile wide. But she stayed with him, so it couldn't've been all bad."

Yes, a man who would take everything a woman owned if she left him could be said to have a "mean streak," yet Nate wanted it spelled out to him. "Mean, how? He hit her?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I never saw him hit her. But I mean he was *on* her all the time. I think he made her feel bad about herself. But, hey, I'm nobody's prize either. How many of us are nice all the time? Women can drive you to just about anything. You can't tell me Jenna didn't nag you to death sometimes. She sure did me."

Jenna, nag? They'd had disagreements, but overall she respected him. He'd given her

little reason not to. He extended the same courtesy to her. He couldn't agree to understand another man treating the woman he supposedly loved cruelly for any reason.

Rori and Jenna were complete opposites, but at heart both of them were gentle and vulnerable. What man would take advantage of Rori's tender-heartedness? And for what possible reason?

To have stayed for eleven years, Rori must have loved Brett Foxx. She'd put up with his cruelty, his cheating, the ways Nate knew the man undermined her confidence. Part of the reason for the return of some of her self-worth had to be getting out of that jerk's influence. And reach.

"So what's up?" Jason asked. "Why do you wanna know all this stuff now?"

After hitting him up for one answer after the other, Nate had to give some sort of explanation. "I saw her recently, and I guess it got me thinking about it again."

Jason stared at him, a hint of a grin forming. "You know, I never understood why you did it, Jovie. Don't get me wrong, I loved my sister. But I can't believe you chose her over Rori. Rori would've given you anything. She didn't give *me* it because of you. I always thought you felt the same about her until I saw you kissin' up to Jenna during that vacation. I guess you got your reasons. Maybe cuz I told you how far I almost had her in my

backseat. But I still don't get it."

It surprised Nate that that betrayal still pierced him. After eleven years, he believed he and Rori couldn't have shared the life he'd had with Jenna. Some way or another, it would have ended.

"I'll never regret what I shared with Jenna. We shared the same goals, the same world."

This time Jason flat-out laughed. "You talkin' about a business deal or love?"

The words sent Nate into immediate defense—he and Jenna shared love in every way. But he also heard how it sounded. And the truth was, at first turning to Jenna had been something of a business deal. She'd been his friend, but he didn't love her romantically. He didn't love her the way he'd loved Rori. He'd chosen Jenna on the basis of mutual goals in life. Love had come eventually despite how hard it was for him to forget everything he felt and wanted with Rori.

Had he really been that cold-hearted? To chose comfort over love? No wonder Rori couldn't forgive him. She saw his choice the same way Jason did. Nate began to wonder if he was any different than Brett Foxx in the way he treated Rori.

*Take the advice you give gang members: The past is the past. Don't lose sight of it, but don't let it take over either. You can mend some of the damage.*



He'd do it because he already knew he couldn't let Rori run away this time.

"GOOD WORK, people. See you next Thursday."

As her Thursday afternoon adult class filed out, Rori went to the stereo to take the CD out. The class had been small today considering it was the day after Christmas.

Her life had slipped back into seeming routine since she'd returned from her father's, but a part of her kept wondering if it was an illusion. Something she'd fabricated to keep from realizing in reality everything had changed.

If things were normal, why did she spend so much time remembering the past? The good, the bad. Memories of Nate and Brett bombarded her constantly and mingled to the point where she spent Christmas afraid one of them would show up unexpectedly.

"Hey."

The voice directly behind her made her jump in alarm. She turned to see Courtney grinning. "You're jumpy," the girl teased. "Who were you expecting?"

*A ghost or two*, Rori thought, but shook her head. "You did good today." Requirements for a Baby Dolls dancer were too simplistic to necessitate the ability to move each part of the body as if it was a separate yet whole component. Through this class, Courtney was

learning more than how to use her God-given (in this case) endowments to spur an audience.

"Really?" Courtney beamed. "Thanks. Listen, do you want to go get a cup of coffee after we shower?"

"Sure. I was surprised to see you today. It is the day after Christmas. I thought you'd spend it with your parents."

From what Rori had pieced together during their talks, Courtney's home life was pretty close to the Mike-and-Carol-Brady variety.

"Actually, they went on a cruise this year. I was glad—I got to spend it with Donnie."

Courtney's usual blind look of love was overshadowed by something... Worry?

"That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," the girl admitted, and Rori had a vision of her first and last Christmases with Brett. God, the contrast. She hoped Courtney didn't waste so many years figuring out Mr. Commitment Five Minute Style.

They went to shower, then, before they left the school, Rori stopped to say goodbye to Charlene. The owner was working with Deb Smyth.

Once a year, the school put on a fundraising ballet, performed by its students. One for the kids and one for the adults. The adults were doing *Giselle* this year.

Sensing her mentor's frustration with the understudy—become—lead, Rori made her farewells quick.

"Somebody told me you turned down the lead," Courtney said as they climbed into Rori's truck. Courtney had started taking classes at the school long after auditions were over and parts assigned. "You'd be a natural for it. But it's probably beneath you, you're so talented. You should be on Broadway or something."

Rori shook her head. Courtney had said it before, but she knew "Broadway" would take one look at her and sum up her worth in that short of time.

In the excitement of Charlene's encouragement in the beginning, Rori had auditioned—and got—the lead role in the annual play. Her own fear, something even she couldn't explain, had crept in shortly after. She had no doubt she could perform flawlessly. She wouldn't allow herself to believe the reason she'd given the part to her understudy Deb Smyth had anything to do with whether or not she felt she had the *right* to perform the lead role. Dancing it had felt right—fitting almost, because she emphasized with the tragic Giselle. But whenever she wasn't in the part, she knew she couldn't let herself do it. Charlene hadn't forgiven her for it completely either.

She decided to give the same excuse she handed Charlene every time she tried to get her

to change her mind. "I teach at the school now. The annual ballet should be done to show off the student talent."

Courtney shrugged as if to say 'Why should that matter?'

They ordered just coffee at a nearby restaurant. Annmarie had fed her too well in the past couple days.

"So, what's the Menace to All Females up to?" Rori asked, watching her friend stir a packet of artificial sweetener into her coffee.

"You really don't think he's in it for the long haul, do you?" Lifting her cup, Courtney looked over the rim at her. "I didn't want to believe you, and I'm still not sure I do."

"What happened?" The question was redundant because she really didn't need confirmation. Donnie acted suspicious, and Courtney worried it meant he was about to dump her.

"Nothing really. It just...feels different."

Brett and Donnie were true brothers in crime. Rori knew exactly what Courtney meant. Looking across the table at the young girl, seeing her beauty, her intelligence, she wanted to break Donnie's nose the way she had Brett's. Courtney was way too good for a roving-eye Romeo. She was too good for the place she worked. Baby Dolls and men like

Donnie were for the jaded and beyond—redemption. Not for a golden girl like Courtney.

"Have you noticed anything? You worked last night. Has he hired anybody to replace Mavis?"

Worrying during the interview process was smart. The majority of the time, Donnie hired based on who turned him on the most...and was most responsive to his charms.

"If you think he's losing interest, Courtney, he probably is. Don't blame yourself for it. I haven't seen anything, but I've seen Donnie's kind before. He's not much different than Brett."

"Brett Foxx?"

Rori nodded, tight-lipped.

"He cheated on you?"

"From the start." She shook a cigarette out of the pack from her jacket.

"How did you find out?" Courtney's coffee was forgotten as she listened with avid interest.

"I caught him," Rori said, after the smoke was lit. "But I sensed it before. It felt different—the way he treated me." God, hard to believe Brett had ever been sweet, gentle, attentive...so crazy about her, she'd actually felt special for awhile there.

"But you loved him and stuck it out for so long."

*You see love, I see mistakes.* "Look, kid, I know you love Donnie and you think he loves you. But he's not gonna change, no matter how amazing you are. I think you need to realize it's possible to love somebody and to know the relationship is destructive for you. I made a mistake staying with Brett as long as I did. I don't wanna see you make that mistake with Donnie. You deserve a lot better."

Courtney stared at her silently for a long minute, warring with Rori's words and experience, with her own heart. "Is that why you left Brett? Because you realized you deserved better?"

What could she say? She'd crawled away from Brett without an ounce of confidence.

Rori sat back in the booth. She didn't look Courtney in the eyes when she admitted, "No. I just realized he was killing me. And I was letting him do it." A part of her left vowing never to snake back on the sole basis of his dare to her to try it for good.

"I wish I had half the courage you do," Courtney said with a soft, embarrassed smile. "But every time he looks at me, or touches me, I stop thinking rationally."

"Poison never tasted so good," Rori said under her breath. Mistakes were personal. They had to be experienced personally. Until Courtney stepped out into her own mine field, she

could only entertain advice instead of take it to heart and to task. It was too early for her to step back, to see Donnie for who he was.

Rori wouldn't have believed it of Brett in the beginning. When Jace Radcliffe introduced them, she'd thought Brett was sexy in a completely savage way and she'd been flattered by his attention. She remembered Darlene remarking she'd never seen her older brother act like a lovesick puppy before. Brett asked her to run away with him that first day. She'd laughed, never believing he was serious. Every chance he got, he was there trying to woo her.

The best parts of their relationship were those first two months after she ran away with him. He'd seen her sorrow and gave everything he could to comfort her. He complimented her, held her without making any moves. For a while she'd wondered if he was her savior from the cruel memories of Nate. He told her he loved her one night, holding her while she cried, and she let him make love to her. She'd felt little pleasure or pain, and—as he hadn't noticed she was a virgin—he didn't notice her lack of response. He'd treated her well.

She still couldn't remember when that changed. She cried herself to sleep for a long time after they became lovers...until she noticed Brett no longer held her gently and seemed annoyed with her all the time. The only time the "romance" returned after that was when

she left him, got involved with someone else yet eventually always returned to him. Funny that he'd considered her brief relationships with other men betrayals all the while insisting his "meant nothing." He recalled that damn scoreboard everything he saw a chink in her fragile armor.

*You made one decision you'll never regret,* Rori assured herself after dropping Courtney at her apartment. *Leaving him.*

A decision she'd been regretting was telling Nate all she had Monday afternoon. Telling Courtney about her past was one thing. Telling Nate was another. Only God knew what he'd do with the information.

She was afraid to analyze the knowledge that he wouldn't just disappear from her life the way he had last time they ran into each other in Syracuse. Afraid to know if she wanted him gone or wanted him to come back for who-knew-what purpose.

She dreamed of him now. She listened for footsteps in her apartment building hall. Scanned the crowd at Baby Dolls, expecting him to appear. And when he didn't, she felt strangely let down.

*Don't you know he can't hurt you if he stays away? You can go on with your life, fulfilled because you've got friends who love you. If he keeps coming back...you'll have to*



*compromise. You'll want things you shouldn't even consider when they'll never happen.*

She thought of last Sunday morning, the way he held her, the way he looked at her the same as when he was a teenager and could make her believe he loved her with just a mesmerized stare. Thinking about it led to thinking of that one perfect kiss. And pain. It always led to pain.

## Chapter Ten

NATE CLIMBED the stairs to the third floor knowing his presence wouldn't be explained with a simple 'I was in the neighborhood' this time. Rori would want more this time, a reason outside of him grilling her about her life and making her defensive.

He felt a little trepidation going in, but mostly he felt eagerness. Christmas with his parents and family had been slow, nice...but he'd spent a lot of the time wondering what Rori was doing. Was she spending the holiday with her neighbor and little boy? Was she working? Was she building all her defenses against him?

Driving back from Syracuse today, he'd realized just how deeply he longed to see her. Instead of heading straight for home, he considered stopping to see her then. But Andrea had been asleep in her car seat, Jeremiah looked like he had car fever... Besides, he wanted to be alone with Rori.

*Guaranteed she'd like to avoid that at all cost. Is that what you plan to tell her when she asks what you're trying to accomplish by coming here? That you needed to see her? How far are we from the hills? Because that's where she'll head.*

Reaching the top of the third floor staircase, he saw Rori's apartment door open. As he

neared, a dark-haired woman came out carrying a basket of laundry. She shut the door behind her and then she saw him. Nate recognized her immediately as his waitress at Baby Dolls. Her hair was in a loose ponytail and she was dressed in casual wear, but it was her without a doubt. The suspicious look in her eyes was a dead giveaway. Apparently she recognized him too.

"You must be Rori's neighbor. Zak's mother." Suspecting if his smile was overfriendly she'd be even more wary of him, Nate kept his expression merely congenial.

She nodded curtly.

"Is Rori home?"

"She's teaching a class. She'll be back soon."

This woman had the same sweet warmth shining in her oval face her son did. Yet both of them seemed to view him as a criminal. Or maybe they were simply protective of Rori.

"I'd like to wait, if you don't mind." Asking her permission was unnecessary, but she was obviously important to Rori. Nate wanted to get into her—and her son's—good graces for that reason.

"Why?" The way she stood in front of Rori's door was clearly a challenge. *You're not getting through me, buddy, unless you've got a darn good password.*

Nate couldn't help smiling this time. "I guess she's mentioned me."

Rori's neighbor shifted suddenly, revealing uneasiness. She hadn't anticipated his response, he realized. "I know who you are," she said slowly, transferring the plastic basket to her other hip. "Me and Rori have no secrets. I know you hurt her a long time ago, and I don't like it. She doesn't deserve to be hurt."

Fervent inflection strained her tone as she continued, "Rori Mason is a saint. She'd give me and my little boy everything she has if we needed it. She helped me when she didn't know me from Adam. I'd do anything for her...and that includes telling you to walk out of here and never come back if there's any chance you might hurt her again."

Conviction made her face a deep crimson. Nate couldn't speak for a moment, absorbing the deep friendship and love Rori had inspired here. Her neighbor knew there was much more beneath the surface of the notorious reputation Rori never could shake. She knew it and he knew it.

"I know I hurt her. It took me a long time to accept that, but I'm not here to make it worse. I care about her too."

*Nice words. You keep insisting and implying you want to make amends, but it's a lot more than that. Maybe it's more than wanting her to trust you again too.*

Making amends and gaining trust had nothing to do with how easy it was to remember the plans he'd made for the two of them as a teenager, plans to marry Rori, have babies with her, spend the rest of his life with her. And making amends and gaining trust had nothing to do with how easily the thought of her became fantasy lately.

He remembered his mother's scowl the past couple days every time he started daydreaming, playing with the memory of how Rori moved on the stage, the sight of her silky flesh, the feel of her in his arms...the need that no longer resembled that of the naive adolescent he'd been. His needs were so tangled up now, he couldn't separate them into making amends, gaining trust, renewing friendship or sexual desire. All of it was wrapped up in the uncontrollable longing to be with her. Not even knowing she didn't return that longing lessened it.

Rori's neighbor started to say something, then, looking past him, she closed her mouth. Nate turned to see Rori coming up the steps. She had a duffel bag slung over her shoulder. Seeing it, he wondered about the dance class her friend mentioned. Was this something outside of the club?

The look on Rori's face as she approached them was a combination of annoyance and resignation.

"Need anything washed?" her neighbor asked her.

After giving him something close to a glare, Rori opened her duffel then threw a spandex top, tights and something that looked like bikini bottoms into the laundry basket.

The image of that white satin costume she'd worn on stage flashed through his mind so vividly, he could hardly breathe. She now wore a pair of black velvet leggings under a short top and her leather jacket. The casualness should have defied the acceleration of his heartbeat. She certainly wasn't trying to be sexy.

He could see she'd showered recently. Her hair was a little damp, a little mussed. No make-up covered her natural beauty.

Nate swallowed with difficulty, tracing the V'd front of her leggings with a mental finger. Her belly button seemed to nestle into that V the way a kiss would...

He didn't turn away from Rori or see her neighbor disappear into the apartment across the hall. When he met Rori's eyes, she glared at him again, then pivoted to shove her key in the door. "Now what?" she demanded, moving inside.

The anger in her tone barely phased him. He followed her inside, closing the door behind him.

"What's the excuse this time? Or are you gonna admit finally you just wanna see if I

fucked up again—"

She'd tossed her duffel on the bed, shrugging out of her jacket as she turned to face him. Everything about this woman affected him. She mesmerized him to the point that his hands clenched, fighting the ache to touch her sleek curves molded so intimately by the soft fabrics she wore.

*You have no idea what you do to men, Rori. No idea that looking at you tangles up inside until the knots are too tight to undo.*

But Nate knew what would make him come undone—touch. His. Hers.

Right now, he needed to be close to her. Rori's wariness grew with each step he took toward her. Her eyes widened, and he heard the choked gasp she gave when he was finally near enough to smell her clean fragrance. Near enough to create possibilities.

"You know, there's a lot more productive things to do with a mouth than curse," he said softly. He couldn't help it. Her tangible nervousness intoxicated him. He wanted to make her *more* nervous.

She lowered her eyes abruptly. "Why do you always stare at me like that?"

Had she noticed it "always"? When they were teenagers? When she sat in the next row of desks in school, one ahead of him, and he imagined what it'd be like to sink his fingers

into her golden hair or run his hand over her shapely thigh?

"I can't help it." Now anymore than he could then. Before he considered it, before he even realized his instincts had taken over he dipped his head and captured her mouth beneath his.

*Soft as a ripe peach, wet, pliant...*

The taste of her hadn't hit him yet before she shoved him away. His shock at his own reckless actions increased when he saw the tears in her eyes. His kiss was more of a betrayal to her, he understood intrinsically.

"Damn you. How could you do that?" Her hand lifted to her mouth as if to wipe his impression away. Somehow she couldn't do it. Her fingers touched her lips in wonder instead of disgust.

Nate shook his head, wishing he hadn't come here so...knotted up. "I couldn't help it." What had he been thinking? With so much unresolved between them, so many regrets and grudges...

Before the apology could form in his mind, Rori reached for him, ignoring her own recent objections, and kissed him. Despite her reckless impulse, the kiss was nowhere near reckless. It was soft, sweet, and just as dangerous to his senses as their first—and



last—kiss.

Nate was overwhelmed with need. He wrapped his arms around her, tugging her so close she seemed to slide up his body as naturally as a vine up the side of a brick wall. His fingertips brushed the waist edge of her leggings at her back, but the fabric wasn't nearly as velvety as her skin.

They might have been lifetime lovers. Their mouths opened simultaneously, their tongues touched and mated, mingling textures and tastes and needs.

No thoughts pushed him toward realizing how wrong this was. At the moment, he couldn't imagine this ever being anything but right and good...and perfect.

He closed his eyes, aware of the shape of her body molding to the unyielding lines of his own. Her soft breasts inched upward against him when she folded her arms around his shoulders. Soft other than the pebbled crests of her nipples.

*What would it be like to touch you and watch you become aroused?* All too clearly, he remembered the ethereal glow surrounding her after their last kiss.

Nate opened his eyes to see the same beauty before him. *You gave me your heart that day, Rori, and I trampled over it like an insensitive bull.*

As soft as their kiss was, Nate gentled it more—an apology and a promise to be tender

from now on. Taking her face between his palms, he broke the kiss only to trail his mouth over her cheeks, the bridge of her nose, her eyelids and brows.

"Productive," he said quietly, smiling as he brushed her swollen lips again.

She'd opened her eyes at his word and reality dawned all too quickly. "Oh God, Nate, what are we doing? We can't... There's no way..."

The torment in her voice affected him as much as her shaky hands pushing him away did. She hugged herself protectively, turning away almost blindly. "What do you want from me? I don't have a clue and...I have to know."

Summing up all he felt for her would only confuse her. He didn't know how to answer. "I want to be your friend," he said carefully, putting his hands in his pockets. The room was cold with Rori so far away now. She'd went to the window and pressed her forehead and fingertips to the pane like a shaken little girl.

"That wasn't friendship," she murmured motionlessly.

*No, that was me losing my head all over again. That was the ghost of my past, present, and—if you allow it—our future.*

She shifted her cheek to the pane, meeting his gaze for an instant before insisting "We can't get involved in any way. We're in two different worlds."

No denying that. Still... He closed the space between them to stand at her side. "That's what bridges are for."

She squeezed her eyes closed tightly as if looking at him hurt her. "Why? Why should we do anything? Are you lonely because—"

He knew what she suggested before she even completed the sentence. "This isn't about Jenna. It's about you and me."

Instead of looking at him, she crossed the room to her bed, slumped down on it and held her head in her hands. "We can't. I can't. Cuz no matter how many times I go over it, I can't understand why you did what you did." She glanced up, pressing her folded fingers to her mouth. "I can't forgive you because I can't understand you."

He went to her again, not getting too close this time. The look in her eyes was too raw. "I'll try to make you understand. Even if it doesn't make anything better."

She laughed indecisively. "How's this for crazy? I'm afraid to hear it now."

She looked so small, so fragile sitting there huddled into herself. Afraid he intimidated her by standing over her, Nate lowered himself to his knees in front of her. She didn't draw back when he put his hands on her arms, lightly stroking through the knitted sleeves.

"There's time. If we take it slow, get to know each other again, maybe you can hear me out."

I want you to trust me. I want you to forgive me."

Tears stood out in her eyes, determined to fall—almost as determined as he knew she was to thwart them. "No promises," she finally said in the quiet of the room.

*Too many promises spoken, too many broken*, Nate thought, nodding.

"I don't understand you. At all."

The urge to lay his head in her lap, to feel her gentle hands in his hair giving him comfort, was strong. But she needed the comfort more than he did. "I know I hurt you. And maybe you did things you never meant to because of that hurt." He shook his head. "I don't understand it all either. I just know I can't spend the rest of my life separate from you."

Her confused expression deepened with his confession. He couldn't blame her for not understanding. She'd trusted him at one time, believing she really knew him, but he'd turned around and become a stranger in every way. Yes, it was going to take time and many, many bridges.

"Do you have a phone?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Uh...no, but there's a payphone in the hall."

"I want to call you and see you again."

Every line of her body, her expression screamed *No!* But she gave him the payphone

number instead of making him get it himself. And she accepted the light kiss he pressed to her trembling mouth.

She'd give him a chance against every rebelling fiber inside her. He vowed he wouldn't let her down this time.

LONG AFTER Nate left, Rori sat at the edge of her bed with her head in her hands, moaning internally. *God, oh God, what have I done? What's going on? Where am I? Gotta be the Twilight Zone cuz in real life Nate didn't kiss me again, I didn't kiss him, and I didn't agree to give "us" a chance. No way.*

But that didn't explain the physical sensations rocketing through her every time her mind slid back to the kiss. God, he'd been gentle. And God, he knew just how to shatter her body and soul. Every time she thought *It was just a kiss. He didn't touch me, he didn't make love to me* she understood the phrase "blow my mind." Hers was still blown like every fuse in a forty-story building.

Lifting her head, she glanced at the business card Nate left at the edge of the bed next to her. She could call him and say it was all a mistake.

He'd thrown her off-balance the instant she noticed him looking at her *that* way. The

way he had when they were teenagers. But, oh hell...there was nothing innocent or naive about the enthralled expression in his eyes this time. The feeling he tried to memorize her for later fantasies remained. The addition was a strong suspicion those fantasies could be possible realities.

*You're not gonna call him for that reason*, Rori thought, standing with a frustrated growl. Every time Nate kissed her, she came alive in a way that made her wonder what sub level she existed on the rest of the time. Giving that up when it was so new, so fleetingly ethereal...

*Self-respect, Ror—you sure it's all that important to you?*

She couldn't be in here. His cologne lingered, physical evidence that kept the memories too vivid. Rori stalked across the hall to Annmarie's. Maybe she wouldn't fall apart there.

The washing machine clunked around while Zak played with his Christmas gifts on the living room floor. Annmarie looked up from folding a dry load of laundry. She didn't need to say anything for Rori to read the questions "He's gone? What happened? What did he want this time?" in her eyes.

Before she ran away, she told Nate her feelings about most everything—her father, school. She'd trusted him more than anyone else she knew. Once she left home, she

stopped trusting and stopped confiding in anyone. Until Annmarie. She told Annmarie everything, and now it was an actual need. Even if she admitted she was stupid, Annmarie never agreed with her. She listened and understood.

But Rori didn't get a chance to spill her guts, which was exactly what she wanted to do. Zak wanted to show her what he built. Then he gave her one of his old matchbox cars and they played together until he got bored.

When he spread his drawing paper and colors out on the table, Rori joined Annmarie on the couch.

"I'm the world's biggest hypocrite," she started.

"I doubt that. Why? What happened?"

"The old say—one-thing-do-another. I could've been rid of him if I'd just stuck to my anger, but he kisses me and I fall apart." She lowered her voice, glancing at Zak, but he didn't seem to be listening—which meant nothing. He was a skilled eavesdropper.

"He kissed you? You mean..." Annmarie's eyes said one thing, her tone did another. She seemed scandalized and a little awed, but Rori could see the wariness in the dark shadows behind her gaze. Since she'd told her friend about meeting up with Nate again recently, each time he returned and Rori revealed all to her, that wariness emerged. Rori realized a

couple days ago Annmarie was afraid. Afraid of something that'd never happen. She worried Rori would fall in love with Nate, move away and leave her and Zak alone again.

"I mean, I've got no antidote against this guy. I should hate his guts, but I'm like putty every time he's too close. How pathetic is that? Doesn't help that he makes a pit bull look unmotivated. I wish he'd just give it up." But that wasn't true. If it was true, she wouldn't listen for footsteps, then be disappointed when they weren't his. She wouldn't feel like running to the window every time a car drove by. She wouldn't feel that surge of adrenaline when it was him and wouldn't have to carefully school her response to his presence.

"What did he say?"

Rori shook her head, slouching further against the sofa. "I don't know. Bridges. He talked about bridges. Cuz we're worlds apart."

*And he can't spend the rest of his life separate from you. Oh God, don't you dare let yourself believe he meant what he implied!*

Glancing at Annmarie, she sighed. "Well, what do you think? Pretty hopeless, huh?"

Annmarie put her tongue between her teeth, thinking over her dilemma. Despite her own fears, she'd try to set them aside in light of what was best for Rori. Her advice was never selfish. "I know he hurt you and he's got his work cut out for him if he thinks there's a good



enough excuse for it. But...he doesn't seem like a bad guy. I think maybe he does care about you and he's sorry for the past."

*And if sorrow healed scars...*

"But you've got no reason to trust him this time. You thought he was sincere before."

Rori found herself creating defenses for Nate, as if feeling someone should be on his side. *I've changed in eleven years, he probably has too. I have regrets, he has regrets.*

The bottom line remained unchanged. If Nate could turn back time, she doubted his choices would shift in her favor. So what would be accomplished by pursuing answers? He regretted hurting her, he'd never regret marrying Jenna. Hell, she didn't even want him to regret his marriage. Jenna deserved the happiness she got, short-lived as it was. Rori just couldn't reconcile her own pain into the equation. Hearing the reason Nate caused it wouldn't make it better. How could it do anything but make it worse? Maybe she was just a sucker for punishment by sticking around for the bullet.

"You're not the only hypocrite," Annmarie said softly, and Rori glanced at her again. Bending her head closer, Annmarie whispered, "Wayne asked me out again today."

Rori's first instinct was "Way to go, Big Guy!" She suppressed it for her friend's sake.

"He said he knows I've been hurt before, but he'd rather die than hurt me or Zak. He said

"Can't you let me prove myself before you shut me out for good?"

Surprised, Rori noted how haunted Annmarie seemed by the memory. Never before had she given the slightest hint she felt anything but bad for how mean she could be to him. Rori assumed she'd felt that way because Annmarie was a nice person; she didn't like being mean to anyone but believed it was a necessity in Wayne's case since she didn't return his affection.

"You do like him," Rori said, careful to keep her voice low. Zak didn't need to get his hopes up any higher.

Annmarie nodded gravely. "But I have to think of Zak."

Thinking of her son was the first and foremost priority in Annmarie's life. Rori wasn't surprised this case warranted the same. "You always think of him, babe. But sometimes what's best for him could be best for you too." She shrugged. "What's the harm in inviting him over for dinner one night? Slugger can be your chaperone."

Even if Annmarie put it under the heading 'For Fixing the Washing Machine' instead of 'For a Date' at least she was thinking about it.

"It'd be too 'family-like.' If you came too..." Annmarie looked at her hopefully. "You could invite Nate too. Monday night. What do you think?"

Annmarie wanted plenty of barriers. That would include having Zak invite Wayne instead of doing it herself, Rori knew.

"This is the only way you'll consider it, isn't it?" Rori guessed, not really needing her friend's nod for confirmation. "OK. I'll ask Nate, but I can't make any promises."

*Oh Ror, you go ahead and tell yourself you're doing this for Annmarie—because she and Zak and Wayne could be happy. But you know both of you just gave yourselves permission to be hypocrites. Partners in hypocrisy.*

It was about the only safety net left to them.

## Chapter Eleven

BETWEEN HER and Annmarie, Rori wasn't sure who was the more nervous on Monday. Zak had invited Wayne on Friday. Of course he'd agreed immediately once Annmarie discomfitedly confirmed it was indeed an invitation she approved of.

Mid-afternoon Friday, Rori heard the payphone ringing and knew it was Nate. Despite a kind of panic she'd never experienced before, she answered the call. A part of her had hoped he'd come to his senses, maybe even regretted everything. But his voice held so much intimacy and warmth, she was glad he called instead of came personally. God, she had no willpower with him. None at all. She'd invited him for Monday, told him to bring Andrea if he couldn't get a babysitter...and, like a spineless ragdoll, ignored all the good advice her brain gave her when Nate suggested he come a few hours early so they could talk.

He'd be here in a few minutes, and she knew her safe world stood to change drastically.

Perched on the window sill, she tried to tell herself she wasn't watching for him—just like she told herself she wasn't cleaning her apartment for him, wasn't dressing for him or trying to look good for him.

Damn Nate for changing everything so she forgot she didn't do anything for a man's approval anymore. Damn him for making her lose sleep. Making her want what she didn't want to want. Making her feel this sick knot in her stomach, a knot of dread and lack of control and...hope. *Hope.*

*Damn who for all that, Ror? Damn you. For never getting over him.*

Her apartment door was open halfway, but it flew open the rest of the way, startling Rori into losing her seat. She slipped and caught herself when she saw Annmarie holding a covered pot.

"Still nervous?" her friend said without a smile on her pale face. "I'm going to put the roast in the oven now, OK?"

"Do I need to do anything?"

Annmarie shook her head as she went to the kitchen. "Nope. Just let it slow cook. I'll come back in a couple hours, when we're ready to eat."

Zak had come over a half hour ago when Annmarie got back from picking him up from school. Then, and now, Rori wanted to beg them to stay. Stay the full two hours it would take for dinner to be ready, Wayne to get home from work and shower. She didn't want to be alone with Nate. He'd called the night before to say Jeremiah couldn't babysit and he'd

be bringing his daughter. Unfortunately he also added that Andrea usually took her nap at four, which would give them time to talk.

"You'll be over before six, won't you?" Annmarie confirmed, emerging from the kitchen. Wayne would be over at six, unquestionably on the dot, and she didn't want to be alone with him, even with Zak there.

"Maybe before." Rori smiled tightly. "Tell me again why we're doing this."

"Don't say that to me! I thought you knew."

Rori couldn't help laughing because of the panicked look overshadowing Annmarie's expression. A glance out the window confirmed her words: "Too late now." Nate's car pulled into the parking lot.

"Come over any time you need to," Annmarie offered before going back to her apartment.

Rori stood by the window for an instant, letting the panic take over, imagining the moment he'd appear...and then she came to her senses. Why wait around like a timid mouse?

She grabbed her jacket and headed down to the parking lot. When she arrived, Nate was just getting out of the front seat. It occurred to her—spurred by something in his warm

smile of greeting—that racing down here might indicate eagerness.

*What is it with this guy? He makes you go right when you should go left, up when you wanna go down...*

A sudden attack of dirty mind hit her, based on her own thoughts, and she knew she'd better do something to rectify this situation quick.

"Where's short stuff? You brought her?" she asked without a welcome, smile or otherwise. Let him think she was interested in seeing his daughter more than in seeing him. God knew she'd make a fool of herself sooner or later.

"She's asleep."

Rori stepped closer to him and peered into the backseat. His little girl slept soundly, her angelic face turned toward them. Unable to help herself, Rori smiled up at Nate. "Hate to wake her just to get her out of that contraption."

"She'll sleep through it."

He reached for the door handle as Rori offered "I'll get her."

"It can be pretty tricky if you've never done it before."

But she already ducked inside. She may have had no experience with handling an infant seat, but she could see immediately it was self-explanatory. Carefully, she slipped one of

the straps out of the plastic holder, then unbuckled the belt. Lifting Andrea, she protected her head as she ducked back out.

Nate's surprised expression annoyed her a little. *You expect me to be a pro at getting out my clothes, but when it comes to this, I'm an instant failure.*

Andrea's covered head nestled into her shoulder while Nate retrieved the diaper bag. Rori glanced at him. She wasn't being fair. If she expected him to look past the surface in her, she owed him the same courtesy. He was nothing like his mother. He'd never treated her like she was worthless. Second choice, but not worthless. She'd felt that on her own.

They went up to her apartment. Andrea's weight, her softness and smell affected Rori, making her want to hold her longer. She seemed to fit into her arms, bulky coat and all.

Nate closed the apartment door after them, then set the diaper bag on the bed. He started removing Andrea's outerwear. When he finally finished, the little girl wrapped her arms around Rori's neck as if to say "That's enough. I'm tired. You're not moving me from here."

Smiling, Rori said softly, "She must be pretty tired."

Nate nodded. "She's been excited about seeing you. "War-wee" is pretty much all she's said for the past couple days."

"War-wee"—Rori swallowed the lump in her throat. Even knowing Andrea was too



young to remember her and that it was her name, not her face, she recalled didn't make the moment any less emotional.

"I couldn't wait to see you again either."

Nate surprised her—with his words, the depth in his tone, the touch of his fingers brushing her cheek. Meeting his gaze, she became aware of his intention to kiss her.

*You're letting him get to you without a fight! You're not a part of his family. You're not Andrea's mother, and you're not the woman he loves.*

She backed away from his hypnotizing fingers. "Can she sleep here?" She indicated her bed. "We can watch her closely so she doesn't roll around too much."

After he arranged the pillows, Rori laid Andrea in the middle, gently loosening her tiny grip before straightening.

"Do you want something to drink?"

They shed their jackets simultaneously. Rori felt his gaze, yet avoided it. "I've got coffee, bottled water, diet root beer?"

"Root beer, thanks."

He followed her to the kitchen, where she got the soda and a small bottle of water from the fridge.

"You've got the day off?" he asked as she handed him the can and moved past him.

"Yeah. Well, I taught a dance class at one. For eight-year-olds."

"Where do you teach?"

She uncapped the bottle, leaning against the window sill with her behind. "The Julius Dance School. It's small. More a volunteer thing than a paid position." Adding that last part would prevent the inevitable question: Why don't you work there full-time?

"What do you teach?" He leaned, facing her, on the wall next to her as if he purposely wanted to make her uncomfortable.

"Introductory ballet to the kids and a modern dance/ballet kind of thing to adults."

"You quit ballet when you were pretty young."

Sipping her water, she gazed at him to see if he was really interested in all this or just making small talk before he launched into the heavy stuff. He seemed genuinely interested.

"My instructor told me she'd taught me everything she knew. Either I became a professional at nine or I got a mentor." She didn't smile although the memory of that conversation never failed to garner nostalgia for her. "I quit instead."

She supposed her expression challenged him to make something of it because he didn't comment. He'd thought about it though.

*What revelation are you storing away for future reference?* she wondered, watching him drink from his can. He rarely let anything go. When he needed the information, he'd use it.

In the silence that followed, Rori almost wished he hadn't let her off the hook. That she'd admitted "My father said I had to do whatever I thought best. But I knew what it boiled down to was he wasn't proud of me for my accomplishment and he didn't care what I did either way. He never came to any of my recitals or performances anyway." Nate didn't seem to experience discomfort, simply stood there watching hers.

She turned to look out the window, but it brought no relief. "Are we gonna go through this again?" she asked between her teeth.

"Go through what?"

As if he didn't know. She looked at him again. "Dragging out the past, present and future so you can tell me everything I've done wrong in my life."

He shifted his feet, an expression of confusion in place. It made her even more impatient.

"Can't we talk, Rori? Can't we just talk without attacks and heavily-armed defenses?"

"I don't know. Can we?"

"My intention has never been to attack you."

Rori looked away again. God, having him here, constantly aware she'd *invited* him, sent

her off the deep end. How could she claim not to realize what this visit was about? She knew it wasn't to "chaperone" Annmarie and Wayne. It wasn't to talk about her career choices. It was about the past. Past choices. Old wounds and making amends. She didn't want anything to do with any of it. Why would Nate think she wanted to know why he rejected her for Jenna? God, she wasn't a masochist!

"Why didn't you tell your mother I'm a stripper?" she asked quickly—avoidance she knew wouldn't keep Nate off-track for long. Plunking her bottle next to her on the sill, she put her hands on her knees and stared at him expectantly. She'd thrown him.

"Why would I? I'd just as soon tell her *I* was there not long ago."

The honesty of his statement set her off. She laughed out loud, imagining him admitting "Hey mom, dropped by a strip joint. One of the dancers wasn't half bad."

When Nate glanced Andrea's way to make sure she still slept, Rori forced her amusement under control.

"No matter what you think of me, I don't share my mother's opinion of you. She doesn't really know anything about you or she wouldn't say half the things she says."

What quieted her was how convinced he seemed. Because, in light of their past, his words couldn't be genuine. Either she hadn't been good enough...or he'd never loved her the

way he led her to believe.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, but she wanted to know why. She *had* to know.

"I thought you loved me," she said, feeling dizzy, sick, afraid.

When he moved in front of her, she couldn't run nor could she look at him. She heard the click of a can on wood as he set his soda on the window sill next to her.

"You had every reason to believe that."

Her eyes focused on the weave of his sweater. Focused and blurred.

*"Is it true? True you and Jenna... She's your girlfriend?"*

*He couldn't, or simply didn't, look her in the eye. He nodded once.*

Tell me you don't love her! *her mind had screamed.* Tell me you were just being nice, putting your arm around her because she's your friend. *Just your friend.*

*But Nate rose silently and, for the first time in his life, walked away from her.*

"The last thing I want is to hurt you again, but... You deserve the truth."

When she leaned forward, putting her hands over her eyes, too raw to even feel the anger for her own weakness, he kneeled in front of her. She heard his movements, felt his nearness. Even then she couldn't fight.

"I think I loved you my whole life. I can't remember ever not feeling like you were the

one for me. It took me half my life to get up the courage to do something about it. But then..." He trailed off helplessly.

*Don't! Don't say "You loved me but." I'd rather have Brett's screwed up version of love. I'd rather spend the rest of my life believing you hate me than "you loved me but."*

"I've never known anyone like you, Rori. No one's ever affected me the way you do. One minute I think I've got it all figured out, all planned and packaged neatly. The next minute, I don't even know my own name with you."

He sighed, then she felt him cover her hands. Gently, he removed them from her eyes, holding them so she could see him. "When I was seventeen, I was a hundred percent sure I wanted to spend my life serving Christ. It's what I wanted more than anything. But when I kissed you, all I wanted was *you*. I didn't care about anything else at that moment."

"So? I wanted you too. I would have..." She shook her head as if it could convey the depth of her feelings. "...*anything* for you."

How could he say he wanted her so much he ended up rejecting her because of it? Worse, how could she listen instead of telling him to get out and never come back?

"I lost my head. I was scared. I couldn't trust myself. If I hadn't ended it, you would have been pregnant before either of us graduated."

Sex no longer intrigued her, yet the intimacy he suggested brought warmth into her cheeks. He wasn't wrong—she would have made love with him in a heartbeat. The very afternoon he kissed her the first time in his car. And she would never have regretted it. He'd said he would have.

"And Jenna didn't make you lose your head?"

Color stained his narrow cheekbones. "No. She was just a friend. It grew into more, but I didn't have any trouble...keeping my head until we were married."

God, Nate—even Nate—had cast her into the role of the vixen. He hadn't seen her as someone he could love completely, make his wife and the mother of his children.

No doubt Rori had wanted to tempt him, but she'd never been blatantly seductive. *He'd* taken the lead during that kiss. Yet, when it came down to the bare bones, she'd never been pure enough for him.

"I wasn't worthy," she stated the fact of the matter.

Predictably, he shook his head. "It has nothing to do with that."

"It has everything to do with that! You wanted a good Christian wife who only appealed to your base needs when you wanted children—" She shot to her feet, and he was right beside her, not allowing her to walk away. He trapped her against the window with his lean

body.

"I know it sounds like that, but it wasn't. We never shared the same goals. You loved me, you probably wanted marriage and children. I wanted all that too. But I wanted to go into the ministry. It's a career that has to involve both husband and wife. Was that one of your goals too? Or would you have just followed me because it was what I wanted?"

"I would have done whatever it took!" she insisted.

"And you would have been miserable!"

He didn't need to raise his voice to drive home his point. She got it crystal clear in the quiet, forceful words that kept ringing in the silence after they were spoken.

"Jenna wanted exactly the same things I did. She would have followed that road even without me."

For eleven years, Rori had concentrated on one aspect—his rejection. She'd never considered the rest. Maybe he was right because, at sixteen, she'd been too restless to settle for a romantically innocent relationship with someone she loved so much. And settling into the conservative lifestyle she imagined entailed at least the first five years of Nate and Jenna's marriage—maybe she would have been bored to tears. Which meant she'd been right in the first place: They hadn't been meant to be. Cupid, fate had made a hell of a



mistake.

"It works both ways, Rori. You hurt me too. How do you think I felt when Jason Radcliffe told me he got to "third base" with you? If you loved me, how could you let him touch you so intimately?"

The effect of his words made it as if a single day hadn't gone by since their first kiss. Rori cringed, mortified, ashamed...humbled by something she'd hoped he would never hear about. "When did you find out?"

He seemed to stare right through her, and she could no longer meet his eyes. "I asked him when we went on vacation that summer."

Rori frowned. "But that was after... Why didn't you tell me that's why you didn't want me?"

His mouth thinned, answering her questions wordlessly. He'd already made his decision by then. It'd hurt him to hear the truth about her, but in the end it didn't make any difference. Jenna was his choice anyway.

Instead of making excuses for herself—lame excuses like "I did things with him, but I saved my virginity for you" or "I loved you, I didn't know if you loved me"—she accepted the truth. The truth was, the blame had to be shared between them. They were even. And

destiny had had its little joke on both of them.

ANDREA WOKE crying in the accumulating silence, and Rori moved first to go to her. Nate knew the truth had exposed itself too nakedly to be relieving on any level.

He turned to see his daughter, quiet now, sitting up smiling shyly at Rori, who sat at the end of the bed. Andrea glanced at him as if making sure everything was fine. Finding a smile for her, he moved over to the bed. "Hey, munchkin."

"Da-dee, War-wee."

At his approach, Rori looked up at him. He saw vulnerability in her eyes. A moment ago, she'd fought to keep him from observing her emotions. Somehow Andrea left her defenseless.

After scooping his little girl into his arms, Nate sat at the side of the bed. "Yup, we're at Rori's. Can you say hi?"

Andrea rarely spoke the handful of words she knew until she'd warmed up to a person. Instead of saying "hi", she said "War-wee" again, pointing to Rori.

"Hey, short stuff. Not easy waking up in a strange bed, huh?"

She didn't need to look at him this time. She was trying to tell him no bridge had been

built with the past out in the open. All the words he'd spoken...somehow none of them seemed like his own. Yet the bottom line remained, the one Rori had tried to make him see from the time he saw her at her father's over Christmas: They were worlds apart.

After changing Andrea's diaper, they went next door to Rori's neighbors'. Zak seemed to be waiting for them. He said he'd taken out and washed some toys Andrea could play with and not "choke on." Nate couldn't help smiling. Despite the coldly polite shoulder he got from the boy, Zak seemed enthralled over his little girl. Andrea took to him too. Rori ended up on the living room floor, playing with the two kids while Nate and Annmarie discussed their children.

Watching Rori, he realized for the first time why she was so good with kids. She had a child's lack of inhibitions, never "talked down" to them. She was completely herself.

The last guest arrived at six o'clock on the dot. Annmarie, who'd seemed relaxed, became nervous immediately. She got up to see to dinner and didn't sit down again until there was nothing more she could do except join them.

Rori sat with Andrea on her lap—his daughter's request—

and fed her. Andrea talked now, a mile a minute, mostly baby gibberish, and lit up every time Rori responded to her chatter.

It surprised Nate that Zak didn't become jealous of the interaction. But then Rori had a real knack for paying attention to both kids without favoring or slighting the other. Zak seemed to take well to the other man present, so Nate knew it was just him the boy wasn't fond of. For some reason, Zak saw him as a rival for Rori's affections.

*I should be so lucky*, he thought, watching Andrea chew nestled comfortably against Rori. No matter what else happened between them, she would have made a beautiful mother. Maybe that could have counterbalanced any misery. Maybe not.

He talked with Wayne, finding him extremely down-to-earth. It was clear the burly man had a huge crush on Annmarie. He couldn't look at her without handing over his heart. Annmarie was so nervous, she never made the attempt to meet his eyes and accept that love. If not for how endearing a couple they'd make, their shy behavior would have been amusing.

"Zak's a great kid," Nate said when they went back to Rori's apartment after dinner. "Have I offended him somehow?"

Rori shook her head, glancing back at him. "Don't take it personally. He wants Wayne to marry both me and his mom."

It made sense, strange as it sounded. Rori was like a mother to Zak too.

"The two of them belong together—Wayne and Annmarie."

Rori set Andrea on her feet. "Yeah, they do. But she's been hurt by men all her life. It's gonna take a lot for her to trust anybody, even a big ol' teddy bear like Wayne."

As Andrea roamed, finding everything around her worthy of her interest, Rori kept her eye on her—maybe just so she wouldn't have to look at him. There was very little for Andrea to get into in Rori's sparse apartment. She found a pair of high-heeled boots, then sat down on the floor to examine them. Nate assured Rori shoes fascinated his little girl and it was fine for her to play with them as long as she didn't mind.

"Seems like you and your neighbor have a lot in common," he commented as Rori went to return the water bottle she'd opened earlier to the refrigerator. He followed her, knowing she wanted him—not necessarily Andrea—to go.

Closing the fridge door, she turned to lean against the sink. "Have you ever heard 'There are no victims, just volunteers'? Well, it's not true in Annmarie's case, but it is in mine. I let men treat me bad for a long time. That's my fault; I didn't stand up for myself because I didn't think I deserved better."

She faced him squarely, knowing he wondered if she now believed she deserved better. All she conceded was "I made mistakes. We all make mistakes. But you go on and try not

to make the same ones again."

They could get hurt. If they continued this, hurt was inevitable. He could see she wasn't willing to take the risk. Right now, he wasn't sure whether he was willing to volunteer for it either. Because, if neither of their goals had changed in the past eleven years, no bridge would be strong enough to hold both of them and their ponderous baggage.

## Chapter Twelve

"SO WHAT DID Donnie want to talk to you about after your show?" Annmarie asked, fastening her seatbelt.

Rori started the truck, waving to let Gina pull out of the space next to hers first. She glanced at Annmarie, who stifled a yawn. "He thinks I "lack motivation" lately."

"What does that mean?"

Smiling, Rori backed out of her space and drove out of the lot. Annmarie sounded more offended than she'd been at Donnie's pep talk. "He said, and I quote: "You're still the best stripper in this joint, honey. But you're givin' your fans *job* when they want *blow*. Now you take Gina there—she's got the right idea. You go out there like you just got laid and we both get rich."" He'd also told her she had to get his approval for the music she used.

Annmarie's wide eyes and "What a creep!" were anticipated.

"Yeah. And then Mr. Subtle Charm asked if I wanted to avail myself of his services."

"Generous guy."

"A real prince."

"He doesn't know what he's talking about," her friend assured her, patting her arm.

Rori shrugged. In truth, she hadn't been offended by anything except Donnie's lame come-on. Her motivation *had* been lacking more so lately than ever before. Getting on stage every night was harder and harder. And recovering after took longer.

Sighing, she leaned an elbow on the side window ridge. "You know I've never been comfortable getting up there, but I was a hundred percent capable of doing the job. Now...now I despise the guys out there for wanting to see me take my clothes off and then it reflects right back... And I don't want it."

*Bet it was all part of your underhanded scheme, Nate Jovanovich. All that talk about how I deserve more, how doing this would come back to haunt me. All that talk about bridges, taking things slow...making me wanna believe you when you said you didn't wanna spend the rest of your life separate from me.* Rori snorted mentally at the memory. *I didn't just wanna believe you. I was stupid enough to believe. And now you bow out and leave me in this mess.*

"You are too good for it," Annmarie said softly. "'I don't mean it makes you a bad person. You know I think you're an angel. But you dancing at a strip joint is like Pavarotti singing in a cheesy Vegas lounge. It's a crime and a waste of talent."

When Annmarie touched her arm, Rori turned to smile at her. "Thanks, babe."



Annmarie yawned again as they pulled into the parking lot of their building. She'd looked tired a lot lately—more so than usual. Their routine on nights they both worked was to get home at quarter after four, get Zak from the widow's, and then unwind by talking over a glass of milk or a snack. Annmarie had been going straight to bed when they got home.

Rori turned to her friend as they reached their floor. "Do you wanna—"

A door opened—Wayne's. He stepped out, clearly not on his way out with heavy wool socks on his feet instead of boots.

"Hey. What's up?" Rori asked.

"I have to get Zak," Annmarie insisted predictably.

She took a few steps before Wayne reached out to stop her. His words did the trick: "He's here."

Panic overrode her features in an instant. "What? Why is he here? What's wrong?"

There was no reason to think anything was wrong, but Annmarie's reaction touched on Rori's sensitivity toward the little boy too.

"He's fine," Wayne said with both compassion and conviction. "The widow collapsed after you two left. Zak came here. I took her to the hospital." He shifted his stockinged feet,

admitting, "I thought about calling you at work, but I didn't wanna worry you since he's fine."

Annmarie's hands clenched at her sides. Her face was pale and her voice trembled beyond recognition with anger. "You should have called me! What do you know about taking care of children?"

Knowing it wasn't her place to say or do anything, Rori watched her friend push past Wayne into his apartment to get her son.

What would have happened if Wayne hadn't been here? That was the scary question. But he'd been here; he'd taken care of Zak and the widow. Rori felt bad for Wayne. Sure, he'd probably never read a childcare handbook, but he was good with Zak. Zak loved him.

Devastation clearly etched into Wayne's rugged features. Not knowing how else to comfort him, Rori murmured, "Hell of a night, huh?"

He nodded, glancing toward his apartment as if he expected Annmarie to come out with a shotgun instead of her little boy.

"How is the widow?"

"She's OK."

Annmarie's footsteps neared.

"Her daughter's taking her home to care for her," he finished when the woman of his dreams appeared with her sleeping son in her arms and a scathing glare in Wayne's direction. She stalked past them, managed to unlock her apartment door and disappeared inside.

The air seemed charged with negativity, and Rori tried to neutralize some of it. "Thanks for taking care of him," she said quietly, aware it wasn't her place to extend the gratitude yet equally sure he deserved it from someone. "He probably had a lot of fun."

Wayne managed a tremulous smile. "I don't know about him, but I sure did. He's an amazing kid."

God, seeing this mountain of a man turned to water over his own feelings was... Well, Rori had met few men so paper-thin emotionally. She felt for him. "I'll talk to her."

"You don't have to do that." He shook his head, glancing longingly toward Annmarie's door.

"You're gonna need all the help you can get for this battle, Big Guy."

When she squeezed his arm, he murmured "Thanks." He seemed a little embarrassed she knew how he felt about Annmarie, but probably figured a blind man could see it too.

Once he returned to his apartment, Rori moved down the hall to Annmarie's. She'd

tucked Zak into the sofa bed. He slept like an angel.

"How's slugger?" she asked pointedly in a whisper.

Annmarie sat on one of the dining room chairs with her head in her hands. "He should have called me!"

Rori sat in the chair next to her, pulling it closer to her friend so she'd know this wasn't an attack. "Why? You would've been out a night's pay when Zak's been in good hands." She rubbed Annmarie's arm. "I think a "thank you" was more in order than a tongue-lashing. Wayne was just trying to help. And you know he's crazy about Zak."

Annmarie glanced up in dejection, and Rori added, "If you ask me, slugger's better off there than with the widow."

The sigh from Annmarie stalled. "I'm out a babysitter, aren't I? Oh God! Who else can I leave him with when we're both working?"

Rori knew "who" as well as her friend did. Looking at Annmarie's pallid face, the dark circles under her eyes, she wondered if there was more to her friend's reaction earlier than surprise. "What's going on, babe? Has something happened since Monday? Cuz you said you liked him before that. You don't look so good and... Well, that was pretty insane out there."

Annmarie shook her head, clutching her hair down to the scalp a little desperately. "He's such a monster. A horrible, sweet...*monster*."

"Wayne?"

"He told me he loves me. He told me right after you and Nate left on Monday. He loves Zak and wants to marry me and take care of us and... How could he do that? How could he say all that?"

Tears slipped out, past her nose and mouth. Rori grabbed the box of tissues at the back of the table, pushing them over to her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

*Your courage is beginning to match your zeal for the woman you want, Big Guy.* Rori wasn't sure this direct approach worked any better than the patient waiting, but Wayne endeared himself to her more for it.

"I was afraid." Annmarie pressed a tissue to her nose. "I was afraid you'd give me permission to say maybe. Or yes."

"You don't need my permission."

Annmarie choked slightly. "I'd rather have yours than mine! At least if it goes wrong, I can say it wasn't my fault."

When Rori stifled a laugh, Annmarie smiled for a second. "I'm afraid if I fall in love with

him, he'll turn out to be like my father or Zak's father. I can't put Zak through that."

All she'd heard of the two men who'd made Annmarie into the love-shy person she was convinced Rori that Wayne was a completely different class of male. "You know Wayne's nothing like them. Your old man was an alcoholic. Wayne never drinks anything stronger than a Pepsi when he comes into the club. And the creep who raped you had the sensitivity of a charging bull. Wayne's been patient with you. Wayne's a good guy. You can trust your instincts. Trust mine. Wayne would rather die than hurt you or Zak."

She had the feeling her advice was exactly "the permission" Annmarie had feared. Still, there was a chance for happiness here, for the real family Zak craved so much. She didn't want them to leave her alone, but she'd survive. She always managed that.

"I'll ask him to babysit Zak."

*Small steps, babe, small steps.* Keeping her frustrated sigh to herself, Rori leaned back on the chair.

"Do you think he will?" Annmarie asked, balling the tissue in her fist.

"If you don't ask, he'll offer. Or Zak'll put in a request." She stood and dropped a kiss on the top of her friend's head. "Get some sleep, babe. You look like you could use it."

Rori locked the apartment after her, then let herself into her own. Removing her jacket,

she took the envelope out of the inner pocket. One of her requirements for taking the job at Baby Dolls was to be paid in cash. She wouldn't make the mistake of opening a checking account and then have Brett walk back in to take over everything. He stole her ATM card last time and, knowing her PIN, withdrew all her money over a matter of a week. The checks she'd written bounced, she had to pay overdrafts in addition to covering the checks. It meant pawning her leather jacket and the gold bracelet she'd worn when she walked out on Brett. The jacket was still there when she had the money to get it back. The bracelet had been one of Brett's I-cheated-on-you-let's-call-it-even gifts. She didn't want it back.

She sat on the bed, reached through the steel-barred headboard and loosened the screws from the electrical box cover there on the wall with a fingernail. From inside, she removed the piece of cardboard hiding the roll of cash behind it. She'd found the empty outlet when she moved in and put the bed in front of it to make it the perfect safe.

After folding the new money with the old, she counted it, wishing the tooth fairy had dropped by since last time. But there still wasn't enough cash saved up to allow her to quit her job, maybe go to college. She'd be lucky to get through two years, in addition to living expenses, on what she had. Until she did, she'd have to live with the increasing revulsion for her job. God knew she wouldn't pull in half of what she made now anywhere else.

She rolled the cash into a tight wad, snapped the rubber band back around it, then replaced it in her "safe."

Moonlight streamed through her windows, pooling softly on the floor. *Melancholy moon*, she thought before sitting up to strip down to her panties. She wasn't tired, couldn't imagine sleeping when she felt this lonely.

*Why'd you have to come back, Nate? I was content with my life, with being by myself. Funny, you were the one so convinced we could move past the impossibilities. I was dead set against it. So why did we both do a 180?*

Pulling the comforter up around her, Rori snuggled into it with a heavy sigh. She'd started thinking about the potential instead of obstacles. Based on the lack of communication in the two days since he'd left here with his baby girl, all Nate saw was nothing had changed. She was the same person she'd been at sixteen in his eyes, the same threat to his faith.

*It would've been different this time*, she thought heatedly. *I was restless for excitement back then. Now I'm restless for a little stability. It might've been different. But we'll never know.*

Closing her eyes, she called forth the memory she knew by heart. Nate accidentally



brushing her breast with his arm, the shared laughter over their pet squirrel Dolly, the way he turned to her and kissed her without warning...the way her heart exploded with love and need and a sense of destiny.

God, maybe she hadn't changed. She still found it hard to believe that—over and over like a sad song on a jukebox—she and Nate were destined to take two steps closer to each other, only to end up worlds apart.

NATE GLANCED from the clock in his church office to the phone.

*This sermon is as ready as it's ever going to be. You don't have any more appointments for the day. Why don't you do what you've been wanting to do since Monday night.*

The problem was, calling Rori wouldn't be nearly enough. Too easy for her to run.

*He'd* run Monday, telling himself he was getting himself into a no-win situation he'd best back out of quietly. That was the impression he left Rori with, but five minutes away from her and he wanted to turn around. Nate told himself to give it time. Maybe the need to see her, the need to reverse a no-win situation would go away.

Not for one solitary minute had it. Instead, his need for her grew stronger.

From the floor, Andrea murmured to herself and her toys. Nate was reminded of how

Rori played with the kids on the floor at her neighbors'.

*She's changed. You know you've changed. Isn't the possibility of finding happiness together worth the risks?*

Rori was no longer so trusting, yet, jaded as life made her, she still retained the pure sweetness he'd fallen in love with as a boy. He was no longer so single-minded and altruistic. Regardless of what it said of him, he wanted something for himself. Feeling that way was unusual for him. He rarely thought of himself first. Wanting Rori had always been for himself, but she would fit into his life now. He could fit into hers if she was willing to accept the risks involved.

Nate picked up the phone, speed dialed his home number, then stood. Jeremiah answered just before the machine would have.

"Just got in?" Nate guessed, glancing at the clock again instinctively. It was almost two.

"Just walked in the door."

The thud Nate heard in the background was Jeremiah's school bag hitting the kitchen table. In another minute, he knew he'd be opening the refrigerator.

*Can it ever be that way with Rori? That I'd know her routine, know how she'd react in every given situation?*

She was the most unpredictable person he'd ever known. He'd learned to expect the unexpected with her. He wasn't even sure he wanted to clear that obstacle of mystery.

"So did you finally decide to do it?"

Nate perched on the edge of his desk, watching Andrea pick up her toy phone. "What do you mean?"

Jeremiah chuckled. "Come on, you may not be a kid anymore, but you're definitely pining after Rori Mason. Who can blame you? That lady is *fine*."

A wash of heat crept into Nate's face. His concentration over the past few days had been practically nonexistent. He answered his own question silently--yes, he'd definitely been that obvious about his feelings for Rori.

"I shouldn't even ask," Nate started. "I know you usually get together with your friends Thursday nights--"

"I already talked to Nick. I've got too much homework tonight. So if you need me to watch Andi, I'll be here."

It worried Nate that Jeremiah seemed to slough off any social life lately. He rarely dated, only saw his friends on the campus. It wasn't good for someone his age to be such a workaholic.

"You need to get out more, Jeremiah."

Nate could almost see him shrugging. "Just don't feel like it lately."

"I noticed that. You're too young to become a workaholic."

Jeremiah laughed slightly. "Look, I just haven't met anybody I can really get in to for awhile. You have. Why don't you go? You can owe me someday when I meet somebody."

The honesty of the words relieved Nate. He didn't need to feel guilty for wanting to go to Rori immediately.

As he drove home with Andrea, he remembered Rori taught a dance class on Thursdays. He looked up the address of the school before kissing his daughter and telling Jeremiah he should be back for dinner. It wouldn't take long to say what he had to do to Rori. Her response could be even quicker.

He drove to the school in Buffalo, finding only two vehicles in the parking lot. One of them was Rori's truck.

As he stepped into the building, he heard music and followed it.

Rori stood to the far side of the studio, near the stereo, watching another woman dance. Nate moved partially into the entrance, making sure he didn't call attention to himself.

It was Rori who caught his. She wore the shimmery tights, half top and bikini bottoms

he'd seen her toss into Annmarie's laundry basket last Wednesday. Her arms were folded over her chest, and she bit a nail. The concentration she displayed was consummate.

The dancer stopped abruptly. Her breath came in sharp gasps. "Look, I'm never gonna get any better—"

Rori reached over to halt the music. "That was better. Much better. You just need to keep your legs straighter on the *grand jete*. You're landing too hard, and it throws off the split."

The dancer shook her head. "I can't do the splits on the floor, let alone in the air! You make it look easy, but the bones in this body aren't flexible."

Rori started to protest though the woman seemed to be joking. She cut her off. "I have to go anyway. My babysitter needs me to be home by three."

Pushing the hair from her forehead, Rori nodded. "OK. You're getting better, Deb. Don't give up. I know you can do it."

"You've got more faith than I do."

Nate stepped back from the entrance as the woman came through. When he returned, Rori had her back to him. She started the music again, then moved to the center of the floor.

There was no other way to describe the motion of her body. She flew like a

fairy—boneless, weightless, one with the air that carried her like a feather. The way she moved didn't resemble any of the clumsy steps the other dancer had performed. Nate had a moment's sympathy for that woman. Watching Rori must be part of the reason she didn't believe in her abilities, yet Rori had encouraged her sincerely.

Nate leaned against the entry frame, aware of the exact moment she caught sight of him. Following what he assumed was the "*grandjete*" she'd advised the other dancer on, she rolled her head, sighing. Then she turned toward the stereo. She must have caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye because she whirled around again. What she muttered under her breath was either a curse at being startled or of *who* startled her.

"How long have you been there?" she demanded.

He maneuvered himself off the frame and went to her. "You're a good teacher. And a beautiful dancer. I could watch you all day."

Instead of responding to the compliments, she headed for the stereo saying "Charlene would say I don't drive her hard enough. I just don't believe a whip promotes creative expression."

"Why are you training her individually?"

The music cut off abruptly. "I'm not. Charlene asked me to fill in today since she

couldn't do it. Deb's rehearsing for the school's annual, fundraising ballet. She's the lead in *Giselle*."

It wasn't until Nate stood at her back that he realized she talked for the sake of talking. Her hands trembled.

"Why are you here?" she barely whispered.

She wore her hair up, exposing an elegant neck. Nate cupped his hand around the back of her neck gently. "I couldn't stay away. I tried to, but I've been miserable."

Seeing a tear course down her cheek, he notched his chin between her shoulder and cheek, turning her toward him. She came to him bonelessly, neither fighting nor cooperating.

"We've both changed, Rori. Maybe it was all wrong back then, but we were just kids. We weren't ready for the responsibility...and maintenance of a relationship."

He curved his other hand around her damp cheek, close enough to kiss her...

Not yet. Her eyes shut so tight, he knew his absence had hurt her. She'd believed he gave up when he was the one who pursued her in the first place. Instead of feeling relief that her heart wasn't worlds away from his, he couldn't shake the sense he'd let her down again.

"I thought we should just back off. We could get hurt here, but I can't just say the risk is

too much."

She opened her eyes, and her eyelashes clung together with moisture. Her fragility made him hold her closer.

"I went through the old routine this week, and I don't feel it like I did. You're everywhere, in my thoughts, my dreams... I want a clean slate. I think we deserve it."

Her dark eyes showed him vulnerability, yet she kept hiding the other emotions he needed to see.

"Why?"

Tracing a tear to the corner of her mouth with his thumb, he watched her, not wanting to believe in the hopelessness her tone implied. "Because there's a chance we could be happy too. Because we could make it work this time."

He pressed his lips to hers briefly, stopping to see her expression. She'd closed her eyes again. Then she leaned in to him. Nate accepted the welcome, taking full possession of her mouth. Her body curled against his with an almost childlike trust.

A clean slate forbade him from thoughts like, *What did I do to deserve this woman's willingness to put her heart on the line for me? Again?*

He needed to hear the words. God knew he couldn't assume anything with her. "Should



we try?" he asked softly when she reluctantly looked at him.

"What if you lose your head again?"

He couldn't help smiling. "I've already lost it. But I'm older and, hopefully, wiser. I can handle whatever comes of this."

One of her hands clenched around his collar, the other touched his chin tentatively. She traced the cleft there.

"Yes?" he prodded.

She lifted her gaze to his. All her emotions were out of hiding. He saw desire, and terror, before she whispered "Yes."

## Chapter Thirteen

WALKING DOWN the hallway to her apartment with Nate, Rori could barely get herself to breathe. The tension had stole her logic, her fear of getting involved. She'd convinced herself so completely that he'd never come back, never once had she considered saying no at the dance school. She supposed it made her a fool, a spineless ragdoll who couldn't see how bad this candy was for her...but she didn't care.

*I don't care about anything except I've wanted him for a lifetime and he wants me too.* It was the thought of an open-hearted teenager instead of a jaded twenty-seven-year-old, but right now that was OK too.

When she got her keys out, Nate took them. She stood next to him as he unlocked her door.

*I'll never be able to call you "holy man" again,* she concluded. His gaze was almost as tangible on her mouth, on her body as any kiss or touch. As a teenager, she'd never quite believed those looks meant what she hoped they did. She just knew how they made her feel—hot, liquid, alive and completely willing.

Now experience told her Nate wanted her, wanted to get his mouth and both his hands

on her. He was starved for her.

Rori tried to swallow. She tried to think of something to say, but the only thing that came to mind was "Hurry."

*You can't make love*, her head told her, unbelievably logical for a split second. Even that didn't matter to her. They didn't have to rush. All she needed was a part of what she'd missed with him as a teenager. More than the few minutes of insanity their first kiss led to. She wanted to want, to feel him want and to be satisfied they had all the time in the world for more.

The door opened at long last. She preceded him, turning to close the door once he'd followed her inside. Before she could consider her reasons, she locked the door.

Nate had removed his coat when she faced him. Dropping her duffel, she watched him sit on the end of her bed while she removed her jacket.

She'd showered at the school, putting on the outfit she usually wore after a class—the velvet leggings and sweater. His gaze fixed on the ribbon of bare skin between her hem and waistband for a moment, the way it had last Thursday. God, he'd made her uncomfortable then, with the way her body responded to his sensual stares. Now she didn't want it to end.

"Come here," he said softly, seemingly enabling her to move.

He looked up at her at her approach. "Do you know how many times I've dreamed of you in my life?" Even when he could put his hands at her waist, he continued to meet her gaze. "Dreaming of you staggers me. Yet it's never as good as when you're actually here with me."

*No one's ever made me feel the way you do*, she thought instinctively, but the words wouldn't come. Somehow they didn't sound as sincere as his had. Or maybe she was afraid he wouldn't believe her.

His hands slid against her sides, over the velvet hugging her hips. When his legs scissored open, she stepped between them, surprised and pleased at the touch of his mouth on her bare skin. Warm shivers raced along every inch, exposed or not.

"Mhm, you smell good," he murmured with his lips against her bellybutton. The gentle nudge of his tongue sent a stabbing jolt of sensation through her. Her response staggered her. There was an innocence to Nate's caresses and yet nothing had ever set her off so easily before. Contractions had been triggered at her core; she could barely stand against them.

"Nate."

He glanced at her, saw what she couldn't hide, and pulled her down to him. Rolling her

to her back, he covered her with mouth and body. His arousal growing against her pelvis fueled her sudden, overwhelming hunger for him. He kissed her as if it was his last chance.

They broke apart, and Rori wasn't sure who'd initiated the separation.

"I can't think," he said breathlessly.

"Neither can I." She looked up at him, a little afraid of the agony in his expression. "Are you sorry?" *About wanting me? About losing your head again?*

He lifted his hand, underscoring his words with a reassuring caress. "No. Never. But if I rush, I'm inside a volcano about to explode. If I take my time, I notice the softness of your skin." His lips skimmed her cheek. "The taste of your skin."

"No one's ever made me feel the way you do." The words were out before she could cage them again. "I don't think I've felt anything since...since you kissed me for the first time."

Silly tears filled her eyes. *I think I always knew I belonged to you*, she realized but couldn't allow herself to reveal that much.

Her spoken words didn't sound insincere or unbelievable—

she could see the affect they had on Nate. He seemed humbled...or ashamed of himself. She couldn't accept that.

"A clean slate," she reminded softly.

He closed his eyes and kissed her, cherished her. Turning toward him, Rori wrapped her arms around his neck, giving herself to him. Their lips and tongues made love in slow motion.

Rori hadn't indulged in a "make out session" since she was a teenager. In Nate's hands, she didn't feel like a teenager. She felt like a woman, old enough to want the first fruits instead of rushing to the grand finale.

Pausing only to remove his glasses and set them on the table next to the bed, Nate enveloped her again in a simmering kiss, in light, satisfying caresses, molding her against the length of his body.

It was so much like a dream, neither of them felt the wild hunger again. Rori realized they were healing each other, even if it wasn't complete. They were building a foundation for all that was to come.

"I'm so glad you said yes."

"Always happy to disappoint your mother," she said, smiling, and Nate laughed before hugging her.

"You're not just trying to redeem me, are you?"

"You mean your job?" he asked as she rolled to her back and he looked down at her. She

didn't bother to confirm.

He reached for his glasses. "I don't like it. I don't want you to do it. But you're not your job. I'm in this for you."

She nodded. Until she'd asked, she'd been too relieved and hopeful to consider his motives.

"I don't like my job. But I do it for a reason. It's the only way I can save enough money in a short time so I can quit, go to college or something, and support myself for a couple years. I don't have enough to do that yet."

"I don't suppose you'll let me take care of you?"

She'd expected him to offer it from the beginning. Nate was that kind of person. She shook her head. "I can't let you. I've made the mistake of relying on men one too many times. I trust you more than them...but I think I'd respect myself less if I didn't do it on my own."

After a long, uncomfortable moment under his gaze, he nodded. "OK. I understand that."

"Thank you," she said softly. She didn't like the idea of feeling the man she loved was ashamed of her. The fact that he'd accepted her reasons and understood them relieved and resolved her to do everything in her power to quit as soon as she possibly could.

"So, college huh?"

She shrugged. "I figure once I get my GED I should know what field I want to go into."

"Don't you want to dance?" He seemed confused.

He believed in her talent despite her job. Brett had never believed in her talent for anything. "I love dancing, but if you mean could I get in a dance company or the School of American Ballet? Never. My background would count against me to the point where it wouldn't matter that I'm actually any good. Besides, I think I like teaching dance better. Some of my students are really talented. I'd like to see one of them get into a dance company."

"The woman you were teaching today?"

Rori touched a button on his shirt, sighing. "No. But I don't think it's her fault. I think she was having a good day when she auditioned and accidentally got the lead. Or she got it and it intimidated her so much, she can't get into it now. Either way, it's frustrating for all of us."

"Why didn't you audition for the lead?"

He seemed to know her answer, and it made her reluctant to give it. Lying, even on something so small, would be a bad way to begin though. "I did get the lead. She was my



understudy. I just...didn't feel like I could do it. It's just a little community service thing anyway." She looked up at him pointedly. "Don't analyze that either. I made the decision, and I agree with it now. The lead role should go to a student."

He surprised her when all he said was "You're an incredible dancer, Rori."

Smiling at him, she felt special because he believed in her. "Can you dance?"

"Slow dance. Nothing fancy."

She sat up, taking his hand. "Show me. I won't be a teacher. I'll be your partner."

Without protest, he let her lead him over to the dance floor, where she put soft music on. She expected him to refuse simply because Brett always had.

Nate took her in his arms, enfolding her in an intimate dance that almost made her cry. He felt so strong and male next to her, she knew she'd had to forget this in order to leave Brett. She'd been weak for so many years because she needed to feel the strength of a man's embrace—even if it came with cruelty. Learning to be independent hadn't been easy, but she didn't need to feel guilty for allowing herself this sustenance from Nate.

"You're a good dancer," she whispered after awhile.

"You make it easy."

He kissed her, and she thought *Can I reach for you every time you're here? Can I let*

*myself need you when you're not? Can I trust in these feelings? Or will I regret everything as soon as I admit what I've done out loud?*

Looking at him, she felt nothing except certain they were right in taking the chance.

"Do you want to go out? For dinner? If you have no plans."

She shook her head. "No plans, but can we order out for something instead? I wanna be alone with you."

"Sounds good to me. I'll pay."

She couldn't help smiling. "OK."

They agreed on Chinese, then she slipped out to call in their order. She smiled like an idiot and couldn't help it. She'd never expected this day to come. A part of her had pretended she didn't want it to happen. Now she knew she couldn't deny her feelings for him. The past few days had been hell--the worst part of which was believing Nate saw her as not good enough for him. Bad for him. They hadn't been good for each other eleven years ago. Now they could be everything to each other.

When she hung up, Zak poked his head out of his door.

"Hey slugger, I didn't hear you get home."

"Mom said you were busy."

Rori wondered about that. Annmarie wouldn't recognize Nate's car in the lot. Had she tried her door and found it locked?

A little embarrassed went to a lot more when Nate came out of her apartment. Zak's face fell at the sight of him, then he ducked back into his apartment.

"Everything OK?" Nate asked.

In truth, no. Not for Zak. She couldn't stand knowing he hurt, but she didn't want Nate to leave. "I need to talk to him. Give me a couple minutes."

"OK. I'm going to call home. Take as long as you need."

Rori walked into Annmarie's apartment without knocking. Zak was curled up at the end of the couch. Annmarie asked him what was wrong.

"This is mine," Rori said. Annmarie nodded before leaving them alone.

Kneeling in front of the sofa, Rori wasn't surprised he wouldn't look at her. He was too near tears.

"Look slugger, I know you're not crazy about Nate, but he's a part of my life and I need you to accept that. It doesn't change how I feel about you one bit."

"What do you need him for?"

She curved a hand around his head. "I just do. I don't wanna choose between you two,

cuz you know I'd do anything for you. But I'd end up unhappy and I don't think you'd really want that. Do you?"

Reluctantly, he shook his head, then scooted forward, toward her. He carefully tucked her hair behind her ears. "You'll love me and wanna play with me even if he hangs around?"

"I'll love you no matter what. And I'll always have time for you. But I want time with him too. Now do one thing for me."

"What?"

She poked lightly at his chest, making him giggle a little. "Don't ever forget anything I said."

He hugged her, and she tickled his neck with a kiss. When she got up, Annmarie peeked in from the kitchen. "Will you be able to babysit tonight?"

"Sure. Just come over and let me know when you're about to leave."

Nate stood at one of the windows in her apartment when she got back. "Everything OK?" he asked again, glancing back at her.

"Yeah. I've got Zak tonight, but you can stay."

She moved over to him and felt quiet pleasure when he put his arms around her as soon

as she was close enough.

"I'd like to, but I have to be there to get Andrea ready for bed."

"Jeremiah can't do it one night?"

He slipped his fingers through her hair, resting them against her scalp. "He can, but I need that time with her."

His dedication and love for his daughter was everything she expected. "I understand. I'm glad." She smiled up at him. "I'll let you go right after we eat."

"OK," he said on a kiss. "But don't let me go too easily."

THE FIRST opportunity Nate had to pick up the phone the next day was late afternoon. He'd hoped to clear his schedule enough to make an hour or two to see Rori. Unfortunately the later days of the week were his most busy. Appointments, visiting, making and answering calls, going over his sermon for the following Sunday...all done with Andrea since Jeremiah's schedule was intractable on Fridays too.

Nate suddenly felt overwhelmed with duties that, until recently, made his life complete. He'd realized that once he got used to taking care of his child, he'd tried to fill the hours of his day to keep him from loneliness. Now he wanted back some of the leisure time he'd set

aside for Jenna to spend with Rori.

From his church office, he dialed the payphone on her floor a little after four. Andrea was in the playroom with one of the deaconess's. Instead of the half-dozen rings he expected, it was picked up on the first.

"Hello?" Rori's eager voice greeted him.

"You must be in good shape." Why did it feel good to tease her? Or was this headiness just reaction to hearing her voice, finally?

"Don't make me tell you I've been sitting out here hoping you'd call."

Her confession surprised him. A big part of him anticipated a little regret for how far things went yesterday. They'd both jumped in with the fearlessness of a kid jumping over a cliff trusting the water below to catch him safely.

"Are we rushing into this?" she asked, revealing her earlier confession had everything to do with needing reassurance.

He was human—he'd had a few doubts himself. Not of her or of starting a relationship. He'd wondered at the wisdom of not taking things slow. Building up one step at a time instead of running like uninhibited children.

"Maybe we are rushing. But I can't stop it. I feel like I've waited a lifetime for you

already." Every time he touched her, he thought, *This can't be new. Not when it feels like we've been lovers for as long as I can remember.* They fit together. That was ageless...and impatient.

"I feel like that too," she said softly. "But I'm scared to death today...now that you're not here to make it OK."

Nate wished now he'd called her earlier, even if there hadn't been a free minute. He should have known she'd have more trepidation than he did.

"Tell me why you're afraid," he coaxed gently. "Is it because you think I'll hurt you?" God knew she had every reason to worry about that.

"I am scared you'll bail on me, just when..."

"I wish I could see you tonight. I wish I could be there to reassure you."

"Are *you* that sure?"

Curling his hand around the arm of his chair, he felt out the answer. After talking to her, whatever fears he'd had were gone. "I'm that sure."

"So what are you doing that's so important?"

She sounded almost drunk, with relief or need.

"I've got a budget meeting at the church. You know how it goes when people discuss

spending money. I'll be lucky to get out of here in three hours."

And she had to work tonight. He didn't think he could take spending time with her, only to have to let her go *there*.

*When did you start feeling like she belongs to you?*

The possessiveness came to him, familiar and strong now. It was why he'd gone to Baby Dolls in the first place, he realized, why he'd pushed her into a defensive corner that night instead of apologizing, why he couldn't seem to let go and let her decide on her own she had to quit.

He did understand her reasons for continuing, to a certain point. Yet he knew he wouldn't remain quiet on the subject for long. He didn't want other men seeing her beautiful, naked body, lusting after her. He didn't want her to lose one ounce of her self-respect.

"I'm free all day tomorrow," he offered.

"Zak'll wanna spend time with me and you'll probably have Andrea. We could do something with everybody."

*Then have time to ourselves after,* he added silently.

"What do you think? The zoo? You should bring Jeremiah—unless he's got a girl he



spends weekends with."

"No. It'd be good for him. I'll try to talk him into it."

They set a time just seconds before a tap came on his office door. Everyone had arrived for the meeting.

"Wish I didn't have to go, but everyone's waiting for me."

"OK."

"I can't wait to see you tomorrow."

She paused, then murmured "See you."

It clearly wasn't what she wanted to say, but she hung up, leaving him to the tantalizing mystery.

## Chapter Fourteen

*DON'T CHANGE your mind! I'm in too deep already.*

Instead Rori said "See you," then slid up the wall just far enough to replace the receiver. When she came back down, she wrapped her arms around her knees.

*You're on the edge here, Ror, breathing fresh air and waiting for it to suffocate you.*

Talk about your heart running away with you. If Nate knew even half of the notions she'd gotten since yesterday, she didn't doubt he'd be a little more afraid. Maybe as afraid as she was.

Rori shook her head. How could she want this so much when she was so skeptical of the outcome? But she wouldn't change her mind.

Hearing footsteps, she glanced up to see Annmarie and Zak coming up the steps. Annmarie carried a bag of groceries. She'd just picked Zak up from school.

Rori pushed herself to her feet though it was too late to hide she'd been sitting by the phone, waiting for it to ring. Annmarie handed her the keys to her truck.

"Hey, you guys doing anything tomorrow?" she asked, forcing a brightness she didn't feel. She knew Annmarie had to work tomorrow night too.

"Why? What's up?"

"How 'bout if we go to the zoo?" She glanced at Zak. "Andrea'll be there."

The appeal of the zoo overcame his inclination to avoid Nate, and he looked to his mother. "Can we, mom?"

"Are you sure—?" Annmarie started.

"Of course I'm sure. I want you guys there." Need *you there*.

"Can we ask Wayne?"

Zak's face lit up like a little ray of sunshine. Rori wouldn't blame his mother for feeling reluctant to say no, if she did.

Annmarie turned to her door and inserted the key. "You can ask him when he gets home."

"Oh boy!" Zak ran ahead into the apartment with his backpack bobbing on his shoulder.

"I have to ask him to babysit Zak tomorrow," Annmarie said defensively to Rori, as if that was the reason she'd agreed to allow Wayne to join them.

Rori hid her bedeviling smile...then Annmarie turned the microscope on her. "So Nate called, huh?"

After a minute of trying to control the heat in her face, Rori followed her friend into her

apartment to the kitchen. "Do you think I'm crazy for doing this? Should I be making tracks in the opposite direction?"

Annmarie began unpacking the grocery bag as Rori leaned against the counter nibbling a nail. "Do you want to make tracks?"

She shook her head too quickly for comfort.

Annmarie glanced at her with a box of rice in her hand. "Has he told you he loves you?"

Imagining the words coming from his mouth... God, it was too much. It was everything her heart rushed toward. "No.

But—"

"Well, just make sure you know what you want from the start. And what he wants. If they coincide, then you don't have to worry."

Rori's mind reared in disagreement just before Annmarie said "I mean, maybe then it'll be worth it."

Would getting involved with Nate on every level, and then having it fall apart, be worth it? Rori wasn't so sure. She'd done that all before. *This is different!* she assured herself.

All she knew for certain was there was no way to back out now. She was in it and the entry door had slammed shut, locking with the deceptively simple word "Yes."

"I REALLY shouldn't have come," Courtney said from the passenger's side of Rori's truck.

Annmarie and Zak had gone with Wayne in his truck. Rori still couldn't believe Annmarie had agreed to get into an enclosed space with Wayne. Still, there'd been little choice after Rori invited Courtney last night. It was Donnie's blatant flirtation with the new dancer that turned Courtney's "No, I can't come" into a "Where do I sign up?"

"I've got a lot of homework..."

Rori glanced at her. "...and you're hoping he'll call?"

Courtney made a face that almost hid a blush of truth. "I really hate it when you do that." Shrugging, Rori offered an insincere apology.

"You're right, OK? He's beginning to act like a jerk, and I know it can't last."

Courtney was beginning to see reason; Donnie had always been a jerk. Instead of leaving it at that, Rori tried to drive the point home one more time. "Let me guess: He doesn't wanna belong to you, but you belong to him. He complains all the time that he doesn't like being on your leash, but every time you're not where you're supposed to be, he's possessive and jealous. For a while you're flattered by it, telling yourself it means he really wants

you—"

Courtney threw up her hands. "OK, OK. I get it. You've been there. So why not let me make the mistake so you can say 'I told you so'?"

"Believe me, I'd get a lot more satisfaction out of seeing Donnie get what's coming to him. He might not be so smug next time."

"I don't want to hurt him," Courtney said softly.

*You will*, Rori thought, but even that desire would fade. Soon all she'd want to do was crawl away like a whipped puppy, hoping he wouldn't notice her absence until she was a thousand miles away.

"Today'll be fun. Who couldn't have fun at a zoo?"

"Annmarie and her little boy will be there?" Courtney asked on a sigh.

She was relieved. So was Rori. She'd expected Courtney to change her mind about going. And then Donnie would win again, the way jerks like him always did.

"Yeah. And some other friends," she said without embellishment.

"How old is her kid?"

"Seven."

"Wow. She barely looks my age. She must have given up a lot."

Though the circumstances were completely different, Rori wondered what her life would have been like if Nate's predictions had come true: If she'd gotten pregnant when she was sixteen. The love she'd always had for children forbade her from thinking of it as a misfortune, any more than Annmarie could see Zak that way. He was the blessing come from a curse.

"She'd never regret Zak," Rori said with conviction.

"Of course not."

As they neared Delaware park, Courtney sighed longingly. "I love babies. Don't you? Those big eyes and tiny fingers and toes."

"Their soft heads and their sweet smell."

Courtney smiled over at her. "Is it just when you're with a guy who you think you wanna spend the rest of your life with that you think about babies?"

"For me, it's what I always wanted. Didn't necessarily have anything to do with the guy." She'd certainly never wanted to share a child with Brett—God no! But she'd wanted one of her own all the same. A child with Nate... Her whole body responded in aching tenderness. The force of it stole her breath and slammed tears to the surface.

*Too easy... Damn, it's too easy to feel too much with him. You're not working with a*

*clean slate, and you know it. Your heart's taking over exactly where it left off eleven years ago. It's why you feel you're rushing in and yet you've been here forever.*

Rori managed to pull herself together as she found a parking space, then they walked toward the zoo. Annmarie had met up with Nate, and the six of them stood off to the side.

Zak saw them first, rushing over to Rori. She picked him up as he told her Wayne gave his mother a flower and him another toy truck he'd had as a kid. "Mom made me leave it at home so I wouldn't lose it, so I'll show you later."

"Can't wait, slugger."

Letting him down, she realized with a jolt of guilt she was afraid to look at Nate. If she looked at him, everybody would know... everything. Including him. It'd been so much easier when they were alone. No one to witness her vulnerability.

Once she'd introduced everyone and they started in, she couldn't avoid it any longer. Nate touched her shoulder, pulling her apart emotionally just when she'd gotten herself in hand. She turned to him.

The look in his eyes was so plain, she could almost feel his mouth on hers. God, she couldn't... If he kissed her, the whole world would know she belonged to him, body and soul. She wasn't even ready to accept that herself.



"Hi," he said softly. "How you doing?"

She wanted to laugh at the simplicity of the question, and she managed a choked version of amusement. "On the edge. You may wanna keep your distance today." *I'm transparent to you, aren't I? That's how you always know when to back down and when to move in for the kill.* The thoroughness of his gaze was all the proof she'd ever need she was an open book to him.

"Until we're alone," he agreed, making the edge she was on razor sharp.

And to think she'd convinced herself she'd be safe in a crowd of friends. She should have known her awareness of him was too fine tuned.

Once inside the zoo, Nate let Andrea down while they decided which way to go first. The little girl walked straight to Rori and held up her arms. Rori caught Nate's smile before she lifted her. Wayne put Zak on his shoulders, then they began the adventure.

Andrea was enthralled with everything on her first visit to the zoo. This particular zoo wasn't new to Zak, but Rori knew the majority of his excitement stemmed from the family he imagined, here together.

An hour later, Courtney joined Rori at the gorilla habitat. "You're good with kids. You keep surprising me."

Rori frowned at her in confusion. "What do you mean?" Of course she knew most people presumed she went with kids like oil in vinegar.

"I mean, the first time I met you, I figured you for one of those tough chicks other women are either afraid of or secretly envy. But you're more like ten parts tough and ninety parts sweet." Courtney leaned over and hugged her unexpectedly. "Someday I know I'm going to wish I'd listened to you sooner, and I'll thank you for banging your head against my mile-thick walls. Thanks for caring. For thinking a lot of me when I don't think much of myself."

Courtney walked back to the group before Rori could say *You remind me of myself. But nobody ever told me you could love undeserving people until you lose every part of yourself. Now I don't know the difference between giving all of me for something and all of me for nothing. And I'm afraid to find out.*

She glanced at Nate and found him studying her with quiet yearning.

*Are you for real, Nathan Jovanovich? Can I trust you enough to give you everything and it'll be worth it? Can you ever love me as much as I wanna love you?*

## Chapter Fifteen

"BY THE WAY—and I know you don't need my approval—Rori's great. Hope it works out," Jeremiah said, bringing a soda into the living room.

Both Nate and Andrea looked at him, Nate from the couch, Andrea from where she played listlessly with her toys. She'd napped in her stroller for over an hour at the zoo, but the excitement of the day would have her asleep early tonight anyway.

Nate smiled, pleased at Jeremiah's maturity. Jenna had been like a mother to him; he'd loved her as much. It was a relief not to have to fight anyone except his mother to be involved with Rori.

"Me too. Thanks."

"Andi's crazy about her too."

"I know." He noticed that often. He'd worried about it to a certain degree because the attachment Andrea could form with Rori might devastate her if things didn't work out. But in the end, he concluded that any amount of time his daughter spent with Rori would be good for her. For all of them. And he believed this *would* work out.

Thinking he heard an approaching car, Nate got up and went to the kitchen. The eight of

them had gone out for dinner together following the zoo. Then Rori said she'd drop Courtney off, fill up the gas tank of her truck, and she'd come here.

Nate was impatient for her to arrive. While he understood it, her reticent distance from him today made him worry. It also motivated him. Her fears were real; he'd convince her his intentions were genuine.

By the time her truck pulled into the driveway, darkness had descended completely. Telling himself he only wanted to reassure her she had the right house, he moved out the door without his coat. But he knew as soon as he saw her that he'd been waiting for a moment alone with her all day.

He opened her door, and she turned to get out saying "Me and Courtney got to talking about college and—"

Nate slipped his arms around her waist, lifting her out and down to him. His mouth interrupted her words. After a startled instant, she surrendered, melting against him. He could smell the leather of her jacket, the soft, sweet scent of her beneath it. His thoughts weren't pure. He wanted to be alone with her, wanted them to be wrapped up together like stripes on a candy cane. He wanted to look down and see her passion for him radiant as an angel.

"What'll your neighbors think?" she murmured hoarsely against his mouth.

"Most people aren't as nosy as my mother."

She laughed confidentially, meeting another kiss.

"You must be freezing."

Skimming his mouth back to her ear, he shook his head. "Far from it."

Maybe it should have shocked or shamed him to feel so comfortable with her, with the intimacy they shared, with the greater intimacy he ached to have with her. He didn't feel anything negative. When he said he'd waited a lifetime, it summed up everything. The way he felt, there was no slow course. None that could satisfy them.

The prospect was unnerving, but he'd wondered once or twice if he'd ever stopped loving Rori. And he'd wondered if that cheapened what he'd shared with Jenna. Was it wrong for him to continue to love Rori throughout his marriage? He wasn't sure. Wasn't even sure he wanted to analyze it. The bottom line remained—he'd been faithful to Jenna, body and soul. And, dormant as it was those years, he'd always loved Rori.

"God, you scare me to death," she said softly. Her fear made no sense when she held him so tight.

"OK. Just as long as you know I don't plan on letting you go anytime soon." He doubted

she could handle the full disclosure—he'd already signed on for the lifetime deal with her, if she'd have him.

She actually laughed. "You're crazy. Anyway, let's go inside before you freeze."

After slamming her door, she took the arm he offered and they went in the house.

He wasn't surprised when Andrea's sleepy eyes lit up on seeing Rori and she started to bring her all her toys. After a few minutes, Jeremiah excused himself to do his homework in his bedroom.

"So who is Courtney?" Nate asked.

"She's a dancer at the club—trying to put herself through college and live on her own," Rori said, pausing to exclaim over something Andrea handed her. "She's OK with it. I mean, she's a h— a lot more comfortable with it than I am. But then I doubt she'll work there much longer. She's only got another semester to graduate."

"Does it bother you that she works there?" Nate could see she was upset because of the expression in her eyes.

"Yeah! She's too good for it. She's like one of those people you expect'll get everything they want in life. She *should* get everything she wants. And doing this is..." She shook her head emotionally.

Nate reached over to put his hand on the back of her neck. "Why don't you believe the same for yourself? You're too good for that place too."

Instead of answering, she glanced away to Andrea. He realized if he kept pressing her on the subject, she'd return to thinking she had to defend herself against him. They didn't need walls between them.

Scooting closer to her on the sofa, he asked "So what were you saying before? You and Courtney got to talking about college..."

After a long moment, she glanced at him again. "I said I was thinking of getting my GED and she said she'd help me study whenever she could." Rori shook her head as if the idea was ludicrous. "I haven't studied since I was sixteen. I don't think I know how. I don't think I even know the basics, like multiplication, anymore."

"It's like riding a bicycle," he assured her. "I'll help you study too."

Her smile could be described as no less than salacious. "We've studied together before. Would I learn anything?"

Nate laughed out loud, pulling her close for a kiss. "Somehow I'll force myself to concentrate."

Feeling Andrea's tiny hand on his knee, he glanced down at her. "Hey, munchkin, you

look pretty tired."

As if to verify it, she rubbed her eyes with her fists.

"I think we better give you your bath, then get you to bed." He stood, scooping her into his arms. When he turned toward Rori, Andrea held her hand out to her.

"Feel like getting a little wet?"

Rori grinning, propelling herself to her feet. "Sure. Why not?" She took Andrea from him while he prepared the bath water, got the toys, towels and pajamas.

He and Andrea's bedtime ritual had become sacred. If his day was hectic and he didn't get time to spend alone with her, they always had this. He never missed giving her her bath, reading to her when she wasn't too tired, rocking her to sleep. He'd never shared the time with anyone else either. Until now. Until now, he'd believed he was possessive of his special time with his daughter, so it surprised him to enjoy having Rori join in. They laughed, played, made sure Andrea was squeaky clean.

Once she was dry, diapered and dressed, Nate let Rori take her while he cleaned up the bathroom. He smiled when he heard Rori reading a Winnie the Pooh story, changing her voice for each of the characters. He smiled, hearing Andrea giggle.

*I know it's not fair, Jenna. You deserved this. But our little girl needs a mother. I think*



*you would approve of Rori if you could see her with Andrea.*

He found Rori in the nursery, swaying gently with Andrea in her arms. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "You probably wanted to do this... I think she was just exhausted and couldn't hold out."

*I think it was you, Nate thought. I think she's as comfortable in your arms as she is in mine.*

He moved over to them, stroked a hand over Andrea's already dry, silky curls. A kitten couldn't have looked any sweeter nestled against Rori's breasts. He pressed a kiss to Andrea's hair, then to Rori's lips. Her eyes revealed mild astonishment. She might have guessed Andrea's bedtime ritual was an exclusive club she'd been allowed in to.

Without help, but with his urging, she got Andrea in her crib without waking her, and Nate covered her.

"Sweet dreams, short stuff," Rori whispered tenderly, then left them together.

A part of his ritual had been the instinctive thought each night: *Your mother should be here to kiss you goodnight and tell you how much she loves you, munchkin.* He didn't think it tonight although the truth of it would never diminish.

He found Rori in the living room again, looking at the bookshelves. When he put his

arms around her and pressed himself to her back, she said "I have to go soon."

He'd expected it. They were alone finally and that aroused her fear of getting in even deeper.

Hearing her sharp intake of breath as he slipped his hands under the hem of her Henley shirt, he drew his mouth toward her cheek. She twisted toward him almost blindly, defying her own panic, and their lips met heatedly. He would have smiled if he felt the slightest amusement. Instead, he felt need, powerful and acute. Love, overwhelming and ready for the next step and the next. All of them. Everything they had and everything they were.

Their bodies molded eagerly. Her fingers clutched in his hair, not hurting but conveying reciprocity. He drew his hands up her back, splaying them and pressing her closer until he could feel her nipples stab against his chest. *So easy to lose control*, he thought thickly. *As easy as it was the first time.*

He dragged his mouth away, toward her ear. "I suppose I'd scare you to death if I said I want to make love to you. Tonight. All night."

Pausing only a second, she whispered breathlessly "Yes."

Her tone was too full of passion to fully explain her response, and he faced her. "Yes what?"

"Yes you'd scare me to death. And yes I want the same. But you shouldn't say it."

"Why shouldn't I?"

She threw a glance over her shoulder at his bookshelves. A lot of the books covered theological topics. She didn't explain herself when she turned back.

"You think because I'm a man of God, I shouldn't say I want to make love to you?"

The high color in her cheeks spoke before she did, endearing him because so many people wouldn't believe there was any degree of shyness in her. "What do you think your congregation would think if they heard you say that to me?"

"They're not here. They'll never hear me say that to you. This is between you and me." He brushed her hair back from her face. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm also a man, Rori. I feel desire. You arouse me. I don't see a conflict between my faith and my sexuality anymore."

Despite the shyness, she never averted her eyes from his.

"Our relationship is special. Why shouldn't I be honest about what I want with you? I'd tell you I want to see you without shame. That I miss you. Or how much I care for you."

After taking a deep breath she exhaled shakily, she shook her head. "You...you just surprise me sometimes."

Nate smiled at her affectionately. "Good. Because most of the time you're a mystery to me too. I can't predict you. But I am looking forward to getting to know you down to the bare bones."

*And maybe you'll trust me again once we're both there.*

*YOU COULD live here, daddy, and never leave for the rest of your life*, Rori thought moving through bookshelves set up like a maze to her mind. When a lady asked her if she needed help, she'd taken it eagerly and now she had an armful of books to help her with the GED tests. She hadn't been in a library since high school. Didn't she need to sign something to check these out?

*Twenty-seven years old, and you might as well be performing brain surgery for how well you know your way around this place.*

Ten minutes after making it to the head of the line, she had a library card and was on her way to her truck. She picked up one of text books with sample questions, opening it randomly, and read a question: "Ballet is thought to be \_\_\_\_; once you attend, you may find yourself returning again and again." (A) sporadic, (B) exhausting, (C) addictive, (D) incessant, (E) disappointing."

*So C is always the right answer.* Rori smiled to herself and flipped further. "If  $5x=3$  and  $3y-5x=9$ , what is the value of  $y$ ?"

She stared at the problem for a full minute, then skimmed the rest of the page in disbelief. What had she gotten herself in to? The only time she understood algebra was when her father sat with her and patiently explained everything until she could do it on her own.

*Hell, what made you think you could do this? The highest grade you ever got was a B--in gym. Something tells me you're not gonna be running laps or doing sit-ups on these tests.*

She slapped the book closed, pushing it away from her before jamming her key in the ignition.

She and Nate had made plans Saturday night, just before she left. He'd had appointments in the morning, she had her class. The rest of her day was free. She was meeting him and Andrea at the church.

Dropping by the library had been something of an avoidance. Everything inside her warred lately. She wanted to spend all her time with him and yet she was afraid of the time with him. Saturday night had thrown her. Being in the home he'd shared with Jenna,

wanting Jenna's husband there and being wanted by him.

His words shocked her more than they might have in her own apartment. How could she reconcile his desire to make love with her when Jenna still haunted that house? Her pictures were still on the bookshelves. Her things seemed to be permanent fixtures. It shamed Rori to admit she'd stood in his bedroom doorway with Andrea for a few minutes, looking specifically for Jenna's possessions. She just hadn't expected to be so devastated when she saw the cosmetics on one of the dressers, a framed wedding picture next to the bed.

For an instant, she'd considered going into the closets looking for Jenna's wardrobe. Instead she'd turned away, saving herself grief if not strong suspicions.

If Nate was over his wife, why did he hold on to her things over a year after her tragic death? How could he invite another woman into his home and tell her he wanted to make love to *her* with his dead wife all around them?

Rori had felt ashamed for invading something that seemed sacred. The last thing she wanted to do was return, but since she was never sure if her class would run long, it made the most sense for her to go to Niagara Falls.

*Been a hell of a past couple weeks for you, Ror,* she thought, shaking her head. *You tell*

*yourself you don't want anything to do with Nathan Jovanovich, you tell yourself and him that you feel no shame for your job. Now you've practically got the wedding invitations picked out, too afraid to admit to anyone you think he might be jumping into something he's not ready for so soon after his wife's death. And every time you step out on that stage, you're hoping you'll fall flat on your face--anything to get out of being there.*

Working Saturday night had been torture for her. She threw up once before she went on stage and almost did again after. That was when she knew she couldn't keep it up, even if she couldn't get herself to quit just yet. When she asked Donnie for a week off, expecting a hassle, he agreed almost immediately. The confirmation that she couldn't even do her job satisfactorily, aside from personal feelings, might have offended her if she didn't already know it. She had a paid week to "get her shit together"—as Donnie so elegantly put it.

A part of her wanted to blame Nate for making her feel ashamed, but she knew whether he'd come into her life again or not this would have happened. At first, the end had justified the means and given her self-respect. Now that she was independent in every sense, the only way to hold onto that self-respect was to find another way to support herself and whatever career plans she made. She didn't kid herself she'd probably quit for good when she went in on Friday. Annmarie had guessed the same.

*And you won't tell Nate anything about why you needed a "vacation" either. He's gotta know already how much power he has over you. What power do you have over him if he's still holding on to Jenna?*

Somehow her doubts weren't enough to keep her from hoping she made something out of nothing. That she simply hadn't yet come up with a justifiable reason for why he continued to hold on to all of Jenna's things. She'd spent most of yesterday considering it. Annmarie hadn't been able to offer any answers either. At least nothing good enough to put Rori's demons to rest.

*She found Nate's church easily. He came out with Andrea, again before she could exit her truck. She watched him instead of moving. What can I do? I look at you and I'm sixteen all over. And you're the only man I can imagine feeling like this with. God, I wanna believe you really feel the same.*

Rori turned away from his approach to get her keys from the ignition. Her situation was even more precarious because of his daughter. Andrea was too easy to fall in love with, just as Zak had been. Worse, she sensed the little girl reaching out to her too. Holding her Saturday night, rocking her to sleep... Rori had understood what being a mother could be like, more so because of Andrea's age...and because she didn't remember her own mother.



If things didn't work out with Nate, Rori was already aware she'd lose more than him.

"Class run late?" he asked opening her door for her.

She shook her head. "Actually, I got myself a library card." She lifted one of the books. "Have you ever seen one of these sample tests? I'm gonna need a crash course in eleven years of school to even study for my GED. Do you happen to know what y equals? "Y" am I doing this?"

Nate grinned. "It'll come back to you in no time."

Raising an eyebrow of doubt, Rori turned to get out of the truck.

"War-wee," Andrea said with a big, welcoming smile. She reached her arms out. "Ho'd you."

Rori took her with a lump in her throat and a smile. "How's it going, short stuff?" After she hugged her, Nate kissed her in welcome.

"I missed you yesterday," he said, his hand curved around her cheek.

"You had church."

"I wanted you here."

Unable to speak at the mere thought, she faced Andrea again. Church. How could she work one night and get up the next morning to go to church? How could she feel the way

she did about Nate, the man, then see him, the man of God, up in front of a congregation, expounding on spiritual matters? She'd have nowhere to hide. Now she wondered if this was the first test in their fledgling relationship.

They went inside the church together. As Nate showed her around, she asked him what he did as a minister. "All I ever saw my father do was read, research and give his sermons."

"That's part of it." He led her into the sanctuary. "I also do a lot of visiting—to hospitals, parishioners, those interested in joining or hearing more. Jenna used to come with me on those."

Rori winced, but he didn't glance back at her from the middle aisle between empty pews. When he did turn back, she tried to hide her feelings.

"I infiltrate gangs at times too. I try to meet with the members one on one. We've got a good-sized youth group here—most of them former gang members."

"Jeremiah," she guessed.

Nate smiled. "He was the first. He goes in with me now."

It was hard for her to imagine Nate in a group of hoods, telling them about Christ. He wouldn't fit in. But he had the bold tenacity to go in fearless. She knew without asking that

this was something Jenna hadn't joined him in. But it was something Rori could see herself doing. Most of the guys she hung out with in her lifetime had been dangerous in one way or another. They'd always accepted her as one of them.

"I do believe," she said in the silence. "I believe pretty much most of the same things you do."

Nate took the steps back to her. "I know that. You don't have to defend yourself to me."

They'd talked about their beliefs often before she ran away. Rori had never been completely sure he accepted her faith as similar to his. Especially after he chose Jenna.

"It's just...sometimes I wonder why Jesus would love me if my own father can't."

She didn't want sympathy, and he didn't give it to her. "I don't understand your father. I don't know why he did most of what he did." Anger tinged his tone, the expression on his face. "When you ran away, he just let you go. Like there was nothing he could—or would—do. You must have felt like he didn't care about you at all."

All the emotions tangled up inside her. She'd never told anyone how it felt to be a hundred percent sure her father loved her as a lost soul, not a beloved daughter.

She turned her face into Nate's shoulder, not wanting him to see her cry if she couldn't refrain.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, stroking her hair. "I'm sorry your father makes you feel like he doesn't love you."

"I could never hold anything against him."

"He doesn't deserve that any more than I deserve a second chance. But I promise you won't regret it this time. I want to make you happy."

She laughed slightly, lifting her head. *If you had any idea how crazy I've been...doubting, fearing, wanting so damn much to believe every promise in the book...*

"I wanna be happy. I want you to be happy too. I wanna be the one to make you happy."

He kissed her mouth, just a paintbrush stroke. "Then trust me. Don't run away from me again."

It was clear he'd seen all her craziness. He kissed her longer this time, and Rori let herself believe again. Closing her eyes, she let herself take the happiness she wanted.

## Chapter Sixteen

RORI SAW Charlene standing in the entryway just as she finished up her Thursday dance class. Charlene watched her instruct often, but there was something different about her observation today. She entered the studio as soon as Rori dismissed the class.

"What's up?"

"Deb quit," Charlene announced without hesitation. "She quit the ballet and the school."

Rori stared, speechless for a moment. "Oh God, I was too hard on her--"

Charlene shook her head. "*I* was, but the lead has to have personal discipline. She didn't have it. She knew it. She said she never believed she'd get the lead role when she auditioned--

and never really wanted it."

Taking a deep breath, Rori steeled herself for the worst. "So now what?"

"Now I've got a ballet opening next weekend, hundreds of advance tickets sold and no Giselle." Charlene crossed her arms over her chest in what came across to Rori as a direct challenge.

"The lead dancer should be a student of the school, not an instructor." *Nothing like*

*sticking to your story.*

"So you've said. Numerous times. Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of that excuse anymore. You're the only one who knows the dance. You don't have a lot of time to rehearse with everyone else, but you can step in without causing more than a few ripples."

*A few ripples*, Rori laughed to herself. One week before the grand performance, and she could step in with only a few ripples? "What makes you think I know all the routines? I gave up the part almost before I got it." She'd also learned each of them before she quit. She rarely forgot a dance, no matter how complex.

"You know them. I doubt you're even rusty." Charlene's faith in that was like a wave of the hand. Rori was almost embarrassed to have attempted the foil.

She walked to the other side of the room pulling the scrunchie from her hair. "Look, I'll think about it," she said, dropping the terrycloth band into her duffel.

"There isn't time to think about it. Whether or not this ballet goes on next Saturday depends on your 'yes' or your 'no.' So decide, and let's get on with it."

For the first time, Rori saw the rigid side of Charlene Deb had complained of often. Her guilt warred with her anger. She turned to Charlene. "Don't put this all on me."

For all of three seconds, the older woman looked chagrined. Then she shook her head. "I

have to. The future of this school depends on this fundraiser. I know you want to do this. I've seen you dance this role. I've seen your passion for it. I don't know why you backed out, but I know you think your past matters. I know you think you'll get up on stage and the audience will see this tarnished bad girl trying to pull the wool over their eyes—"

Rori flushed, both humiliated and incensed because her feelings had become form.

Charlene stepped closer. "What you don't realize is that all they'll see is Giselle as she was meant to be. You were meant to dance this ballet. Why don't you give yourself a chance? Let me go out in style."

A rare, slight smile curved Charlene's lips, and Rori knew she wouldn't be able to say no. She didn't like the technique or how personal her mentor had gotten, but she couldn't say no.

"When does the cast rehearse?" she asked irritably.

"Every night from eight to ten, until next Saturday. Does that fit into your schedule?"

It did...if she got to work barely ten minutes before she went on. *Or if you quit.* "I'll be there."

She started out of the room, then Charlene's words went through her head. The thing about the future of the school and then— "What did you mean "Let me go out in style"?"

Charlene nodded, apparently expecting it. "I'm selling the school. I'm retiring."

"When?" Rori heard herself asking through her shock.

"As soon as I get the offer I'm looking for."

Rori wasn't sure what jolted her more—Charlene's announcement or her own first instinct.

She took a quick shower by rote. Her thoughts never left all Charlene had revealed.

When she got home, she didn't even enter her apartment. She went straight into Annmarie's, dropping her duffel on the table.

"Deb Smyth quit. Charlene talked me into taking the lead role in *Giselle* again."

Annmarie looked up from painting her nails. "Oh. Boy, that doesn't leave you much time. But you know it anyway."

Rori waved her hands. "That's not even the worst part. Charlene is selling the school." Knowing she must look half crazy, Rori tried to calm down, but that first instinct kept coming back to haunt her.

Zak pushed himself to his feet from the living room floor, where he did homework.

"Why don't you buy it?" he asked as he took his empty milk glass into the kitchen.

*Oh God, you can read minds, can't you, slugger?* Feeling like she needed to clutch her



chest to keep herself from a panic attack, Rori sank into the chair across from Annmarie.

"You should," her friend agreed.

"Do you know how much it costs to buy a business? To maintain it?"

"No. Do you?"

Rori pursed her lips and admitted she didn't either.

"You saved almost everything, haven't you? From working at Baby Dolls?"

"I can't ask Charlene to accept what I have. I'd be insulting her. It could never be enough. She's rich. What I have she could probably find under her couch cushions." Rori shook her head. *It's not even in the realm of possibility, so just stop thinking about it now. What makes you think you could run a business anyway?*

"Hey Rori?" Zak sidled up to her.

She turned to him. "What's up, slugger?" She wanted to pull him on her lap and hug the stuffing out of him. To make herself feel better. And just because she'd missed him. She'd been studying for her GED all week, surprising herself with how things came back to her—things she'd never even been very good at in school. Sometimes she studied with Nate, sometimes with Courtney.

Courtney had been available more often than not, now that she knew—the way a woman

always knows—her cheated on her. Unfortunately, she still thought with her heart, so she insisted without solid evidence she couldn't accuse him of anything. Rori saw the evidence clear as night and day. He didn't call, return calls, they saw each other only at work and there he was distant. Donnie hoped Courtney would go away quietly so he wouldn't have to get his hands dirty.

"Mom and me are going to Ben Franklin West with Wayne tonight," Zak announced.

Rori glanced at Annmarie to confirm, but her concentrated on her nails again as she corrected "That's *Rue* Franklin West, sweetie."

Ignoring his mother, Zak extended an invitation. "Wanna come along?"

Rori had been to the French restaurant before. In an effort to impress her, Brett took her there for her birthday early in their relationship. The place gave new meaning to costly class, but they both laughed after, admitting their tastebuds were more suited to Burger King. That might have been a good memory if Brett hadn't thrown it in her face so many times. He kept reminding her no one else had ever spent over a hundred bucks on her for one lousy meal. Never mind the fact that he'd been the one to order practically one of everything on the menu. Hence, she'd landed a prince and should never complain again.

"Sounds like fun, but I've got studying to do tonight," she declined.

"Again?"

It was as close to a whine as Rori had ever heard from him. "The tests are next week. Then I'll be done with that, and I can spend more time with you."

"You'll spend more time with *him*." His blue gaze dared her to deny it.

"I've missed you too, slugger. But when I say we'll spend more time together, I mean it. I'll never lie to you."

After a long minute of analyzing her, he nodded. "OK. But don't forget, chickie. I'm like an elephant."

"Honey, don't threaten Rori," Annmarie said absently.

"I'm not. We're making a pact—yderm."

Rori chuckled, shaking her head. Then she planted a kiss on him. "It's a pact all right."

With a grin, he went back to his homework.

"You don't want me to babysit tonight?" Rori asked Annmarie quietly.

Annmarie shook her head. "Zak's coming with us. Wayne suggested it first."

*The man's no fool*, Rori agreed silently. "So what's going on here? Something serious?"

Keeping her gaze averted didn't hide the blush that flooded Annmarie's face. "It's just dinner," she insisted.

"Just dinner at one of the most, if not *the* most, expensive restaurants in Buffalo. What are you wearing?"

She'd borrowed Rori's make-up, something she rarely did as many times as Rori offered it. "I have something."

"Show me."

Annmarie got up as if it put her out to indulge her curiosity. She pulled a hanger off the back of the bathroom door. It held a black cotton dress patterned with tiny red flowers. White lace edged the collar and sleeves. It was new, and, although it probably hadn't cost more than \$25, Annmarie would be stunning in it.

"The man's gonna worship you," Rori said, making sure every hint of teasing fled her tone.

"Do you think I'm doing the right thing?" Annmarie asked predictably.

"One hundred percent, babe." Rori hugged her.

She wasn't that sure of her own decisions, but she'd coasted all week instead of letting her fears drown her. It was easier to be with Nate when she trusted blindly. Maybe not the smartest thing she'd ever done, but she refused to sabotage something that could be great if she gave it half a chance.

Rori heard the phone in the hall. It would be Nate. He'd told her to call him when she got home from her class. He'd told her to call him yesterday when she finished studying with Courtney, but he'd ended up too impatient to wait for her to call.

She grabbed her bag off the table and rushed out to answer the phone.

"Did you just get home?" he asked.

"Pretty much."

"So what's the plan? Andrea just went down for her nap—"

"I'll come there. You don't have any appointments for the rest of the day?"

"I got everything done this morning. When will you be here?"

Rori smiled at the impatience in his tone. "I'll change my clothes and then I'm on my way."

"I'll be waiting."

And he'd come out to scandalize the neighbors the way he always did. Brett never even had the courtesy to get off the bed when she came in with something he'd sent her out for.

After changing into worn jeans, a soft cardigan, then getting her study books together, she headed for her truck and Niagara Falls.

Not entirely sure what prompted the change, she found herself thinking about the dance

school again, this time without telling herself "No!" immediately. She did have a lot of money saved. It was nowhere near enough to get her through even two years of college while paying rent and the basics, but she'd realized while studying for her GED she didn't want to start all over again. No dance company would take her. Still, other options were possible in the field of dance. Choreography, videos, touring as a dancer with a band.

She did have options. Buying the school could be an option. What she saved would certainly be a more-than-decent downpayment. All she needed was a loan. But who would give her a loan? She had little credit history. Almost everything she and Brett bought, even brand new vehicles, was with cash. Besides, would any bank give someone who was unemployed a loan?

Even fearing she set herself up for disappointment, she couldn't completely dismiss it as a possibility. She couldn't dismiss the excitement she felt at the prospect.

Instead of waiting for him to reach her, Rori got out of her truck and met Nate halfway across the driveway when she arrived at his house. She gave him a glowing smile before she kissed him.

"You've obviously got good news. Share."

Her excitement rubbed off on him. He took her books, then they went into the house

together. "I'm not sure there is good news," she said, slipping her jacket off and hanging it over the back of a kitchen chair.

"But something happened?"

"Not even really that. The owner of the dance school is retiring and wants to sell."

She looked at him as he set her books on the table.

"Doesn't sound like good news unless she asked you to buy it."

With effort, Rori kept her expression carefully composed. "You think that would be good news?" she asked, pulling herself up on the countertop.

He moved over to her. "I can't think of anybody who'd be a better choice—and that's not just because I don't know any other dancers."

Had she expected him to react the way she knew Brett would? *"Who are you kiddin', wildcat? Within two weeks, you'd be beggin' somebody else to take over—guaranteed. You'd never be able to hack it. You don't got the staying power. Look at how many times you left me, only to come crawlin' back in defeat."*

"I'm not sure I have enough money, and I'm not sure I could get a loan."

Nate shifted closer, cradling her hips and thighs with his arms. "How do you know if you don't try?"

"What if I take the risk and everything fails?"

"What if you sit back and do nothing? Nothing happens." He leaned closer. "You find a way to buy it and it'll be a success."

Rori lifted her arms to put around his shoulders. "You believe that?"

His answer was written all over his face in sincere conviction. But the words were nice too. "With all my heart."

She knew then she'd find a way—any way—to make it work. She wasn't a loser, a failure, a quitter. She could be a success. She could believe in herself.

"Thank you," she said softly.

His hands came up to cup the back of her head, then they closed the distance between them mutually.

Her mouth opened beneath his. She closed her eyes, knowing what her heart wanted to give him and unsure it was what he wanted.

*Blind faith.*

He maneuvered her thighs open wider with his body, bringing them closer. God, she wanted to touch him. *Him*. Not his shirt. She wanted to touch his body, bare flesh to her palms.



The desire followed an instinctive course. Her hands slipped under his sweater. His groan at her light touch nearly undid her. She pressed harder, drawing his heat inside her. He responded by urging her hips closer.

*Nate, only you. Everything for you.*

Protest was the last thing on her mind. She wanted to tear his clothes off, then her own. She wanted him inside her, wanted love to reflect in his eyes when he took her.

*Just say my name, and I'll know I'm the one you want.*

His kiss was so wild, she accepted everything breathlessly. Her cardigan, unbuttoned, his hands covering her satin bra, unfastening, touching her. As if that wasn't enough pleasure, enough fantasy come true, he lowered his mouth to her breast. The connection was pure molten lava coursing through her. She didn't feel tears running out of her eyes, didn't feel anything except the response his caress brought. She came apart and knew only that she wanted him with her.

"Nate, I can't hold on." She pressed her mouth to his shoulder, sinking her teeth in.

He pulled back to look at her. His own desire took on an expression of awe she felt too needy to understand.

And then he reached for the zipper of her jeans, and she didn't care to know anything but

that he wanted her. Still, the kiss he gave her seemed to defy their eagerness. "We belong—" he started.

Static and then a low cry cut off his words, startling them both.

"She's awake," Nate said heavily, glancing across the countertop. Rori followed his gaze to see a baby monitor, the source of the interruption. Andrea had awakened from her nap.

Nate looked at her again. Adding to her already elevated temperature came a wave of intense embarrassment. God, they'd almost made love on the kitchen counter while his baby slept a few rooms away.

"I'm sorry. I thought she'd nap longer."

Rori could hardly believe her ears. He hadn't claimed mistake. Had he planned this? Was he honestly saying he didn't regret losing control, only that they hadn't been able to reach consummation?

She wasn't a hypocrite. She'd wanted the same. She'd laid in bed at night dreaming of this, certain how good it'd be between them. But she knew they weren't ready for the ultimate intimacy. Not until there was complete trust. Not until they were sure they made love, not more mistakes.

Rori drew her shirt together, surprised at the naked hunger in his eyes as he watched her

movement. "You better go to her."

He actually smiled. "Give me another minute."

She couldn't return his humor. *One more minute, and where would you be, Ror? Even more unsure. Even more convinced you're sending a man still holding on to his dead wife down the road of temptation that won't lead to love or marriage or anything you want. He'd regret it. He'd regret you someday.*

"What's wrong?" No surprise, he noticed what she couldn't seem to hide.

"You should go to h—" Andrea cried for him, and Rori tried not to give in to her own tears. Everything hit her all at once, before she could fight.

"Not until you tell me—"

Rori pushed him away, jumping down from the counter and immediately getting her bra and sweater back in order. She went to Andrea, wiping the moisture from her face in order to present the little girl with a semblance of a smile.

Andrea stood at the side of her crib, clearly surprised her daddy hadn't come to get her immediately when she woke from her nap. Her tears then would've abated the instant she saw him, Rori sensed, but now they continued. She allowed Rori to lift her out. Her lips trembled, her eyes bright and sad.

They ran into Nate as they left the nursery. Rori handed Andrea to him. "She needs you. She needs you to be here for her whenever she calls for you. She needs to know you love her that much." She was unsure why she lectured him. He was nothing like her father. This was probably the first time he'd been a little lax in responding to his baby girl.

When Rori started away from him, he grasped her arm. "Where are you going?"

Until he asked, her destination hadn't formed. Now she knew she'd planned to walk out. If he hadn't caught her—maybe for good.

"Look, whatever you're thinking, it's wrong." The harsh tone of his voice, combined with an angry/confused expression, did nothing to calm Andrea. "I don't regret what happened in there, any more than I'll regret anything else we ever do. Dammit, stop convincing yourself I've got a knife behind my back! If I did, I'd use it on myself before I'd ever consider hurting you."

With his hand still on her arm, he drew her close. She came without resistance because his words were too startlingly convincing to run from.

"I thought you were starting to trust me," he said softly. "I thought we were building something. But you're just waiting for everything to cave in, aren't you? You're waiting for me to fail you somehow."

Subconsciously she knew she'd been doing exactly what he said. She hadn't been allowing herself happiness. It was more like she'd been giving herself that last smoke before she faced the firing squad. She'd *expected* Nate to end their relationship soon, and she planned to get what she could from him until then. But when he'd started to give her some of the love she craved from him, she realized it wasn't enough. She didn't want memories of a few stolen moments with Nate and his family. She wanted to be his family. For the rest of her life.

It was true that some dreams never died. Sometimes you just stopped believing in them, even when they seemed to be coming true.

NATE SAT against the wall next to Rori's apartment door, lifting his head from his hands only when he thought he heard footsteps.

Desperation had brought him here. Finding her gone only added to his misery. Everything that happened last night...dear Lord, made him feel the way he had each time Jenna got pregnant, miscarried and he'd eventually lost her.

He'd come within a hair of losing Rori last night. If she'd walked out after depositing Andrea in his arms, that would have been the end of it. Up until then, he'd speculated she

might run away again. Her shifts from afraid, playful, happy, withdrawn led him to believe she had doubts she was working out. He hadn't allowed himself to really believe she'd turn tail and run. Now he knew better. And now he had to wonder who hurt her so deeply. Brett Foxx? Her father? Him?

*Would it give you any consolation to know who? Would it make it any better if it was a combination of all three of you? You had your hand in it no matter how you look at it.*

Although Rori hadn't left his house until seven o'clock last night—because she had a rehearsal—the hours they had together had been saturated with the kind of tenderness that cut as deeply as a cruel razorblade. They'd gone from arrested lovemaking to holding on to each other by a fragile thread. How could something that felt so perfect turn on them as suddenly as a vicious animal?

And how would he tell her he had an obligation in Chicago for nearly a week?

Nate rubbed a hand over the gnawing ache in his stomach, considering again whether he should knock on Rori's neighbor's door to find out where she was. The truth was, he knew Rori shared nearly everything with her friend. He didn't know if Annmarie had heard about last night in detail, and he didn't want to know.

Only later had he wondered if they'd rushed into the lovemaking. It wasn't as if he

planned it, although anyone who pried into his dreams would argue. Last night had been the first time she hadn't stopped the inevitable course of their kisses, and so things had gone much further than before. Until he saw her reaction, he'd convinced himself they were ready for it because she was beginning to trust him.

*If you want to bad enough, you can make yourself believe anything. Think you'll ever trust your own instincts again?* Nate stifled a sarcastic laugh before it surfaced. *Like a dog to a bone!*

He heard footsteps again and lifted his head. It was her. Finally she was home.

Stiffly, he pushed himself to his feet. He'd expected the worst this time. Expected her to have skipped the country, no forwarding address. He didn't expect her tentative smile as she approached him. "How long have you been here?"

His desperation tinged relief made his head cloudy. He glanced at his watch. "About three hours."

"Did you call first?" She slid her key into her lock.

"I was afraid you wouldn't answer or wouldn't want to see me," he admitted. She'd left his house last night, and they'd still been holding on. But anything could happen with separation.

She glanced at him before pushing the door open. "I wanna see you."

His relief increased. Following her inside, he watched her drop her duffel on the bed.

"Where's Andrea?"

"I left her with one of the parishioners for the day. I had to see you alone." When he put his arms around her, she came to him easily, holding him too. "We need to talk."

Sighing, she turned her face into his chest. "I quit."

"What?" What were they talking about? Last night or...

"I quit my job. Actually, me and Courtney did it together. She broke up with that creep, quit, I quit and made sure he paid up all he owed us, and then we walked out of there like Thelma and Louise. It was kinda great."

She looked up at him, and he cradled her face in a hand. "Thank God. The thought of other men watching you... It was killing me."

"When did that start? I thought it was because of my self-respect you wanted me to quit." She smiled slightly, as if his jealousy touched her.

"That too. But now I just want to think of you as mine." He kissed her gently, denying the need to deepen it. They still had too much to talk about. "Jeremiah said she was thinking about moving on."



"When did she tell him that?"

"They go to the same college. They've got some classes together."

She snuggled her cheek against him again. "God, I didn't want her to make the same mistakes I did. I knew she was smarter than that."

Whether or not she pointed a finger at him—her mistake—his own conscious condemned him. All his life he'd been called a saint, Rori had been the sinner. The world seemed to have chosen the roles, and yet they couldn't have been further off the mark. He'd never met a person more altruistic than Rori Mason. She rarely thought of herself first. She loved people for who they were and believed in them—not someone else's definition of them. His record was nowhere near that stellar. Especially where she was concerned.

Tightening his arms around her, he held her in reaffirmed desperation. He'd realized last night that a clean slate wouldn't erase their past. Mutual forgiveness would only go so far in healing the scars. All he could come up with was that they needed a miracle to get them across the bridge of the past, on to a new, stronger one.

They held each other silently for a long time, until Nate faced he just put off the possibility of further repercussions between them.

"When is opening night for your ballet?" he asked, closing his eyes because now he did

feel like he was fixing to put a knife in her back.

"Next Saturday night."

"At least I'll be back by then."

She lifted her head. Her confusion resembled vulnerability to the point where he wanted to stop this now. Whatever he had to do, just stop it.

"There's an annual conference in Chicago I signed up for months ago. I forgot about it until a colleague called me this morning. The church paid the fee already."

He couldn't have surprised her any more if he announced he planned to mission among some native tribe on the other side of the world. Her eyes went wide and wild. "When do you leave?" she choked out.

"Right after the Sunday service. I'll be back Friday morning."

She clearly didn't know what to ask next and didn't know what, if anything, it had to do with her.

"Look, it's easy enough to cancel. I'll pay the church back. This is a bad time. We need to be together now. I'm sure everybody will understand." He didn't mention the conference fee, as well as the plane ticket, was non refundable. He lived on a tight budget because of the modest size of the church congregation he pastored. But he'd find some way to make up

the loss.

She stared at him for another long minute, then shook her head as if shaking off the shock. "There's no reason for you to cancel. I'm gonna be so busy next week, we probably wouldn't see each other much anyway. I've got studying, the tests, rehearsals. You should go. It's only a week."

A week of uncertainty. Of limbo. Of praying she wouldn't change her mind about them. Could he afford to go? No more than he could afford not to.

"What about Andrea? Will you take her along?"

Nate took a deep breath. "Jeremiah can take care of her. The woman that has her today agreed to look after her whenever he has classes." He'd seriously considered bringing her because he'd never been away from her for a full week. But with seminars, he'd need someone along to care for her. That wasn't a possibility, so this was the only option.

He kicked himself for ever signing up for the conference he'd attended and enjoyed every year since he graduated. What made him believe it fit into his schedule this year, even if he didn't have Rori and Andrea to think of?

"Well, I don't have a job anymore," Rori said, more focused now. "Why don't you let me take care of her for the week?"

The idea revealed itself as unworkable almost immediately. "You said it yourself—you've got too much to do next week without adding more."

"I'll figure something out."

He would have smiled if so much wasn't pressing in on him. She could probably manage the impossible when most people wouldn't even think of trying.

Nate shook his head. "She's used to her crib. She doesn't sleep well anywhere else."

"I can stay there." She backed away from him slightly. Her expression was stoic, and he loved her more for her dedication.

Smiling this time, he took her in his arms again. She remained convincingly rigid in the embrace. "Taking care of a baby is a full-time job. You've got too much to do that's important."

She squinted her eyes at him in sudden bewilderment. "I can handle it." Her voice softened.

Nate rubbed her shoulders, trying to assure her. "I don't doubt it. But it's only a week. No sense having your schedule disrupted too."

She didn't look relieved or happy. He wasn't either. It was settled now, yet his gut still clamored for him to cancel the trip to stay with her. None of this felt right. After the doozy

mistakes hindsight had revealed to him, he feared this might make them all look like a baby's precociousness. This one might leave scars deep enough to last a lifetime.

## Chapter Seventeen

HER THROAT was so thick, she could hardly breathe. Rori sat with her back against the mirrored wall in her apartment. She'd tried to rehearse, tried to stop crying like a fool.

*What were you thinking? Marriage? Family? The man doesn't even trust you with his daughter for five measly days! You can bet he wasn't thinking about anything like love or marriage or taking you into his family.*

And yet she couldn't believe all Nate wanted was sex.

*So what does he want?* Rori didn't have a clue. He'd left her without a clue why he said, did or thought anything. The one clear thing was their goals were still on opposite sides of the galaxy.

She needed to talk to someone. Annmarie and Zak had walked to the park earlier. Yesterday, after Nate left, she'd gone to talk to Annmarie but once she saw her friend's expression and heard about her "date" Thursday night... Well, she couldn't destroy happiness when she saw it. After dinner, Wayne had taken Annmarie and Zak to the house he'd built himself. He'd finished it a year earlier, but when he met Annmarie he decided to stay in his apartment. At the house, he admitted to Annmarie he loved her, wanted to marry

her and give her this home. His courage held long enough to kiss her lightly. While Annmarie couldn't deny she'd almost panicked, she also couldn't help confessing how much she wanted things to work out.

Rori understood now why her friend had been so afraid of being abandoned when she started seeing Nate. A part of Rori felt abandoned now. Her life was falling apart, and she had no one to catch her. If Annmarie and Wayne got married, she'd have no one.

She lifted her head, pressing it back against the mirror.

*So much for independence. So much for vows. You sank your life right back into a hole. And now all you wanna do is crawl into it and die.*

A pounding knock shook her door, and she glanced at it in dismay. Annmarie had only left a little while ago. Anyway, that was the demanding rap of a man.

She couldn't see Nate! Not now. Her self-protective nature wouldn't allow him the satisfaction of knowing he'd hurt her by absolutely refusing to consider letting her take care of Andrea while he was away.

The pounding came again, assuring her she couldn't ignore it. As she pushed herself to her feet, the doorknob turned. Damn, she hadn't locked the door after Annmarie and Zak stopped in to invite her for a walk to the park.

Her steps toward the door halted, she really did stop breathing when Brett moved through the doorway. Though he'd obviously expected her, she couldn't say who looked more surprised as they stared at each other.

*How do you do it, Brett? How do you always know when I'm most vulnerable? How could you possibly know, dammit?*

"Get out," she said rigidly before her body could recover from the shock.

He spread his arms innocently. "Now is that any way to greet your wild child?"

"Get out!" she said louder. She had to be firm right from the start. She couldn't show any emotion. He'd pick up on it like a heat-seeking missile, and then she'd never get him to go.

The problem was, she'd never been able to be that unequivocal with Brett. He knew all the right buttons to press to make her mad, sad, afraid, insane. Once he picked up on her devastation this time, he'd be in control again.

He glanced away predictably to view her apartment, then strode into the kitchen to open her refrigerator.

"No beer? No food? What the hell've you been livin' on?"

Her anger was on the faultline of her misery. The slightest tremor would break up the ground she stood on and tumble her into a deadly combination.



With her teeth clenched, her head in a pressure chamber, she watched him emerge from the kitchen. "What kinda rent you pay for a dump like this?"

"How did you find me?"

He moved over to the bed, tested it for "bang-ability" by free falling on top of it, then made himself comfortable, boots and all. In the old days, he'd be ordering her on top of him by now, saying the bed passed the first test, on to the second.

God, she couldn't take this! Not now.

"What makes you think I didn't know where you were since you walked out?"

The leather of his metal-studded jacket crinkled when he put his hands behind his head. "Where's the TV?"

"I don't have one." He'd known where she lived? What else did he know?

Calm as a cat in the sun, he crossed his legs without looking at her. His silence unnerved her the way he knew it would. Her hands clenched so tight, her nails bit into her palms.

*Swift vindication--that's what this is, Ror. You wanted what you can never have and this is your punishment.*

"I was there on Christmas," Brett said lazily, just when she thought she'd crack. He glanced at her, his bedroom eyes dramatically bored with the conversation already.

"Where?"

He shrugged. "Baby Dolls. I saw you strip."

Rori clamped her lips together to keep herself from screaming *Enough! I've lost everything. Isn't that enough?*

"You still workin' there, wildcat?"

"I quit." She heard the quiver in her voice and knew he had to. He never missed an opportunity.

He laughed, shaking his head. "You're exactly where I expected you to be about now." His full lips slanted cruelly, matching the hard lines of his face. "Not so easy on your own, is it, baby? With nobody to take care of you? You can't even hold a job in a skin palace."

Her inhale of anger flared her nostrils. "Like you can."

He laughed, so nasty, so mercilessly everything inside of her snapped.

"Get out, you son-of-a-bitch! I want you out of here now."

"You don't want me anywhere but right here."

As predictable as he was, he was also as fast as a cheetah. He saw her instinctive urge to flee and was out of her bed, reaching for her before she could do anything to prevent him.

"You're just playin' tough again cuz you don't wanna admit you missed me and want me

back."

"Get out!" she screamed, yanking against his arms holding her like chains. His laughter blinded her. She struck out at him with all her might, past the point of knowing nothing she did ever hurt him. It only turned him on because he'd won again. He knew he had her on her knees.

"Damn I missed you, wildcat," he muttered, catching one of her fists effortlessly. He jerked her closer until she felt the hard ridge beneath his jeans.

*This is my confirmation, the epitome of my failure.* Her tears started as wildly as her fists had flew at him only seconds ago. She couldn't fight him when he wrapped his arms around her, forcing them into an old intimacy. She only turned her head to avoid his kiss.

A knock on her door, softer this time, came as either her rescue or her final humiliation. If that was Nate—and she was sure it was—and he saw Brett here, that would end it all.

Shoving Brett away, she wiped at her eyes as she went to accept her fate.

It took her a minute to recognize Wayne. He glanced in confusion from her to Brett, then back again. "Phone for you, Rori."

She'd been right. Bad to worse. The call would be from Nate. Pulling the door shut behind her, she moved out to the hall.

"You OK, Rori? That guy didn't hurt you, did he?"

Wayne's concern touched her, but she knew it'd only make things worse if he went in there to defend her. She'd seen Brett fight men three times his size. When he was mad, he could be deadly. She wouldn't send an innocent bystander in to do her dirty work.

"I'm fine. This day's just been a nightmare, you know?" She tried to smile at Wayne, failed. She picked up the receiver. "Yeah?"

"I need to see you," Nate said without formality. "Are you doing anything?"

*Exorcising a ghost from my past. Nothing serious.* Wiping at her eyes again, she watched Wayne disappear into his apartment. "I have to rehearse and study. It's not a good time." Not with Brett here. She couldn't let Nate come here until Brett was out of her apartment and her life.

"I don't feel right about this trip. I think I should cancel."

"Andrea'll be OK. She'll get over it within a week of having you back."

*I don't need to hear your voice, dammit. Don't you know it's torture not to understand you at all? To not know what to believe?*

"I know she will. I'm talking about us. You. I can hear it in your voice already. You're pulling away from me."

His voice brought a picture to mind too. He sounded like he was at the end of his rope. He sounded desperate for reassurance. Reassurance *she* needed. He was the one who didn't trust her.

"I'm tired. I didn't expect all this to happen at the same time." She leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes. "Go, and I'll see you when you come back."

He exhaled heavily. "I need to know where we stand. I need to know you'll be here when I get back."

"Where would I go?" But she'd left eleven years ago—she knew he referred to that.

"Promise me you'll wait for me, Rori. Promise me you won't do anything, decide anything until we talk face to face again. We have to figure this out together."

Tears pressed again at his words. *Figure what out, Nate? That you can't get over Jenna? That you can't trust me with your daughter? God, will you never love me the way...?*

"I won't do anything until you're back," she whispered.

"I'll call you every chance I get."

"You know I'll be in and out."

"I know. But I'll try and if you're not there I'll know why." He sighed as if everything was settled except his conscience. "I miss you already. This couldn't have come at a worse

time. I'll make it up to you as soon as I get back."

"There's nothing to make up." Knowing she couldn't hold back much longer, she murmured "I'll see you" and hung up.

She couldn't have waited for him to say goodbye. Because she would want so bad to hear "I love you" and, when she didn't, it would kill her.

She stood in the hall for a while, but her balance in life had escaped her. Facing Brett with any strength would be impossible. She'd never discovered how to win against him anyway.

When she went into her apartment, he'd taken off his jacket and boots and smoked a cigarette on her bed. She was tired, dammit. Too tired to fight him right now.

Getting her study books, she sat on the floor, trying to block out his voice as he told her what he'd been doing since she left.

*Why can't you see we're better off apart, Brett? Why is it so obvious to me, every minute I see you or think about you, but you keep coming back saying I'm lost without you?*

Maybe she'd never understand men.

"YOU KNOW there's an emergency number near the phone?" Nate asked after his

flight was called.

Jeremiah laughed at his worry this time. "I've lived in your house since I was sixteen. How could I have missed it?"

Nate glanced away from him to Andrea. He wasn't worried about Jeremiah taking care of his daughter alone, and both of them knew it. He was looking for a reason—any reason—not to go. He wanted Jeremiah to say "No, I can't take care of Andi even with Mrs. Abbott's help during the day."

Knowing Jeremiah wouldn't give him a convenient excuse, he got going quickly, as if it would minimize the stress of it. Andrea waved to him with a big smile the way she did most mornings. She wouldn't understand until later today that he wasn't just going away for a few hours. A phone call wouldn't replace his presence, but he hoped it would assure her he hadn't abandoned her.

*That's exactly what you feel like you're doing—abandoning your baby and Rori.*

Andrea would recover quickly once he returned. He wasn't so sure Rori would.

After a sleepless night of analyzing every detail of their relationship since she'd agreed to try with him, he'd concluded he completely misread her signals Thursday afternoon. Their intimacy hadn't been so much about desire and commitment as reaction to his belief

in her. Rori felt people tagged her a loser on sight. There was no doubt in his mind she could make a success of the dance school. Having someone deem her capable had thrown her. He'd assumed she was beginning to trust him...and, well, a part of him *hadn't* been thinking beyond the way she made him ache.

He'd rushed her when he should have known Rori would need something more than assumed commitment in order to make love with him. Somehow he'd convinced himself telling her how he felt, saying "I love you" would rush her...but making love wouldn't.

*You're destined to make every mistake in the book with this woman. And what's to keep her from running away this time?*

Nate also realized during all this soul searching that he'd held the one card to keep her there until his return. He'd thrown that card away with little consideration. If he'd agreed to have her share in the babysitting duties with Jeremiah, she would have stayed at least that long. At least until his return.

Her responsibility toward Andrea was already strong. She loved her as if she was her own child. Despite knowing Rori didn't have enough time to do all the things she had to next week *and* to care for Andrea, he wished he'd been a little more selfish in this case. Because he'd never forgive himself if she was gone when he returned. And he'd never get



over it this time.

## Chapter Eighteen

*BOINK! BOINK! Boink!*

The sound of the tennis ball hitting the wall rhythmically was pure torture. Rori had her fingers jammed in her hair as she read and reread the same sentence without gaining clarity. She didn't have to look at Brett invading her bed to know he was trying his damndest to get a rise out of her. Between the tennis ball thumping against the wall, the blaring heavy metal he insisted on playing, and his chain smoking she'd done little studying. The only peace she'd gotten since he showed up yesterday afternoon was when she went to her ballet rehearsal. A completely stupid part of her had hoped he'd be gone when she got back. Instead, she came in to find him buck naked in her bed with the bottle of whiskey, empty now, on the nightstand and the remains of a delivered pizza on the floor. He'd brought up an overnight bag from his car.

Knowing if she woke him to try to order him out again he'd resort to everything short of rape to get her into that bed with him, she'd retrieved her comforter from where he kicked it to the end of the bed. She slept on the floor under the window.

Well, she hadn't actually *slept*. She'd alternated between scheming how to get Brett to

leave and torturing herself about every aspect of the short time she'd believed forever could happen for her and Nate.

The tennis ball stopped abruptly, but she forced herself not to look up from the study guide. He'd be looking for trouble in another minute.

She felt him approach, fighting the instinct to move out of his direction. When he stood over her, he nudged her book with a bare toe then swiped it from her before she could stop him. "What the hell are you doin' anyway? Homework?" He flipped through the yellowed pages, a grimace of disgust on his face.

"If you must know..." she ground out between clenched teeth. "...I'm trying to get my GED."

His enthusiastic snort was predictable. "What the hell for?"

"Why shouldn't I?" She shoved herself to her feet, grabbing the book from his hand. He stared at her as if she couldn't pass a first grader's exam. Stalking past him, she got her gym bag. She jammed fresh workout clothes inside.

God, she had to get out of here. Away from him. Staying would only end in his satisfaction and her humiliation.

"Where you goin'?" he demanded when she moved around him to get the cassettes she'd

borrowed from the school.

"I have to rehearse."

"Rehearse what?"

*Need a few more insults? Then go ahead and tell him.* "I'm dancing the lead in a ballet."

She didn't look at him as she zipped the bag.

"*Ballet?* Holy shit, you gotta be kiddin'. How much are they payin' you for that?"

She sat on the bed to yank on boots. "They're not paying me. It's a fundraiser for the dance school."

"Figures."

Glaring at him, she told herself she just played into his hands by reacting to his sneers. But she couldn't help it.

"When you gonna be back?"

She got up, grabbing her jacket and bag. "Late. Do me a favor—get out before I get back."

He wouldn't. Rori didn't kid herself about that. Brett Foxx had made an art of telling himself she never meant what she said. Besides, he hadn't gotten half the satisfaction he came for. He wouldn't be satisfied until she was on her knees before him, telling him she'd

never be stupid enough to try living without him again. *And you're not gonna give him that. You're not gonna abase yourself for a man ever again. Have at least that much pride.*

Charlene was in her office at the school when Rori arrived for her individual rehearsal. Group rehearsal was much later, and she had quite a few hours to kill. Instead of talking to Charlene, Rori went right to the locker room and then to the studio. She wasn't ready to admit she'd thought about buying the school. She wasn't even sure what made her consider it. Charlene would probably laugh in her face if she brought it up.

After her last conversation with her mentor, Rori got the distinct impression Charlene knew she was a stripper. Why would a former *danseuse etoile*, a woman with more sophistication in her pinkie than Rori had in her whole body, want to sell her school to someone whose highest "resume" credit was being wooed by the self-proclaimed country's top strip joint?

Her self-disgust faded only when she began rehearsing. Charlene had been right about how smooth her inclusion in the ballet troupe went. At first, she got the impression everyone expected her to slow them down—since they'd been rehearsing as a group for over a month. She'd worried herself, but for nothing. She knew *Giselle* the way she did one of her own dances.

She found Charlene watching her when she paused to get a drink. Praise was rare, but Rori could tell she was pleased. Instead of voicing it, she asked "Think you'll have time for a fitting today? The costume will probably need some altering."

"I've got all day."

"Have you had lunch?"

Rori's appetite lately had been as diminished as her sleep. She shook her head.

"Why don't you jump in the shower, then I'll take you for lunch and to my seamstress."

For all of the ten minutes it took her to get cleaned up and dressed, Rori felt like a pet student. That went away quickly. Unbelievably, it seemed like she and Charlene had a lot in common. Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course, but there was little about Charlene's money and class that made Rori uncomfortable. She found herself talking freely, more surprised than Charlene when she confessed she'd been a stripper until recently. Charlene equaled it with a confession of her own concerning a male dancer she'd had an affair with until she discovered he was married. The rest of the day, including rehearsal later, went that smoothly.

It wasn't until Rori was in her truck, heading home, that the reminder of Brett's presence brought her down a couple notches.

God, she had to get him out of her life. She knew from past experience he hadn't changed. If she gave even an inch... Well, she'd changed, she was a stronger person, but he'd crashed in at her lowest point again. Given a little more time, he could break her.

Crazy as it was, as she made her way into her building, she wished she could talk to Nate even if he couldn't help her now.

When she heard the music before she reached her floor, she knew her half-hearted hope that Brett would be gone had been foolish. She stalked in quickly and cut the power on the stereo. Annmarie had the night off. Though she probably wasn't asleep, Zak surely was.

Brett came out of the kitchen opening a beer. He'd stocked her refrigerator as if the Prohibition Act might be passed again. All he wore were half-unbuttoned jeans.

"What'd you do that for?" he demanded of her.

"It's after eleven and there are other people in the building trying to sleep." She dropped her duffel on the floor. "I thought I told you I wanted you out of here before I got back."

He actually grinned at her, but she knew that grin—he was drunk and anything could happen. "I did go out. And came back with beer."

When he offered her the one he'd just gotten, she shook her head. Getting mad at him this time wouldn't work. It'd only make him mean and completely intractable.

"Look," she started, her tone pacifying. She slipped off her jacket and dropped it on her duffel. "I don't know why you're here anyway. I can't satisfy you—you've said it yourself." She perched on the window sill, then faced him.

"You know I don't mean nothin' by that shit." He somehow walked a straight line to her and faster than she could realize he had her blocked in. "You're the best. You're my baby."

He had that you-need-to-hear-it-truth-or-bullshit-so-here-it-is expression she'd come to fear. Because he only got it when he knew she'd come to the end of her "independence"; when she was most in need of love—any kind at all. Even his bad love. He'd misjudged her this time.

"I'm just tryin' to wake you up, wildcat. Cuz you know you can't live without me. We're supposed to be together. Don't kid yourself anymore."

Rori closed her eyes against a spear of sudden pain. She remembered Nate's promises. Had he just played with her emotions? Told her what she needed to hear from him? Told her everything but that he loved her?

Facing Brett, she said calmly, "I want you to leave, Brett. I don't want you in my life. Don't kid *yourself* about that anymore."

He'd set his beer can next to her on the sill and looked at her, at her body. He curled his



hands around her biceps. "I don't know about all this ballet crap, but you look so damn sexy in all this tight workout stuff."

He hadn't heard a word she said! He chose not to hear. As he trailed his fingers to the V front of her velvet leggings, she put her hands on his chest, trying to shove him away. "Don't touch me. I don't want you near me."

Chuckling, he snaked an arm around her waist. "What are you? Fort Knox gold? You're not. You're mine. I'll touch you any goddamn time I feel like it."

Rori turned her head just in time to avoid his mouth. Nothing would detour him, not when he was in this mood. Holding her tight enough to bruise, he pressed his mouth into her collarbone.

Everything about him was familiar, yet it didn't keep her from panic and anger. She jerked her head back, hitting the glass with a stunning crack. Despite the pain, she freed her hands to fight him. The beer can next to her toppled with her effort.

Brett pulled back only far enough to glare at her. "Don't fight me, dammit."

"It's the only way you're getting me," she said between her teeth.

He got her implication loud and clear. "I've never raped you."

"So don't start now. Cuz it will be."

His expression softened too late. Why couldn't he ever listen to her? Changing his tack wouldn't change her mind.

"Damn you, let me go." Her head was nearly in flames as she stared at him and knew exactly what evil scheme he was about to put in motion.

"You always liked it rough, just as long as I told you I love you." He yanked her forward and crushed her mouth under his.

A scream rose, and she heard it even as it hovered in her throat. It only took her an instant to realize the scream came from Zak.

"You leave her alone, you big bully!" He threw himself on Brett, landing blows on Brett wherever he could reach.

When Brett turned, muttering "What the hell—" Rori saw Zak dressed in his faded race car pjs, tears running down his face as he struck out blindly.

She didn't take the time to wonder if Brett would hurt him if given the chance. One thoughtless push, and Zak would go down hard.

Taking advantage of Brett's surprise, she ducked under his arms, scooped Zak up and kept moving.

"I've got friends!" Zak shouted hoarsely. "Friends who'd be happy to break your

weakling bones! Nobody hurts Rori. Nobody! Not while I'm around—"

He sounded so brave, regardless of his crying, Rori got tears in her eyes as she carried him back across the hall.

Annmarie glanced out of her kitchen with a mug in her hand. "What in the world..." When she saw Zak, she came out, ignoring the whistling teapot on the stove. "What are you doing out of bed, honey?" Annmarie's confused gaze moved to Rori.

"Brett's here." Rori stroked Zak's head. He'd wrapped his arms around her, and she could feel his tears against her neck. "I'm OK, slugger," she murmured, pressing her mouth to his hair. "You're my hero, but I couldn't bear it if you got hurt."

"He hurt you." He pulled back to look at her with his blue eyes glistening. "I knew he was gonna hurt you if I didn't stop him."

Annmarie took a few steps closer. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. I can handle Brett." She wasn't sure Annmarie believed her, wasn't sure if she believed herself.

She brought Zak over to the sofa bed and tucked him in. What cued him in to her situation was a mystery, but she'd always suspected Zak had a touch of ESP.

"You go to sleep, slugger, and don't worry. I'll come over in the morning and we can

play."

When she got up to go, Annmarie joined her at the door. One of the kitchen chairs stood next to it—Zak must have used it to unlock the deadbolt he normally couldn't reach.

"Better keep an eye on him tonight."

Annmarie nodded, looking worried. "Do you think maybe you should call Nate? Or I could..."

Rori glanced away, putting her hand on the doorknob. "He's out of town. Until Friday. I'll get rid of Brett somehow."

She managed a reassuring smile for her friend, wanting for a minute to admit she wasn't certain Nate would be coming back to her. But saying the words, voicing her fears, would only make them more real.

"I DIDN'T WAKE you or Andrea, did I?" Nate asked, kicking his shoes off and leaning back on the bed.

He suspected Jeremiah would have waited up for his call even if it wasn't after eleven. He'd just made it back to his hotel room a half hour ago. His flight got in much earlier, but he'd been met by a few colleagues who'd only allowed him to check into the hotel and drop

off his luggage before they whisked him off for an endless dinner with still more colleagues. Nate hadn't been in the mood. Unfortunate time to remember that most of his old friends didn't take no for an answer very often.

"Nope. Get shanghaied at the airport?" Jeremiah guessed.

"That's one way of putting it. How's Andrea?"

Jeremiah paused for a second. "Well, I won't lie to you— she knew something was different. She kept asking for you... Took her longer to go to sleep. But she's OK."

Nate had been afraid of that. Jeremiah surely told her, in the simplest way possible, where "da-dee" was, but it'd be like trying to explain the process of osmosis to her at her young age.

"How are you holding up?" Nate asked him.

"I can handle it. Don't worry about me."

He'd wondered a time or two on the flight if he took advantage of Jeremiah. Most nineteen-year-olds didn't have his responsibility, reliability, or attachment to a baby.

"So, how many days early do you plan to leave?" Jeremiah asked, bull's-eye to Nate's thoughts. He laughed, feeling it stifle in his throat when he thought of Rori. He'd tried

calling her when he got in thirty minutes ago, but she hadn't answered—he knew she wouldn't either. She had rehearsal until ten. It probably ran late since they had less than a week before opening night.

*Maybe you're a little disappointed she didn't rush home, hoping to hear from you. Or maybe you don't want to admit she may not be waiting around for you at all.*

"Would you think I'm crazy if—" What he was about to say dawned on him only seconds before he would have voiced it. He wasn't sure if he'd shocked himself or was worried he'd shock Jeremiah.

"If what?"

*Say it. Maybe it's not as shocking as it sounds inside here.* "If I asked Rori to marry me."

The crazy part was, it didn't sound all that crazy to Nate. He'd considered the possibility too many times in his life for it to be wrong.

"I'd think you were crazy if you didn't."

Nate almost smiled. "You don't think it's too soon?"

"For who?"

Jeremiah's logic never failed to amaze him. His logic and his ability to cut right down to

the bone without dancing around it first. "For everybody."

"What does it got to do with 'everybody'? Do *you* think it's too soon?"

Nate had known Rori all his life. The first seventeen years, until that kiss, he'd never questioned who he'd marry if given the choice. He realized now the opposite of what he'd told himself lately was true—he hadn't rushed Rori. They hadn't gone too far too fast because they *couldn't* go slow. They'd had seventeen years of the courtship dance. Now that they had a second opportunity, the only thing they could give was 100 percent commitment. Nate couldn't deny, as soon as he saw her again at Christmas, that he'd been sure it was right this time.

"I'm ready for it," he murmured, and heard Jeremiah's confirmation—"Then that's all that matters"—as if it filtered through his own conscience.

"I don't know why it feels like...I was always meant to be with her. Like I did something wrong, and yet I don't regret the parts that maybe I should. Does that make any sense at all?"

Jeremiah gave a soft laugh. "Does it make any sense that I loved my mother and never wanted her to die, yet I'll never regret becoming a part of your family?" He paused, and Nate sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for him. "I know you loved Jenna. You were the

perfect couple, not just for the outside world. I lived with you; I saw how you treated each other at home. You loved her completely. You were never unfaithful to her, in thought or deed. You don't have to feel like you've gotta explain yourself for everything you had and want with Rori. Just go for it."

*If you ever did, you can stop wondering why he wants to be a psychiatrist,* Nate thought with a grin.

"And since we're on the subject, your mom called to pump me about whether you're seeing 'that Aurora Mason.'"

It seemed the perfect topping to the conversation. A lightness crowded out the cloud inside Nate's chest. "What'd you tell her?"

"I gave her the hotel number there and told her to ask you herself. She backed off like a jackrabbit."

His father spooked her, and Nate was grateful for it. "She's probably losing sleep over it."

"I bet," Jeremiah agreed dryly. "I understand her, but she's unbelievably judgmental. She doesn't give anybody a chance unless she absolutely has to."

"She'll have to sooner or later." In Rori's case, she'd kick and scream every step of the



way.

## Chapter Nineteen

"WHO THE HELL was that brat?" Brett demanded when Rori stalked back into her apartment.

"Zak is *not* a brat. He's the most fantastic kid in the world. And he's important to me. You're lucky you didn't hurt him. I'd kill you if you hurt him." Snagging a handful of paper towel from the kitchen, she moved to the window to clean up the spilled beer. She was surprised to see cracks in the glass where she'd hit her head, yet only slight tenderness resulted when she touched the spot.

"Since when did kids become so important to you?"

Rori shook her head as she knelt to clean up the beer. The idea of a kid in her life might drive him out, but she doubted it. "Since I met Zak." She stood with the can and soaked towels. "Look, we're no good for each other, Brett. My life has changed since I left you. Leaving you was the best thing I've ever done." She'd already realized getting mad at Brett for what Zak just walked in on would only come as a challenge to him.

"What's changed?" he asked on a snort as she came out of the kitchen. He didn't bother to look around. Even if he found evidence of change, he'd never see it or acknowledge it.

"Zak, for one. And I've got goals now..." *Don't use it, Ror. You use it and there's no going back.* But it was her last option. "...and I'm seeing somebody."

For a full minute, Brett stared at her, his eyes black and narrow. She might not have believed her words had any effect on him...then he spoke and she couldn't deny his confidence had been shaken.

"Yeah, then where's he been? I haven't seen him hangin' around here." He turned away, moving to the window her head had scored. When he looked back, it was to sneer. "You can't expect me to believe you're not screwin' him. Because *I've* been in your bed."

Rori couldn't help feeling defensive. "You make it sound like I've never met a man I didn't sleep with."

"You fucked other guys when you were with me."

*Oh God, not this again! You walked right into it too.* "I left you. I didn't cheat on you."

"You belong to me."

Rori gritted her teeth. "Yeah, I belonged to you. And you cheated on me when I went out for cigarettes."

He didn't bother with the old it—didn't—mean—anything routine. She'd heard it too many times and he knew it.

"He's out of town," Rori forced the conversation back on track. "He had a conference."

She expected him to laugh, to convince himself she lied to him. He turned away to look out at the street. After a silent moment Rori held her breath in, he muttered, "Who is he?"

*No turning back now.*

Rori sat on the bed, leaning her elbows on her knees. She'd never wanted to tell Brett about Nate, knowing he'd call her a fool and then some. "He's somebody I've known all my life. I met him again when I went to my father's right before Christmas. We've been...seeing each other since." God, she felt like such a liar. 'Seeing each other' implied dates, phone calls, romantic interludes, and, in Brett's mind, near constant sex. It'd been nothing like that between her and Nate.

Brett reached for a cigarette from the pack on her stereo. Rori watched him light it, surprised by his silence. By now he was usually all over her trying to find holes in her story. Or trying to prove—to himself—that she belonged to him exclusively.

His silence continued like a form of torture. Rori studied the lines of his lean body. He seemed withdrawn. Almost protective. And his profile resembled chiseled stone. Was he drunk? He looked more sober than she'd ever seen him in her life.

Rori started to doubt herself.

"He's the one, isn't he?" Brett said into the treacherous quiet. His voice was soft, so hoarse, she felt a lump form in her throat. "He's the one you were cryin' over when you took off with me. You never got over him."

He turned, and everything inside Rori winced. He hadn't shown her this side of himself...since the beginning. Yet she recognized the hurt in his eyes, the naked emotion in the tight lines of his face. His Adam's apple stood out starkly, and she remembered that too. God, she'd closed her eyes for so long, she'd assumed all of those things were purely sexual reactions for him. Now she remembered them from when he held her in the beginning, comforting her as she cried. She remembered them from when he told her about leaving home at fourteen—the way his father made him feel. She remembered them the first time they made love and she cried then too, thinking of Nate.

"You never got over him, did you?" he said again.

Rori couldn't speak under his wounded accusation. Had he always suspected someone else held her heart? Was that why he treated her the way he had? Was he punishing her for "betraying" him? *Oh God, Brett, you never cared about me. You never loved me that much... Did you?*

"So you love him?" he asked when her silence confirmed to him his first question. "You

gonna marry him or somethin'?"

His anger sounded threadbare over his pain. Tears stung Rori's eyes mercilessly. She couldn't have said another word about Nate at the moment if she had the answers and if Brett really wanted them.

"I'm almost outta cigarettes," he said, jamming the butt of the one he held into the ashtray on her stereo.

She watched him dress. Even when she realized all she had to say now to get him to leave was "I love Nate," she couldn't do it. She was too stunned. This was a man she'd thought she knew down to the blackest depths of his soul. If everything he'd done was because he loved her and lived with the knowledge she loved someone else, never him, then she knew nothing about him.

After he walked out, she got up and went to the window. The light snow she'd come home in had turned into a swirling blizzard. She watched Brett roar out into it in his souped up Camaro. And she worried about him, a completely alien thing for her.

Now every memory brought guilt to her. The memory of when he told her he'd never felt like anyone in the world loved him except his sister Darlene—and Rori probably confirmed that inadvertently. She understood now why he'd gotten so infuriated with her

when she cried every time he made love to her. She'd never bothered to fake a response to him. She just closed her eyes and gave herself to Nate's memory. Brett had known that. God, he'd known the whole time.

Despite his hurt and her guilt, she couldn't claim to want him to return. There was no way she could love him the way he wanted her to. She couldn't make up anything to him. She'd never get over Nate enough to love another man with her entire heart and soul.

Learning the truth about Brett only confirmed she'd made a mistake getting involved with him in the first place.

"GODDAMMIT, I'm goin' up there and whack that whore!"

Brett threw back the covers and stalked, buck naked, to the door. Rori had no doubt he'd go up there and start banging on the opera singer's door too.

"It's Monday. She has to leave in fifteen minutes anyway, so calm down."

She knew he wasn't in such a bad mood purely because of the noise above them. He'd been in a bad mood since he came back around midnight. Although she locked her door, he produced a key he made from hers. He told her without apology he stole her keys when he went out to get beer yesterday, while she studied. He drank last night until he passed out in

her bed. His mood had been volatile; she never considered breaking the silence or asking him to stop his binge. Admitting she felt guilty for hurting him would only work against her then.

With her duffel bag packed, she slung it over her arm. "I have to go."

She'd gotten up at six, showered, then went over to have breakfast and play with Zak for over an hour. He'd asked hard questions, ones she couldn't answer with much more than "He'll be gone soon. Just stay away from him until then, slugger."

"Now where the hell you goin'?" he demanded, blocking her path to the door.

"I have a test at nine. I'll be gone most of the day. Don't hang around on my account. I want my key back too."

It was easy to be mean to him when he was in a bad mood. She tried not to dwell on last night. How did she even know he'd really been hurt? It could be just another of his tricks. But she didn't really believe it.

"You'll flunk. Why bother goin'? You're wastin' your time."

She couldn't control the flair in her nostrils. *Explain why he gets such pleasure out of telling you you're a failure? That's punishment for loving somebody else? It's just plain nastiness.*



"Fine. I'm wasting my time." She shoved past him, out the door.

*Maybe he thinks if you have a career, a successful career, you really won't need him,* Rori came up with an excuse for his insults on her way down to her truck. Then she kicked herself for making excuses for him. If he'd really wanted her to stay with him, he would have treated her right. Hurting her just drove her away.

The first part of the test took her just under two hours, and she left feeling good about her work.

She had a study lunch scheduled with Courtney at 11:30. When she walked into the coffee shop, she almost ran—seeing Jeremiah there too. Somehow facing him seemed as traumatic as facing Nate would now. She knew he'd been in contact with Nate, knew he was the one Nate trusted with his little girl...

Courtney spotted her and waved, stealing her opportunity to escape. Rori forced herself over to their booth, sliding in across from them.

"How'd you do?" Courtney asked with a grin.

Rori set her duffel next to her. "Good, I think. I think I passed. But it was probably the easiest section of the test."

The waitress came to take their orders, then Courtney said "Hope you don't mind I

invited Jeremiah. He was here when I got here."

"No problem," Rori managed with a semblance of a smile. He wasn't, after all, Nate. He just reported back to him.

"Nate hasn't gotten hold of you yet?"

Rori caught her tongue between her teeth the way Annmarie always did. *Did you think you could escape it altogether? Would you even want to?* "I've been in and out."

Jeremiah nodded. "He got in OK."

"Good," she said softly, glancing down at the worn tabletop. "How's Andrea holding up?"

"She doesn't understand, but I doubt there'll be any permanent damage. She hears his voice every night."

Rori nodded, agreeing. One week out of Andrea's life wouldn't scar her because Nate would be there for the rest of her life.

"You know, she'd love to see you. Got any free time coming up?"

"I'd love to see her. But I wouldn't wanna go behind Nate's back." She tried to swallow the lump in her throat without success. Nate had been adamant about it. He didn't want her there. She'd practically begged him, yet he'd held firm to his position.

"Why would that be going behind his back?"

The suspicion confusing Jeremiah's expression made Rori shake her head. "I don't think I've got any free time this week anyway."

She would have made time if Nate had allowed it. She would have been able to avoid Brett in the process too.

After they ate, she studied for the two tests she'd be taking the next day, then she went to her dance class and individual rehearsal for the ballet.

When she got back to her apartment building, she first went to Annmarie's.

"I know he's still here, so I asked Wayne to babysit tonight," Annmarie told her, and Rori nodded. It would work best that way until she could get Brett to leave. She could hear the blaring music coming from her apartment. "But I have to leave soon. Can you stay with Zak until Wayne gets home?"

Knowing Annmarie liked him to concentrate on his homework right after his snack, Rori gently ruffled his hair instead of disturbing him with a verbal greeting.

"Can I talk to you?" Annmarie indicated with her head to the kitchen. As Rori followed her there, Annmarie said "Tell Wayne I made a casserole. He can heat it up for Zak and himself at his apartment."

"OK," Rori said slowly, a little surprised that was what Annmarie wanted to talk to her about.

"I decided to do it," Annmarie whispered, grabbing her hands, once they were in the kitchen.

"Huh?"

"I think I'm going to accept his proposal."

Eyes widening, Rori bent her head closer. "Wayne? You mean you're gonna marry him?"

Annmarie drew a sharp breath as if the spoken words demanded more than when she thought them. Finally, she nodded. "But I'm not sure when to tell him."

The fear of losing her best friend and Zak came as quickly as it went. Rori couldn't deny she believed this was the best thing for Annmarie and Zak. Wayne was everything they could ask for. He'd be patient with Annmarie and an ideal father for Zak. "Why not tell him right away?"

Annmarie put her hand on her heart, shaking her head. "No! Not yet. I need to let myself get used to this. I just decided, and I need a couple days to make sure it still sounds like a good idea."

Rori smiled slightly. "What made you decide this?"

The blush suffusing Annmarie's face absolutely intrigued Rori, too much for her to let it go. After protesting repeatedly, Annmarie conceded "I had a dream about him...and me. And it didn't scare me. At all."

Rori almost laughed because it was so precious. Annmarie was like a scared virgin just realizing sex wasn't always terrible. The same thought made Rori a little sad. It was sad Annmarie'd gotten this far in life never aware a man *could* make sex something wonderful. God, she hoped that wonder never betrayed her.

Rori hugged her friend. "I think you're doing the right thing, babe."

Annmarie smiled tentatively. "I hope so."

Rori watched her finish packing her dinner, then put the small sack into her purse.

"Oh. I think Nate called. Your unwanted guest answered the phone, and I heard him say "Rori ain't here.""

*Oh God, did he...?* Rori's panic must have been obvious.

"He slammed the phone down right after," Annmarie elaborated. "I don't think he told Nate who he was."

But there was no way of knowing that until she heard from or saw Nate. *If* she did.

Wayne came to get Zak about an hour after Annmarie left. As soon as Rori walked into her apartment, Brett announced loudly "Your boyfriend called."

For a second, Rori stared around her, shocked at the mess. Beer cans everywhere, ashtrays overflowing, CD cases scattered around her stereo, pizza boxes...

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him I'm back to claim what's mine and I've had you six different ways to Sunday since I showed up."

*Six different ways to Sunday.* Rori used to think his frequent expression was cute and funny. Now it just annoyed her.

"You did not. What makes you think he even knows who you are?"

He was drunk again. She knew she shouldn't provoke him, but it made her crazy to see how he'd taken over her apartment like he owned it. Asking him to clean up his own mess would be hopeless. He was a slob by nature.

She started gathering up the garbage. When she grabbed the ashtray to empty it into the garbage, she saw the cover plate of the hollow outlet on the nightstand.

*No, damn you. No!*

She leaned over him and saw her worst nightmare. The outlet box was open...and empty.

She slammed down the ashtray again. "Give it to me. Give it to me right now, you thief!"

He grinned, reaching for her waist. "Thought you'd never ask, wildcat."

"Give me my *money*," she said, leaving no room for misunderstanding or play.

"What makes you think I got your money?"

He baited her, and it worked. It worked like a match in a flame. A superficial glance confirmed a bulge in the side pocket of his jeans. He wasn't aroused and wouldn't be until she started fighting.

Ignoring the smart of tears and any danger, she climbed on the bed. If she had to rip him apart piece by piece to get her money, she would.

He groaned in appreciation when she dove her hand into his pocket, but when she got too close to snagging the bundle he grabbed her around the waist, flipping her on her back. Straddling her thighs like a vise grip, he leaned down until his face almost touched her face. "You know what you gotta do to get it back, baby. You wanna do it the easy way or the hard way?"

"I can break your nose again. Do *you* wanna do it the easy way?"

He laughed but seized her hands before she could carry out her ploy—while he protected his nose, she'd planned to get her money.

Leaning even closer, he rocked his hips against her. Rori turned her head away, too angry now to control the tears.

"What do you need it for?" he asked, his mouth against her ear. She could hear the excitement in his voice as clearly as she felt it growing against her pelvis.

"I wanna buy a dance school. Give it back, Brett." She hated the plea in her voice, hated letting him see her cry again, hated knowing he was too strong to fight for long if he really wanted her.

"You? Own a business? Hell, I might as well take the money and save you the trouble of wastin' it."

She let him get to her. She couldn't help it. Her own insecurities paralleled his assessment. She'd failed too many times before. And he knew it.

As he let her take his weight, he moved his mouth over her ear, her neck, her cheek. He let her go to turn her face to his with one hand. Rori didn't respond to his kiss. He'd be nice if she let him do what he wanted, but she wouldn't let him feel like he'd won.

"Rori, let me..." he murmured. "I want you. I want you to say you want me, you belong to me. I'll be nice, I promise."

She shook her head. "No."



He flinched slightly at the word, staring down at her. The hurt still lurked in his eyes, but she hurt too much now to give in to the guilt of it.

"I don't belong to you. I love him."

His jaw hardened first, then his whole face became like a thing of stone. Turning, he shoved her away from him. "You're not getting' the money back, you stupid bitch."

Rori sat up hating him. He didn't love her. No one so cruel could possibly claim they did it out of love. No one who could take your dreams, ridicule them and then kill them had anything but a heart of stone.

## Chapter Twenty

RORI PARKED in the lot of her apartment building, shut off the engine, but made no move to go in.

*You've gotta do it. Get over your sympathy. Nate's coming back tomorrow. Do you want him to see Brett here?*

A strange kind of pity kept her from more than a few obligatory demands that he leave this week. When she came in after exams, study sessions, classes or rehearsals, Brett was always drunk, day and night. Practically comatose best described his state.

He hadn't been eating either—that was the part that worried her. Lean as he was, Brett had a ravenous appetite. He could eat anywhere, anytime and in any quantity. The only time he'd eaten this week, since he stole her money, was when she brought him something. She told herself she was only doing it because she didn't want to come in to find a dead body on her bed. The truth was, she felt sorry for him. While it probably had nothing to do with her loving another man, something was definitely wrong with Brett.

*That's not your problem. He can take care of himself. You just have to shut everything off and tell him to get out.*

Rori gathered her duffel bag, then started up to her apartment. She found another message taped on the payphone, this one written by Annmarie instead of Wayne. Nate had called again.

She'd missed every one of his calls this week. She'd also missed Annmarie and Zak. Between her schedule and her belief she should stay away until Brett left, she hadn't seen them more than a handful of minutes. She didn't even know if Annmarie had accepted Wayne's proposal yet, but she suspected not.

Before she opened her door, she heard the static of the television Brett bought with her money. With no cable hookup or antenna in her apartment, not much came in. He never seemed to notice.

Impulsively, her nose wrinkled at the lack of fresh air inside. Closing the door, she glanced at Brett on her bed. His hair was partially wet so he'd noticed the pollution he contributed to personally. He watched her through hooded eyelids.

To the unknowing gaze, he looked as drunk as he'd been every day this week. But Rori recognized him sober. When he was drunk, he didn't care how he looked or smelled or acted. He didn't care if he got loud, what or who he destroyed—including himself. This quiet observation only came from sobriety.

After setting her duffel bag warily near the door, she moved over to the window. With the cold weather, it didn't open easily, but she finally got it up a couple inches—enough to admit bitterly cold, fresh air. Anything was better than the stale, drunken stench.

*You've got no reason to pity him now. He's pulled himself out of his misery at least temporarily. Do what you have to do, and do it now.*

He spoke first, just as she turned to confront him. "You never loved me, did you?"

Whatever Rori started to say evaporated from her memory like steam, leaving her mouth open for a split second of shock.

"It was always him. You were with me for eleven years, but it was always him you wanted to be with."

God, she'd been right. It was true everything he'd done didn't add up to knowing someone else held her heart, but maybe he'd hurt for so long being cruel became instinctive.

He turned away first, rubbing a hand over his face and eyes.

Clutching the hem on the sleeves of her jacket with cold fingers, Rori crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed near him. She had no idea what to say. Was she truly sorry? She was sorry if she'd hurt him this way, but he'd hurt her too and for a long time.

"I knew it from the start. Jace told me you were hot for some Good Samaritan kid." He grimaced, shaking his head. "I knew when you said you'd come with me he didn't want you."

Her humiliation stung, hearing it from him. She wanted to look away, yet something in his eyes wouldn't let her. Something there told her she'd better give him this because she'd given him little else.

"I wanted you. I wanted you the second I laid eyes on you—even when I knew you were jailbait."

When he gritted his teeth, Rori could almost feel the tension roiling in his chest.

"But I never mattered to you. You cried your damn eyes out for him every fuckin' night. Even when you gave me your virginity. You cried for *him*."

Rori bit her lip for an instant. "You knew? You knew I was a virgin?"

He snorted. "'Course I knew. But it just pissed me off all the more when you kept cryin' for him. Then I knew you didn't give it to me. You just gave it away cuz that sorry ass didn't want it."

It'd been so much easier believing Brett was entirely at fault. How could she have known though? He never asked her about it. The only time he wanted her to say she loved him and

only him was during sex. And then the cruelty was too much for her to give anything sincerely.

"Is that why you were so mean all the time?" she asked on a shiver from the cold air coming in from the window.

He stared at her wordlessly, the flare of his nostrils the only indication he felt anything at all.

"You cheated on me to punish me."

His lip curled menacingly. "I fucked around cuz they wanted *me*. You couldn't even fake it for me once."

He laughed, a bitter thing that would have warned her of the upcoming danger before. Now she believed he'd more likely shed a few tears than hurt her.

"I knew if you responded a little, just a little to me, you were thinkin' of your poor lost love. I knew it every time. I could see..." His teeth bit down on one side of his cheek for a second, then he continued viciously "I could see *him* in your eyes. And then I wanted to make you pay for makin' me love you and want you all the time...when you could never give me the same."

A mixture of horror and sadness threw hard tears into her eyes. *Every word he says*

*confirms it. Every dimension of your relationship was sick. So screwed up, how it lasted as long as it did...makes it even more twisted.*

"You stupid jerk," she moaned, swiping at the wetness on her cheeks. "I could've loved you a little if you weren't so sadistic. You made me feel...like I was worthless. Like there was something wrong with me cuz..." *No one could love me.* "I did love you."

"Not like him," he guessed, and she couldn't deny it. He had no right to make her feel guilty for it, but she felt it anyway. She'd never wanted Brett to know about Nate; how much she loved him and how he might never return it.

Rori rubbed the back of her hand under her nose, surprised to see something close to sympathy or longing in his eyes.

"It's too late, isn't it?" The hollow edge of his voice told her he already knew the answer.

"Even if it wasn't, we're no good for each other. We'd only end up hurting each other more. I never meant to hurt you. Not that way."

The cold air worked its way through her jacket, deep inside her. Even as she shivered, she couldn't get herself to rise or look away from Brett.

Few and far between as they were, they'd had good times together. That first Christmas. After she broke his nose and threatened to leave him because he cheated on her, he'd

been...gentle and sweet again and she'd believed (at least for a week) that he might really love her. The way he'd come after her the first time she really did leave him. He'd come bearing gifts and begging on his knees for her to give him another chance.

She had loved him, not enough to stay forever, but she'd cared about him until he destroyed most of that too.

"So you're gonna marry him and have kids or somethin'?" His effort to sound uncaring was thwarted by the softness.

She didn't want to talk to him about Nate. Everything was too up in the air. If she didn't though, she knew Brett would try to change her mind. Try to win her back.

"I don't know what's gonna happen, but...I love him. Sometimes I wish I didn't--" She shook her head. "I do. It never changes."

He flinched as if he'd expected her to say something else. Something to give him hope.

"I'm sorry," she said urgently, scooting closer. She put her arms around him, laying her head on his bare chest. He didn't push her away, as she anticipated, because she'd struck at the core of his pride. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his mouth to the top of her head.

"I don't wanna let you go," he ground out between his teeth.



She knew his every trick, every scheme, every manipulation to get what he wanted from her. She knew this wasn't one of them. Even as they held each other, the finality blew through them like the frigid winter air blowing in the window.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said again, softer.

Without letting her go an inch, he brought one of his hands up to brush the hair from her cheek. "Let me have you, wildcat. One more time. I promise I'll leave and you'll never see me again unless you wanna."

Rori recognized her own weakness. She wanted to give him something, one last time, for those good memories. But no matter what Nate wanted from her, she loved him. She belonged to him.

Looking up at Brett, knowing he would try to kiss her, she stopped him by pressing her fingertips to his mouth. "I can't, Brett. I can't say goodbye to you that way."

She sat up, hugging the sides of her jacket around her. "You can stay here tonight, but I need you to go in the morning."

IT WAS ENOUGH Friday morning for the woman behind the counter to suppress a yawn as she handed Nate the keys to the rental car.

The yawn was contagious. The past week had been exhausting, mentally if not physically. Nate had gotten little sleep before he caught the red-eye back to New York.

Even on the flight, his mind had gone over and over what to do about Rori. At the very least, he knew she hadn't skipped the country—unless her friends covered for her. Annmarie, Wayne and one other person Nate assumed was a tenant on her floor answered all of his phone calls instead of Rori. He knew she was there because Jeremiah saw her once.

Jeremiah mentioned she seemed uncomfortable, but it was something she'd said that didn't make sense. "Going behind his back" to see Andrea. Nate couldn't imagine where she'd gotten the idea he didn't want her to see his daughter. He'd confront her about that later though.

First things first. As soon as he got to her apartment—and at barely six a.m., he knew he wouldn't miss her—he'd have it all out with her. No more taking it slow. No more waiting for her to feel safe enough to trust him. The only safety was in total commitment now.

*You're not going to make a lot of sense.*

Nate took a deep breath, trying to expel the fatigue from his lungs. He'd already decided he wouldn't beat around the bush, so maybe he'd make more sense if he just said it. Said *I*

*love you. I want you to be my wife. What do you say?*

He didn't have time to get sidetracked anyway. Jeremiah's first class today was at 10:30. If Nate didn't make it home before then, Jeremiah would drop Andrea off with Mrs. Abbott. If it happened that way it was fine. But he'd told Andrea on the phone yesterday he'd be home today. Whether she understood him or not, he didn't want to disappoint her. She'd had a tough enough week because she couldn't comprehend his absence any more than she could comprehend how he talked to her yet she couldn't see him.

When he arrived at Rori's building and trudged inside, up the stairs, he had a momentary wish he'd stopped for coffee. His head would be a little clearer now if he had.

A door opened as he reached her floor and turned down the hall. Rori stood in her doorway, and, an instant later, someone else emerged.

*You're more exhausted than you thought. Or you're asleep.* He had to be. Because the someone else who emerged was a man and that man kissed Rori.

In his nightmare, Nate started forward, getting close enough to hear the man say "Don't forget me, wildcat. 'Least not the good parts." Letting his hand drop from Rori's face, the long-haired guy slung a bag over his shoulder, then started away, toward Nate.

They passed each other, and the expression on the guy's face was blatantly smug. He

grinned cruelly as if to say "I got what I wanted. The rest is yours—if you still want it."

Nate turned to look back at him...and then he saw red. The logo on the back of the guy's jacket had a hand-stitched fox. The studded letters beneath it read "Foxy."

Brett Foxy. Brett Foxy had just come out of Rori's apartment with an overnight bag and all the cockiness of a well-satisfied man.

For all of a second, Nate tried to tell himself he'd imagined all this, but a chuckle of mirth followed the guy down the steps.

Rori's apartment door closed, and Nate stood frozen for a minute. Then he started toward Rori's door. At the last minute, he changed his mind, flying instead down the stairs and out to the parking lot.

Brett Foxy unlocked the trunk of an ostentatious Camaro and tossed in his duffel.

*You know what that means, don't you? He spent the night...or the week with the woman you planned to propose to. Did he come on his own or did she call him? What's the plan now?*

Nate didn't have a plan. All he knew was, he couldn't let this go. He realized Brett was aware of him after he said "I want you to stay away from Rori" and the other man turned to him slowly and gave him a dismissive once-over.

"Yeah? And who are you?"

A cigarette hung out of the corner of Brett's mouth. Despite the long hair, Nate had seen few people who looked tougher than this guy. He was lean and predatory.

*And exactly Rori's type—-isn't that what you're thinking? Rori is just as untamed as Brett Foxx, just as addicted to the wild side. And you couldn't be more conservative if you wore your shirts buttoned all the way up to your eyeballs.*

"Haven't you hurt her enough?" Nate found himself saying, while some other part of his brain realized that wasn't really why he wanted Brett to stay away from her. He wanted Brett out of her life because he didn't know if he could compete. How long before she realized life with Nate was life in a cage?

Brett pulled the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it down, squashing it mercilessly under a boot. "I got what I wanted. I don't need her anymore."

Nate stared at the other man, sure the words and the tone qualified as pure ego. Brett wanted him to believe he'd spent the week with Rori, in her bed. He gave the old locker room song and dance, like Jason used to.

Brett turned away, started toward his car. After he pulled open the door, he leaned on the top. "I'm gonna miss the way she looks when she gets hot. That angel glow—know what I

mean?"

*Jackass*, Nate thought clenching his teeth, his fists, his spine.

"No, you probably don't, do ya?" Brett's laughter was merciless and jeering, especially when Nate flushed in anger.

Brett tore out of the parking lot, narrowly missing Nate standing stock still trying to control his temper.

Even if Rori's old boyfriend was a lying instigator, what possible reason could she have for letting him spend the night? For kissing him? Why did she even let him in?

Nate jammed his hands into the pockets of his trench coat, feeling a chill in the wind he hadn't when his anger fueled more than his worst nightmares.

Were he and Rori meant to be together? Considering the fact they'd known each other all their lives, it should have amazed him they'd ended up in completely different worlds. Yet they'd been complete opposites from the start. Nothing had changed despite the mutual bridge Nate thought they constructed from their poles.

*"Let her go. If you hold her back, she'll resent you. You know you're not what she wants deep down. All your love will do is cage her. She doesn't love you enough to stay with you forever."* Nate recognized the words his memory recalled all too well.

He started toward his car, got as far as to put his key to the locked door before he came to his senses with another memory, this time his own words: *"I can't spend the rest of my life apart from you."*

The truth of that still remained tenaciously loyal. He loved Rori. And, reputation or no reputation, he trusted her not to fall into the clutches of her ruthless ex-boyfriend. If Nate trusted her, he didn't need to know the reasons and details behind Brett Foxx's visit. All he had to know was that Rori believed in them enough to commit herself to forever.

## Chapter Twenty–One

RORI CLOSED her apartment door, unwilling to watch Brett walk out of her life, maybe for good this time.

Leaning back against the door, she started to squeeze her eyes shut in relief, but then she saw something on the nightstand. She went to it and found the roll of money she'd saved. Brett gave it back! She could hardly believe it.

Realizing it meant something—meant he was a good guy after all, despite his many flaws—she went back to her door and looked down the hall. Instead of seeing Brett's dark, flowing hair, she caught a glimpse of a blond head. It was gone before she could get a good look, yet her entire body reacted in alarm.

Nate? Had it been Nate? She knew everyone on this floor. Zak was the only male with blond hair, but this had been a grown man.

*You're imagining things. Nate won't be back until later today—and he'll go to his daughter first, if he comes here at all.*

But she couldn't shake the impression of seeing him. And if he'd been here, he must have seen... Rori swallowed the lump in her throat. God, was fate having the last laugh at



her again?

She moved over to the window. After a few minutes, Brett's car roared out of the lot and down the street. She waited with her hands clenched, but Nate's car didn't follow. She'd imagined it. Everything was fine. Nate would never have to know Brett had been here.

Tears stung her eyes. She was no longer sure of their intent. Relief? Fear? Stress?

Before she could get herself together, someone rapped on her door. She turned as the door opened.

All of her breath collected in the cramped space of her throat. *Nate.*

His face was set in an unreadable state of determination. He had to know... But what did he think?

*What else can he think? Brett kissed me and walked away with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. What would you think if you saw a woman come out of Nate's house kissing him and toting an overnight bag?*

She tried to speak, but even if she'd been thinking clear enough to explain, Nate didn't give her the opportunity. He crossed her apartment in space-eating strides, hauled her against him and kissed her so hard, so fast, so *hot* she lost herself instantly. Clinging to him like a starfish to a rock, she instinctively absorbed every trace of passion he gave.

She was unable to get in enough oxygen, unable to keep herself standing when he broke the kiss and they both gasped for breath. Rori didn't know whether to be consoled by the fact that he didn't seem to have any more control than she did or hurt because she sensed beneath the desire his intent had been to punish her.

"Marry me," he burst out harshly. His fingers bit into her upper arms. "I don't want to hear anything except yes."

His kiss had stunned her. His words blew her out of the universe. There was nothing romantic about his proposal. There was no joy, no anticipation for the future, no "I love you, let's take forever by the hand."

He'd seen her with Brett and he'd assumed the worst.

"Nate, I—"

"Yes or no?"

His eyes resembled flint. No, he didn't want explanations. He wanted to mark his territory, just like Brett always did. And if she refused, he'd banish her forever.

Rori couldn't control the hurt eating through her. Her eyes smarted with the pain. Instead of fighting him, she murmured "Yes."

"We can apply for the license this morning. We'll have breakfast in Niagara Falls, then

apply. I'll bring you back after that."

He turned to grab her jacket from the floor next to her gym bag.

Rori took it, even more shocked at his rush. "But...don't you need to see Andrea?" Her tone sounded as raw as her emotions.

"She doesn't wake until nine most days. We've got plenty of time."

She didn't have time for more than snagging her keys from the nightstand before he hustled her down to his car. During the drive, he detailed his plan: They'd get married the next morning. He'd call a fellow pastor in Niagara Falls to perform the ceremony. Rori listened to him in mute shock.

*Who are you?* The man next to her—the man rambling off succinct, matter-of-fact details to an event that might as well have no more importance than a shopping list—was a stranger to Rori. A part of her wanted to say she couldn't go through with it. That she couldn't marry him like this. Like marriage wasn't dead serious. Like it had nothing to do with love and happiness and trust.

But in the end, all she could do was stare at him quietly, thinking *What did Brett say to you? What did you say to him? And why can't you believe in me for once?*

She applied for the license along with Nate, and she became his wife the next morning

telling herself that repeating these vows would prove her love to him. She told herself that, but she never believed it for a single moment.

NATE DIDN'T speak as they left the church. Rori felt Jeremiah's gaze travel between the two of them, but didn't meet it when it reached her. She pressed her face into Andrea's silky hair, hugging her close. The little girl giggled, and everyone turned at the out-of-place, joyous tinkle.

Rori just barely managed to give Andrea a smile.

*God, what a mockery,* Rori thought sadly. *I've dreamed about this day all my life. I should be happy. At the very least, I should've felt I could ask the people I love most to be here with me.* But a horrible sense of wrongness had prevented her from inviting Annmarie and Zak. What she'd done today was nothing like Annmarie marrying Wayne would be. That would be about eagerness, tension and, ultimately, trust—no matter how fragile.

Turning away from Andrea, Rori let a smile of horror through. She'd feel the same way if she'd married Brett. Like she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life, without a clue how to rectify it.

"Congratulations," Jeremiah said, and she didn't miss the questioning note in his tone.

She didn't know if she should even accept it, but when he hugged her she murmured "Thanks."

As if believing they needed a moment alone together, Jeremiah took Andrea from her saying he'd get her in her car seat.

Rori pushed her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket. Without ample time for plans, she'd been forced to choose her "wedding" dress out of a closet full of inappropriate clothes. She'd considered asking Annmarie if she could borrow the dress she'd bought just for her Rue Franklin West date with Wayne, but that would have raised far too many questions. She ended up wearing a white leather skirt and a cropped white sweater with a leotard under it to cover the swath of skin exposed.

How was she going to tell Annmarie without hurting her feelings?

Nate forced her to look at him by moving too close and kissing her gently. Somehow that soft kiss seemed just as inappropriate as her attire...as the whole sham ceremony had been.

"You've got the opening tonight, don't you? So you're probably rehearsing all day."

The tone of his voice was so tender, it could have been an apology. And it cut her more deeply than the words "I'm sorry I married you" ever could.

She caught her lip beneath her teeth to keep from sobbing. "Yeah...I'm rehearsing all day. I left tickets for you at the box. I mean, if you wanna come..." She shrugged, realized that despite how close he was, how close he still held her, she couldn't look at him. "Ballets are probably not your thing."

"I'll be there."

He said it with conviction, but Rori found, in the hollow he'd left with his distrust, she couldn't believe even the little promises.

*I stood in front of God and vowed to love, cherish...commit my life to this man--and now I don't even know if I can ever look at him again without feeling like the biggest part of me is dying.*

"I better go. I'm already late."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod, then he let her go to step back. They both murmured "See you later" before walking to their separate vehicles.

Rori didn't regret her lie as she drove back to her apartment. Rehearsal didn't start until one o'clock, but she needed time to herself.

What was the next step? Did Nate expect her to move in with him? God, how many people went into a wedding without plans for the future?

Annmarie crossed the hall to Rori's apartment with a laundry basket under her arm when Rori got home.

"Hey." She forced her tone to be natural, following Annmarie into her apartment.

"I changed my hours so I can come to the ballet. Do you think you can take Zak after that?" Annmarie set the basket on the bed, then started to hang Rori's clean clothes.

"No problem. I'll drop you at work before we come back here."

"Thanks. And..."

Rori pulled off her jacket, then went to get changed into something more casual.

"...I have the day off tomorrow. I'm going to do it."

Rori glanced at Annmarie at her side in front of the closet. Her friend's cheeks suffused with color when she said "I'm going to tell Wayne on Sunday that I'll marry him."

All Rori's control went into holding back the lethal combination of laughter and tears. *It's not fair* was the most selfish thought she'd ever allowed herself. Annmarie deserved this. She deserved happiness and true love. And Zak deserved to have a family.

"Have you told slugger yet?"

Annmarie shook her head. "I thought about it. But...I know he's all for it. Just in case something happens, I didn't want to get his hopes up."

*Just in case something happened*—like she changed her mind or chickened out at the last minute.

Rori turned to her friend and hugged her hard. "I'm happy for you, babe. For all of you." If she didn't step back then, she knew she'd lose it. So she grabbed some clothes from her closet and walked away. "You're gonna have a lot to do. Are you planning to quit your job?"

"Probably. I want to. When Wayne asked me, he said it's up to me. I think he wants me to quit too."

What man would want his wife working in a skin palace, even if only waiting tables? Wayne had probably saved his whole life for the prospect of providing for a family.

"So, where'd you go this morning? Zak said you were 'getting' all prettied up" when he came over."

The lump in Rori's throat grew, remembering how she'd partially lied to him. She'd told him she was going to church with Nate. For all of five seconds, she thought she'd gotten away with it until Zak asked if he and his mom could come along. "Maybe next time, slugger" had been just enough to get her out.

Rori glanced at her best friend and realized she couldn't do it. She couldn't tell Annmarie



the truth. Not yet. Not when she was so excited about saying yes to Wayne. Not when there was a chance Annmarie would think she too made a mistake by trusting a man again.

## Chapter Twenty–Two

"I'VE BEEN TO more enthusiastic funerals than that," Jeremiah said from the passenger's seat. "What the hell was that?"

Feeling like all the tension in his body had locked in his throat and he couldn't breathe, Nate choked out "What do you mean?" The nonchalance he intended fell flat.

Jeremiah let out a mirthless laugh. "You two looked like you were held at gunpoint. If you weren't ready, why'd you propose?"

Why had he? Nate didn't even know what him drove to this point. All he could remember was gritting his teeth and pushing forward, grimly determined to see it through this time. Grimly determined not to let go ever again.

"Her ex–boyfriend was there...just leaving when I got there yesterday morning." Nate adjusted the rearview mirror to see Andrea sleeping in back.

"Brett Foxx?" Jeremiah confirmed, full of interest. "Well, what happened, man?"

"He kissed her. He had..." Nate's hands uncontrollably clenched on the steering wheel as he remembered Brett's laughter. That *I got what I wanted* cruel, instigating, conceited chuckle. "He was carrying a bag."

Jeremiah turned full-body to face him. "Hold on, hold on. One thing at a time. He kissed her? How did he kiss her?"

"What do you mean *how*? He kissed her." His lips touched hers... *mine. She's mine.*

"Was it a tongue kiss?"

Nate glared at him, but Jeremiah didn't back down. He even repeated the question, which did everything to short his fuses all over again.

"He kissed her, do you understand that? He kissed her on the mouth and said something like 'We had a good time together' and then he walked past me and laughed...he laughed like...like..." Words came through clenched teeth, but he couldn't finish them.

"Like he just got laid? And wanted to make sure he kicked you in the balls before he burned rubber?"

If there was a dignified response, Nate was too angry to use it. So he silently fumed until Jeremiah continued. "So, what's that got to do with Rori?"

"He was carrying a duffel bag, remember?"

*What are you doing, holy man?* Nate thought, realizing for the first time Rori's old "pet" name for him was accurate in all its sarcasm. *He* was acting like a jackass, a holy than thou one. And he didn't even believe what he implied about Rori. He just threw the blame for

today's farce as far from the truth as possible.

"I repeat—what has that got to do with Rori? You don't honestly believe she called this guy up the second you stepped out and invited him for a couple throwdowns hoping you'd never find out?"

Nate shook his head in a barely perceptible movement.

"Cuz if you walked in there and proposed to her when you were fuming over what this guy may or may not have tried to get away with, cuz this guy succeeded in spades to piss you off royally when nothing happened between him and Rori—I guarantee she only accepted your proposal and went through with it cuz she knew the only other option was saying *sayonara*."

"She doesn't even know I was there to see him."

"But is that why you proposed? To punish her for what Brett Foxx may or may not have done?"

Nate's answer was defensive...and immediate. "No. I asked her... I didn't back out because I don't want to lose her again. I don't want to make it easy for her to run away. I don't want to let her go again because she might resent me if I hold her back, because deep down I'm not what she wants and my love will cage her."

Nate flushed. He'd been told when he was seventeen he and Rori weren't meant to be. Never mind love. Never mind desire and pain and a lifetime of regret. And, knowing he couldn't walk away from her if she stayed around, he'd given her every incentive to run away. He'd provided the bait with Jenna's engagement ring. Dear Lord, he remembered deciding to go after Rori when she did run. He'd packed a bag, then marched over to her father's house to find out where she was...

This time he refused to accept he and Rori didn't belong together. If they didn't fit, then he'd make them fit.

Whatever determination propelled him this far stood at the sidelines now, making him wonder. What did he need to do to make this right? How could he unclutter eleven years of mistakes to make a clean slate with Rori? With his wife?

It was time to clean out the past. And pack it away.

THAT NIGHT, Rori became Giselle, Giselle became Rori. She was the girl who fell in love with a man out of her class. She was the girl who realized she'd been deceived when she saw an engagement ring on another woman's finger. She was the one desolate and destroyed by her lover's sword.

After the last ovation, Rori went to her dressing room, angry at herself for being shocked Nate hadn't come. If he had, he didn't sit next to Jeremiah in the first row seats she'd saved for her friends.

After a brief rap, Charlene came in glowing. She didn't need to say anything. Her expression told Rori she was exhilaratingly proud of the performance.

"You've more than convinced me," Charlene said as Rori dressed in her street clothes.

"You're keeping the school?"

Charlene put her hands on Rori's shoulders. "I'm giving it to you."

Rori had never seen her mentor so...exuberant. Only when Charlene danced did she show strong emotion. The woman before her now was nearly in tears of rapture. "Have you been drinking?" Rori had to ask.

Charlene shook her head disapprovingly. "For once in your life, girl, don't be a martyr. I'm not giving you something worth a lot of money. You already know I've been losing money hand over fist. But I believe you can bring it back. You can make people love dance again. Classical dance, not silly fads like that Macaroni one."

Rori started to laugh at Charlene's misnomer, but the weight of what Charlene said caved in on her. Giving her the school. *Giving*, not selling. So the money Rori had saved could go

into promotion or whatever the school needed.

"Charlene, you can't...I wouldn't..."

"Oh but I can! You must! And you will!" her mentor said forcefully, and then backtracked. "You do want it, don't you? I haven't misunderstood that, have I?"

"Of course I want it, but I should give you—"

"I don't want or need anything except your promise to love it the way I have."

Rori stood staring at her, utterly speechless.

Charlene smiled. "I'll take that as a promise. My lawyer will draw up the transfer papers shortly."

After a rare hug, and brief praise about tonight's performance, Charlene left.

*What did I do to deserve...?*

Charlene's martyr rebuke came back to her, and Rori sat heavily in front of the makeup table. A burst of laughter rose in her own throat, surprising her. How did Charlene know she was interested in the school? Was she that obvious?

Rori turned when another knock sounded. Annmarie and Zak came in, while Courtney and Jeremiah loitered in the doorway. Tears shone in Annmarie's eyes and she could barely speak as she hugged Rori. "It was...just beautiful. You were..."

Annmarie hugged her again hard, and Rori thanked her, laughing tearfully. "So, what'd you think, slugger?"

Zak bit one corner of his bottom lip, then said "It was long."

Rori burst out laughing, hugging him. Courtney had moved into the room by the time Rori let Zak go.

"You were fantastic," she said in a but—you-know—that tone.

Other members of the troupe ducked in the doorway to remind her of the celebration afterward. "We'll just stop in for a second. I don't want you to be late for work," Rori said to Annmarie, glancing at Jeremiah. For some reason, he looked guilty, as if he could be blamed for Nate's broken promises.

"I don't know why he isn't here. He said he'd be. Maybe he couldn't get a baby-sitter for Andi."

He didn't believe it any more than she did, but she couldn't blame him for the excuse.

"He saw Brett, didn't he?" Rori asked quietly, trailing behind the others as they headed for the party.

Jeremiah put his hand on her arm to stop her, then he turned toward her. "You need to talk to him. I can't get in the middle."



Jeremiah had answered her question without having to elaborate.

HOURS LATER—while Annmarie was at work, Zak slept soundly and snow fell on the city like judgment—Rori went over and over the ramifications of Nate's behavior. If he saw Brett, if he talked to him, then why would he charge into her apartment, kiss her senseless, and then ask her...no, *demand*...that she marry him?

The only explanation came down to punishment. He believed she'd cheated on him, and, unlike when he found out the truth about her from Jason Radcliffe, he wasn't about to let her off the hook for her "crimes" with Brett.

That left her with more questions. Why did he go through with the actual wedding? Walking out of her life forever without giving her a chance to defend herself would have been worse punishment.

Why did he think she'd gone through with it? Did he believe her submissiveness was an admission of guilt?

Nothing made sense. Rori stared out at the night, cold despite the blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

Jeremiah had advised her to talk to Nate. She didn't know how to do that. She'd tried

calling just after Zak fell asleep. She'd gotten his machine and hadn't left a message. Either he was out or didn't want to talk to her.

*What would you say anyway? Face to face is hard enough, but you can't say 'I know you think you know what happened with Brett, but you're all wrong. And I think the real truth of the matter is you were looking for a way out and seeing Brett made it easy. So why marriage? What were you trying to prove?'*

Her dreams as a teenager seemed naive now. She'd imagined a big wedding. Tuxedo, thousand dollar plus wedding gown covered with lace and pearls...a *white* wedding gown. She'd imagined looking at him with tears of joy in her eyes while he said his vows to her. She'd imagined a honeymoon night filled with soft-spoken promises, acceptance, tenderness, mind-blowing sensuality and love like she'd never had before.

God, reality was a shotgun wedding—minus the pregnancy—no time for fancy clothes, and mumbled *I do's* as they tried not to look at each other. Reality was this cold, dark night, broken promises and no idea if a future for them even existed.

Rori glanced over her shoulder at the clock. Well, Annmarie would be home soon. Telling her wouldn't be easy...and might not even be advisable, but Annmarie already knew something was wrong between her and Nate. She'd commented on his absence in the truck

after they'd left the celebration party. Rori found herself making excuses for him, *God*, like some ragdoll.

When Annmarie got home, she'd tell her the truth. Everything part except that parody of a wedding.

Rori moved over to the sofa bed and put her hand against Zak's small chest. He breathed deeply, softly, looking like an angel.

Such innocence. Peace. Had she ever known either of those?

Fifteen minutes passed, and Rori glanced at the clock again. Annmarie usually got home ten minutes after Baby Dolls closed at four a.m. It was already twenty after. Annmarie was friendly with the other waitresses and dancers, but she had Zak to come home to. Socializing was almost obsolete for Annmarie.

Rori waited impatiently, constantly expecting to hear Annmarie's footsteps. At 4:30, she glanced out into the hallway. She thought about calling the club, but knew she wouldn't get any answer. It was closed.

Throwing off the blanket around her shoulders, she crossed the hall to her apartment. Looking out her own windows didn't ease the tight knot in her stomach. There was no sign of Annmarie. Where could she be? And what could Rori do about it? She couldn't leave

Zak alone.

She paced for another fifteen minutes, from Annmarie's apartment to her own. Finally, she did the only thing she could. She pounded on Wayne's door, knowing Annmarie would kill her if she showed up soon only to find Rori had shared her worry with Wayne.

When Wayne didn't answer his door immediately, she went at it again until he opened a minute later. He blinked at her, only half-awake.

Rori didn't bother with apologies. If Annmarie was OK, she would have called by now. Something had to be wrong. "I'm worried about Annmarie. She's always home fifteen, twenty after four—"

Wayne glanced back inside his apartment, but Rori answered the question for him. "It's almost five. Something must have happened."

He came to full alert the instant the words issued from her mouth. "Did you call the club?"

"I will while you get dressed. I have to stay with Zak—"

"I'll go look for her."

He disappeared into the darkness of his apartment, and Rori went to the payphone. No answer, just as she expected. Wayne tugged on his boots, and Killer lifted his head to give

her a grouchy glare.

"If I don't find her in a half hour, I'll call you," Wayne said as he simultaneously pulled on his jacket and headed for the door.

Rori nodded, clenching her ice cold hands together. She closed his apartment door as his heavy footsteps trailed off in his departure.

A check revealed Zak still slept soundly. Her fear as the minutes stretched made her shiver uncontrollably. She wanted to do something besides wait and worry. She wanted someone...she wanted *Nate* to be here to tell her this was just a bad dream.

A half hour came and went without a call from Wayne either. By then, Rori could no longer get herself to believe she overreacted. Something was desperately wrong, and she couldn't do anything except wake Zak, possibly upsetting him for no reason. Or call the police.

An hour after Wayne left, she called the police, nervously giving them all the information she had. She suspected she'd get the usual lecture about how Annmarie and Wayne were adults and hadn't been missing for twenty-four hours yet so there was nothing they could do...

She didn't get the usual lecture.



## Chapter Twenty–Three

NATE YANKED off his glasses to wipe a hand across his face. It came back with sweat...or tears. The attic was a cramped, dusty space that seemed to have no air.

It was done. He'd packed everything of Jenna's, everything of their life together, into boxes and brought them up here for Andrea when she was older.

He'd mourned. Before he'd started the chore, he was sure he'd be done in a couple hours and he'd still have time to make Rori's ballet.

Glancing at his watch now, he realized it was nearly 3:30 in the morning. The hours he'd spent packing were a blur to him. All he remembered of the time was Jenna.

His entire body felt drained from the saturation of memories. Everything he touched brought a memory. Jenna brushing her hair, ironing a shirt, stroking an earring as she listened to his sermon, laughing and trying to explain the reason as she read a novel. The way she used to curl around his side after they made love. The life jumping against his hand when he touched her pregnant belly. The last expression on her face just before she died—triumph and, finally, peace. And he fallen to his knees when the nurse offered him the tired old cliché—"We did everything we could"—and asked her to leave him alone.

Dear Lord, he hadn't been ready to see his newborn baby after they'd told him Jenna had died. His steady, faithful, always-giving Jenna. How could he go on without Jenna beside him? What neat little corner could he tuck this tragedy into? He'd been so full of disbelief and agony and rage, trapped between a scream and a sob that could tear him to pieces.

Had *he* done everything he could? Had he loved her, made her happy? Had she known...*please no!* what he'd tried to tell himself for eleven years was past?

He looked down at a photograph he couldn't seem to pack away. Jenna's sweet, smiling face greeted him again.

*I'll never forget you.*

And, with that, he tucked it into the last box and closed it carefully away.

He got up from his knees and walked downstairs on shaky legs. Once he'd glanced in on Andrea, he went to his bedroom. He had the service in a couple hours.

After tossing his glasses on the nightstand and hitting the button for his alarm, he sank onto the bed with his clothes still on.

Tomorrow afternoon he'd call Rori and they could talk. If he wasn't already too late, he'd make her see he was ready to start his life over again with her.

He closed his eyes. If he wasn't too late...



"ZAK, YOU HAVE to get up and get dressed." Rori shook him and finally he peered up at her with only one eye open.

"Too early," he mumbled. "Kid can't dance half 'sleep, ya know."

"I'm not giving you a lesson today, slugger."

She pulled the blanket off him, then set the clothes she'd picked out for him on the arm of the sofa bed.

"Get dressed and go to the bathroom if you need to. I made you a PB&J, and we'll bring along some milk in a thermos."

Zak sat up rubbing his eyes. His hair stuck up on end, and he looked so sweet Rori had to bite her lip to keep from crying.

*I can't do this, dammit. That will was never supposed to be put into use, Annmarie. It's like you knew or you didn't wanna take any chances.*

Instead of asking where they were going, Zak said "Where's mom?" as he pulled on jeans that still held the scent of the inexpensive dryer sheets Annmarie used.

Knowing if she looked at him as she spoke she'd lose it, Rori stood folding the bedding. "Your mom's with Wayne, slugger. We're gonna go see her. I'm gonna take you to her."

"Mom's with Wayne?" His tone held as much excitement as when they'd gone to pick out a Christmas tree.

*God, don't make me do this! I can't tell this kid--this kid I love more than life--that his mom's in the hospital cuz some cretin would rather steal than work for a living.*

She'd spent close to forty-five minutes on the phone--mostly on hold--while a cop tried to figure out where to direct her call. Finally someone told her a big guy--Wayne Tobinski (Kominski)--had IDed a Jane Doe in the hospital in a coma. Jane Doe was Annmarie.

All the police could tell her at that time was Annmarie had been attacked sometime around four a.m. She'd been hit over the head with a pipe (or something similar), and a black-and-white patrolling the neighborhood found her at approximately 4:30. They suspected a mugging since her purse was missing. Which meant they'd had no way to identify her. Wayne came in, and they matched his description of Annmarie with their Jane Doe.

Rori still hadn't heard from Wayne, but she knew where he was at least.

"Yeah. Wayne's there, slugger."

He raced around getting dressed, used the bathroom, and then started eating the

sandwich Rori prepared for him. Silly to think *He'll be hungry when he wakes up* in light of the situation, but she'd gone about the motherly tasks almost unconsciously after she got off the phone.

The payphone in the hall rang as Rori got the thermos of milk and followed Zak out of the apartment. She raced for it.

"Wayne?"

"Yeah. She's in the hospital—"

Rori glanced at Zak munching his sandwich and watching her with eagle eyes. "I know. How's it going?"

She could tell from the tone of Wayne's voice the situation wasn't good. He sounded tired and hopeless.

"She's in a coma. They can't tell me anything. You should get down here."

The lump in her throat tightened. "We're on our way."

"D'you tell Zak?" Wayne asked quietly.

How could she? He was calmly eating, so far removed from tragedy, and she couldn't be the one to remove his innocent hopes.

"I...I can't."

She didn't expect Wayne to react in any way to her words, yet he surprised her. "I'll do it. Just come, and I'll think of something."

Already Wayne thought of Zak as a son. Annmarie had planned to tell him yes today...

Rori hung up without looking at Zak.

*Your family, slugger. You were finally gonna have your family. Mom, dad, dog and backyard all in one package.*

"Let's head out." The hitch in her throat was impossible to control. Zak reached for her hand wordlessly. Rori's emotions jumbled up like a game of twister. Zak trusted her. He understood something was happening and he gave her his unconditional trust...God, when she didn't even trust herself. She didn't know how to take care of him, but she'd do it because she loved him and Annmarie counted on her.

Zak finished his sandwich and milk in the truck, then started chattering about school and Wayne's house. All of Rori's control went into her focus on driving to the hospital. What she wanted to do was slam her fists through the windshield and demand justice. At the very least, an explanation for how damn unfair life was.

"Why we at a hospital?" Zak asked—as usual, nothing lost on him. When Rori didn't answer right away, he turned to look at her. "Rori, is mom not feeling fiddle?"

Only because she'd been thinking about the will Annmarie made not too long ago did she understand Zak's meaning. When Annmarie claimed to be "fit as a fiddle," Zak had asked what a fiddle was and then said "Nothing worse than a sick fiddle."

Before Rori could say anything, the passenger door opened and Wayne filled the doorway. He must have been waiting for them.

"Hey, buddy."

He looked drawn, just all done in. But he managed something of a smile for Zak. As he lifted him out, Zak asked him the same questions about his mom.

Rori didn't hear the reply. Wayne closed the door, and she got out on her side. Zak's eyes were wide, his little lips tight.

"Somebody hurt my mom? Take me to him!"

There was something so determined, so tough yet so vulnerable in him, something just like the night he tried to defend her from Brett. Rori couldn't save herself. She burst into tears that had accumulated for weeks. Even when Wayne put one burly arm around her protectively... and a little awkwardly...she couldn't find peace.

*Nate, where are you when I need you? Why do I have to realize now that only you'll do?*

Zak reached for her, and she held him tightly, whispering "I'm sorry, slugger." Only his

mom would do for him.

"I wanna see my mom, Rori."

Wayne touched her shoulder again, and she glanced at him. "I think they'll tell us what's going on with her now that you're here with Zak."

He led them into the building, and Rori explained who Zak was and that she and Wayne were the closest thing Annmarie had to family outside of her son.

God, she hated hospitals. She remembered waiting endlessly more than once after being called about Brett and his accidents or fights. Sometimes she'd wondered if Brett got himself hurt on purpose so she wouldn't leave him. She always felt weak in hospitals. Like she couldn't do anything to help anybody.

A doctor came out to talk to them after they'd paced long enough to make them crazy. Zak kept asking to see his mom, and Rori didn't know what to say to him.

Most of what the doctor said went right over her head, but the gist was that Annmarie had suffered a major blow to the head, there was considerable swelling, and no one had any idea when, or if, she'd wake up.

"She doesn't keep money in her purse," Rori said quietly as they followed the nurse into the ICU.

Wayne's eyebrows knitted in confusion.

"She never keeps cash in her wallet. Every night she deposits her tips in the ATM near the club. She was afraid of having someone steal it."

The point Rori made was unnecessary. The instant she saw Annmarie laying there, her head all bandaged, her skin paler than usual—she knew nothing could make this fair. If the mugger stole money to buy food or medicine for a passel of sick babies, it couldn't make this justifiable.

What if Annmarie never woke up? Oh God, oh God, she didn't even want to think it, but with her best friend so lifeless...

Zak reached out to take his mom's hand. Then he looked at Rori. "Mom's alive, isn't she, Rori?"

Rori nodded because it was the only thing she could do.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

AFTER GETTING Nate's answering machine for the second time, Rori realized it was a Sunday. He was at church. She walked back to Annmarie's hospital bed. Wayne was awake now, though he still looked haggard. He stood and motioned toward his catnap chair.

Rori shook her head.

"When's the last time you got some sleep?"

She hadn't slept at all the night before. Tired as she was, she knew she wouldn't sleep. She'd gone on jags before where she didn't sleep for days. Life with Brett had been like that. Besides, she knew Zak needed her. He cried a lot, asked if his mom was alive more. He sat in a chair next to Annmarie's bed holding her cold hand, once in awhile saying something.

"Slugger, what do you say we get something to eat?"

After looking up at her, he quietly conceded. Wayne shook his head at Rori's glance of invitation to join them.

"We'll bring you something back."

She had no appetite, and Zak picked at his food. Looking at him, she knew he was



exhausted and also knew a part of him didn't want to be here. Their presence wouldn't necessarily bring Annmarie back. And Zak would just get worse and worse if they stayed and nothing happened.

They brought Wayne a couple sandwiches back to the room. "I'm thinking of taking Zak to my old man's," she said quietly as Wayne set the bag on the sidecar table.

"That's probably a good idea. Seeing her like this can't be too good for him. And I'll call you if anything happens."

"It's only a couple hours from here. I think it'd be good for both of us right now."

Wayne nodded.

"So I'll just drop by the apartment to get some stuff..."

"Would you mind feeding Killer for me? I'll have to go home for that later, but right now I don't wanna leave her."

They exchanged key and phone number.

Rori moved over to Zak. "Sluggo, we're gonna go pack some stuff and go to my dad's in Syracuse."

Zak's confusion warred with his fatigue. "But who'll stay with mom?"

Wayne reached across the bed to give Zak's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I will,

buddy. I've taken an indefinite vacation from work, and I promise I'll be here for her. You need to trust Rori and do what she thinks is best. I'll call you guys if anything happens."

"And then we'll come right back here, slugger."

After a minute, Zak nodded, then kissed his mom before murmuring something in her ear.

While Rori packed for them both at their building, Zak laid down in her bed. Seeing he was asleep, she went to make some phone calls. The first was to Charlene, who wasn't too happy to fill in as Giselle at the last minute but understood Rori didn't have a choice.

Next, she called her father to tell him she was coming with Zak.

Finally, she called Nate, leaving a message this time. She guessed what he did about it would be the real test.

NATE HEARD the front door and moved out of the bathroom. Jeremiah came in the house carrying Andrea and her diaper bag.

"Get some sleep?" Jeremiah asked, and Andrea squealed happily, reaching for her daddy.

Nate nodded sheepishly, hugging his bouncing little girl. He'd come home immediately after the Sunday service and dropped into bed. Jeremiah took Andrea for the day. When

Nate woke, he'd been surprised at the time. Now that he'd showered, he had just enough time for dinner before he headed to Buffalo to see Rori's second night of the ballet. He'd wasted the day by sleeping, but he couldn't show up at Rori's door dead tired again. Not when they had so much to talk about and work out.

"Thanks for covering for me today," Nate said to Jeremiah after dinner.

Jeremiah shrugged as if to say *No problem*. "I don't have any plans."

Once he lifted Andrea out of her highchair, Nate followed him into the living room.

"You didn't check your messages today." Jeremiah indicated the blinking machine.

"I didn't even hear the phone ring." Let alone the three times the counter announced.

Jeremiah punched the play button. The first two gave him the time but no messages. Whoever called hung up at the beep. Rori's voice came on after the machine stated the time of the last call—1:15 p.m.

"It's Rori. I'm... There's been..."

Something in her tone compelled Nate to set Andrea on the floor and move closer. She sounded exhausted and extremely upset.

"Annmarie was mugged, attacked early this morning. She's in a coma... I know how unbelievable this sounds. I have Zak, and I'm taking him to my father's."

Nate was shocked. And then she said softly "I need you" and hung up.

So many questions rose in him, but they were squelched by overwhelming regret. He hadn't been there when she needed him. He'd failed her. Again.

"I have to go to her."

"No question. Do you want me to pack for Andrea or do you want her to stay here with me?"

He wasn't thinking clearly enough to make the decision, so Jeremiah made it for him.

"You don't know how long you'll be there. You better take her."

Nate nodded, then scooped up Andrea and swung into action.

Rori left that message hoping something could be salvaged out of the mess he'd made. She needed him. He'd be there for her.

## Chapter Twenty–Five

RORI RUBBED at sleep–deprived eyes as she pulled up in front of her father's house. Within seconds the porch light came on. He'd been watching for her.

*Don't read into it. He probably just happened to glance out the window at that moment.* But an onslaught of needy hope came alive in her, stinging sore eyes with fresh tears.

She glanced at Zak and prayed he wouldn't wake when she brought him in the house. He needed sleep as badly as he needed a temporary escape from reality.

Climbing out of her truck, she took a deep breath of air. Cold as it was, it felt good on her hot, tight face and as she inhaled it. She closed the door quiet as she could, then went around to get Zak.

Once she got the seatbelt unlatched, she turned him into her arms, lifting him until she could get her arm under his butt. He stirred long enough to turn his face toward her neck and murmur her name.

"It's OK, slugger. I'm here," she whispered, stroking his hair. In another moment, he fell silent, breathing evenly. She grabbed her bag from the floor of the cab, slung it over her shoulder, then walked up to the house.

Her father opened the door when she reached the sidewalk.

*Something's different.* She didn't know what until she moved through the doorway and he put an arm around her from the side. He hugged her, pressing a kiss to her temple.

Her disbelief melted into silent tears. "Daddy."

He brushed back her hair, saying softly "Let's put him down in your bedroom." He took the bag from her shoulder, then followed her down the hall.

The blinds were closed, but gave enough illumination so Zak wouldn't wake to total darkness. After covering him, she crept out of the room, closing the door only halfway.

After telling her no one had called, her father led her to the sofa. She was at the point where she no longer cared if the comfort he gave stemmed from mere responsibility. She needed that comfort. Huddling into his arms, she pulled her legs up close to her body. "I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know where to go."

"You did the right thing. I'm always here for you, sweetheart."

*Is this what it takes to get you to care?* Rori thought as she gave in to tears again. This time her fear for Annmarie mingled with the shock at her father's tenderness with her. But even that subsided eventually. She was too tired.

"I don't think I can do this," she said softly.

"You're strong. Your spirit's too strong to lose heart now. You'll do what needs to be done. And I'm here."

Did he really believe she was strong enough? When did he start believing her capable of anything except failing? And why was he here for her now, dammit? He let her go so easily every time, and now he was telling her he'd hold on in case she fell?

Rori glanced up at him, saw something in his eyes she didn't trust, and then shook her head. "You've never been here for me, daddy. Never. And you've never loved me either."

Zak's small cry came from the bedroom, and Rori jumped up and ran to him. She didn't see her father's reaction to her words.

She didn't want to see it.

ONLY WHEN he turned down the street his parents lived on and saw Rori's truck parked at the curb of her father's house did Nate loosen his grip on the steering wheel. Because Andrea was with him, he'd gone against his instincts to drive as fast as his car would allow.

For a moment, after he got the bags then lifted Andrea from the car seat, he considered going to his parents and having Andrea spend the night with them. But he didn't want to

take a second longer than necessary to find out how Rori and Zak were.

A light shone in the Mason home, but it was a small one. Instead of taking the risk he might wake Zak, he knocked rather than used the bell and a few minutes later Pastor Mason opened the door.

In a moment of startling *deja vu*, words escaped him. All Nate managed was "Rori."

As it'd been eleven years ago, the word was enough. Pastor Mason opened the door wider.

*Jeremiah wasn't the only person you pumped for information about my current relationship with Rori, was it, mom?*

"Aurora is finally asleep. I'd rather not wake her."

"How's Zak?"

"He's asleep too." Pastor Mason glanced at Andrea asleep on his shoulder. "You're welcome to say, son. I don't sleep much myself."

"Thanks." He spread one of Andrea's blankets on the living room carpet, carefully removed her winter coverings, then left her to sleep.

At the offer of coffee, Nate followed the pastor into the kitchen. He took the mug gratefully, knowing it wouldn't do him any good. His body was still as wound up as it'd



been when he heard Rori's message on his machine. He wasn't sure he'd relax until he saw her.

"So your mother tells me you've been seeing my daughter."

*Need a partner in crime, mom? Again?* Nate couldn't help shaking his head in disbelief.

"Actually, about all I've been doing is making mistakes with your daughter," Nate admitted. "The first one was listening to you eleven years ago."

For a long time, Pastor Mason simply stared at him, then he said softly "Aurora is very much like her mother. And you—you're very much like me. I don't regret what I said to you back then. You *would* have stifled her and she would have vexed you with her restlessness. Better to let some things go then to destroy each other for a few moments of happiness."

The anger in Nate's chest felt so old, it should have worn off long ago. But it hadn't. Not when he realized how much he'd lost and how much he had to lose. "It was *our* choice to make. I believed you when you said Rori could never love me. But she did. She does. We were meant to be together."

Pastor took a deep breath, glancing down at the steam rising from his mug. "When I met Rori" mother, I...I can't describe it, but...she was like a falling star. A miracle. When you

see a falling star, you're suppose to make a wish and let it go. But I couldn't do that. I loved her. I did the unforgivable by asking her to stay with me. Stay in my safe, quiet, conservative world."

Self-disgust aged the pastor's face. Nate watched the older man lift his coffee and sip as if he needed the strength.

Nate had once asked his own mom about Rori's mother because Rori seemed to know as much as he did—nothing. His mother had turned away mumbling something about how the pastor's wife never fit in and that it didn't matter now, since she was gone. Nate had sensed his mother wanted to speak evil of the dead but couldn't bring herself to do it.

Pastor Mason smiled a little. "We were complete opposites. She loved to travel, I preferred staying home. I liked to read, she wanted to live the adventures. I think the Lord meant for her to "go out into all the world." But I had my little flock and probably wouldn't have heeded His call if I'd heard it. And I couldn't let go of her to allow her to follow where she was meant to go."

Rather than speak and possibly stop the confession from coming, Nate sat quietly, not even daring to move. This man had been his mentor, someone he trusted implicitly to lead him down the right path. Trusted enough to believe he and Rori were never meant to be.

"Then she got pregnant and... Aurora was everything she'd ever wanted. I'd never seen love like that between two people. They lived for each other."

Abruptly, Pastor Mason rose, murmuring something about refreshing his cup. When he came back a few minutes later, he sat again silently. But Nate couldn't accept this.

"How did she die? You owe us that much."

Instead of agreeing, the pastor fixed his gaze on the calendar across the room. "I could never tell Rori the truth. It was a car accident, that's all I could say. Aurora ran out into the street, and when her mother saw a car coming, she went on instinct..."

He didn't need to finish. Nate saw the rest crashing vividly over the older man's expression. Rori's mother had died saving her.

"Do you resent Rori for that?" It made sense in terms of her father's coldness toward her. How easily he'd let her go when she was sixteen.

Pastor Mason glanced at him sharply. "Never! But I promised myself that day I'd never again hold onto something that should be free. I love my daughter. But I won't love her so much that I cage her."

He leaned forward slightly, an edge in his tone. "She really doesn't believe I love her, does she?"

What could Nate say? He'd spent years as a kid wondering how Rori's father could ignore her desperate attempts to get his attention.

Silence hung over the room, stretching until all Nate could say was "Rori and I...we're not you and your wife. You had no right to talk me out of going after her. You had no right to lie to me to keep me from it."

He believed those words but could tell the pastor didn't. He still felt he'd done the right thing. And Nate didn't know if any of it mattered anymore. He'd made his own mistakes. He'd broke Rori's heart when they were teenagers on the basis of fear. He'd been afraid he'd betray his faith in Christ if he allowed himself to love Rori the way he wanted to during that first kiss. But he'd wavered in his conviction after she ran away. He'd come here then to find out where she was so he could get her back.

Pastor Mason had talked about Nate's future—Bible college, seminary, leading his own flock. He'd talked about an ideal Christian wife. Even without naming names, Nate had known Jenna was that woman. Rori had run away because she was restless. And she would again even if Nate went after her. The thing that convinced him not to go after her were Pastor Mason's final words: "Let her go. If you hold her back, she'll resent you. You know you're not what she wants deep down. All your love will do is cage her. She doesn't love

you enough to stay with you forever." So Nate made a wish and let her go.

That wish had been unconscious then, but now they filled his heart. *I wish someday we'll be together again and it'll be right. Then I'll never let you go again, and you'll love me enough to marry me and stay forever.*

Nate got up from the table and went to Rori's room. She lay on the bed with Zak, who slept curled against her trustingly.

Looking down at them, Nate faced the road he had before him. He wasn't the open book he'd always believed himself to be. He didn't allow many others to get inside him. He hid parts of himself from even those he had let inside.

He'd hidden the part of himself that would have told Jenna just how frightened he was every time she conceived, every time she lost. He'd hidden his anger because she deceived him by promising not to get pregnant again. He'd hidden his enduring love for Rori Mason from his wife, and now he knew Jenna accepted the truth silently anyway.

He now faced the one person he could reveal every part of himself to. He could give Rori what he'd never been able to give Jenna.

Kneeling beside the bed, Nate touched Rori's cheek with the backs of his fingers. Her expression, even in sleep, tightened with stress. When she woke, she stared at him quietly

in surprise that cut him. "You're here."

He nodded, giving her more than the simple love he'd given Jenna. He gave her his heart—all the good, all the bad. "I'm here."

## Chapter Twenty–Six

RORI WATCHED Nate through the windows overlooking the street inside her father's house. His mother had shown up a few minutes ago, and, from the looks of things outside, mother and son were having a doozy of an argument. No great stretch to figure out she was the cause.

*God, I can't deal with this. Any of this. The fear. The impending failure. The anger. The anger most of all.*

Her anger had somehow meshed to include both her father and Nate, and it'd grown like an ancient set of vines.

Nate had come to her; he'd passed the "test" she'd left for him on his answering machine yesterday afternoon. The fact that he'd come should have excused him from her anger. Instead, she wondered at his motives. Had his wild animal escaped and now he wanted her back in the cage he'd put her in with their bogus marriage? Had he come in love or possessiveness?

*He doesn't love you any more than your father does. You don't need either of them.*

Her grudge grew stronger, but her vulnerability overwhelmed even that. Every time

Nate touched her, she weakened a little. She wanted him here. She wanted him to take care of her and love her and make everything not so horrible. How could she care for Zak if someone didn't care for her?

He and Andrea sat on the floor watching the television her father had brought out of his room, a television she didn't know he even had. The two kids watched cartoons like zombies.

At the moment, Rori couldn't help believing a little zombie time was good for Zak. He'd asked about his mother, and Rori told him what Wayne said the couple times she called him--no change. But he'd cried last night during dinner and couldn't finish eating. Through his tears, he'd told her his mom always made "mashed potatoes" with meatloaf. Rori had cried silently with him and then again in Nate's arms after Zak fell asleep.

Zak needed to concentrate on anything that wouldn't remind him his mother lay in a hospital bed in a coma and might never wake up.

What did Nate say to his mother? Was he, God forbid, telling her he'd married the notorious bad girl Rori Mason?

*If she comes bearing wedding gifts, don't you be the one to open the obligatory set of steak knives.*



Rori turned away from the window. Zak and Andrea still stared at the TV without blinking.

Her father cleaned up the breakfast dishes on the table. She supposed she should help, but she didn't know if she could stand being in the same room with him.

Why had she come here? Deep down she knew this time it'd come to this. She knew her father wouldn't change any more than Nate's old lady would. Anymore than Nate had for that matter.

*You're still the fallen angel, he's still the holy man.*

Her father looked up, and their gazes clashed.

"We need to talk."

For an instant, Rori wondered whether he'd really said the words or if only his expression had.

Four words her father had never in her lifetime uttered to her: "We need to talk." He'd deny her statement yesterday, he'd deny he didn't love her.

Rori shook her head. "You can't. You can't take back twenty-seven years."

They were twenty feet apart, yet the entire house took on sardine can proportions. She wanted to get out of here. Even if for only a few minutes.

The front door opened just as her father said "I know what you believe, sweetheart. I told myself you knew the truth deep down--"

Rori shook her head, glancing at the kids only long enough to see they were still immersed in the cartoon. Zak rarely missed anything, but right now she couldn't rein in the need to strike back at her father for all he'd spent twenty-seven years ensuring.

"The only truth I know is you wish I'd never come back after I ran away. You were relieved when I went. No more rumors about your hellion daughter. No more disappointment. No more pretending you cared-- But you never did pretend, did you? You never even bothered to pretend you love me."

She turned away from the hurt staining her father's cheeks. Nate stood in the front alcove with his hands in his pockets as if he'd rather have stayed outside and argued with his mother.

God, she had to get out.

If Zak called out for her, she couldn't have put aside her feelings for him this time. She was so shaky, inside and out, she felt she'd shatter like a glass window in front of everyone if she didn't get away.

Moving fast, she brushed by Nate and burst out into the bitter cold wind without her

jacket. A sob rose into the great hollow place in her chest and filled it in crescendo.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she took the steps, stumbled, somehow righted herself, feeling drunk and crazy and unbelievably desperate.

A hand touched her shoulder. Instinctively, she knew it was Nate and knew she couldn't handle anything right now. She shook him off blindly and ran.

She got as far as the end of the snow-covered lawn before the sobs crashed through her, strangling, ripping, wrenching every nightmare she'd ever faced from her.

She couldn't fight Nate when he picked her up out of the snow and dragged her up into his arms.

"He can't... You can't... *I* can't..." Her words were bit off and as incomplete as the jumble of emotions blinding her to anything but her own weakness.

"I know, baby. I know," Nate whispered. "'It's too much.'"

In her state, she didn't understand his comfort, only took it and held onto it with tightly gripped fists.

"I'm here. I'll take care of you."

Rori shook her head, pulled back to stare at him. "He doesn't love me. He never loved me and he never will. What did I do?"

"It wasn't you." His jaw tightened as if fighting a demon in order to get through to her. He rubbed his hands down her arms, instead making the chill worse with his effort. "Your father's never forgiven himself for your mother's death. He feels responsible and—it doesn't make it right—but he believes in the theory 'If you love something, set it free.' That's why he let you go and why he's afraid to tell you he loves you. He doesn't want his love to hold you back, like it did your mother."

It made no sense. The explanation made as much sense to her as why Brett punished her because he loved her. "I never wanted to be free. I never asked for freedom. I just wanted his love."

*I just wanted your love.*

"I know. He didn't know."

She stared at him. Sobs gave way to silent tears just as painful.

Nate put cold hands to her cheeks, drawing her toward him. Something about his touch, the emotion in his eyes and his kiss completely undid her. Nothing was logical. The whole world had gone insane. Her father loved her, and so let her go. Brett loved her, and so punished her. Nate had caged and betrayed her with a marriage she'd wanted all her life. She loved him with everything inside her.

And she was going to leave him the first chance she got.

THE PHONE rang only seconds after they walked back into the house. Her father held it out to her, and she knew it had to be Wayne.

"She's awake." A note of blissful relief radiated through his words. "She's still in bad shape, but she's awake. They're running a bunch of tests now."

Rori pressed a hand against her chest as if to physically hold back a sob. "God. Thank God."

"She's asking for Zak."

"We're leaving now."

When she hung up, Zak guessed "Mom's OK?"

Grinning, she swung him up into her arms for an emotional hug. "She's awake, slugger. I think she's gonna be OK."

She got to packing, throwing the few things they'd taken out back in willy-nilly in the need to get going. Nate came into her bedroom as she zipped the duffel.

"I called Jeremiah. He's going to meet us at the hospital."

Rori started to ask why, but then couldn't make herself do it. A part of her already knew

why. Right now she couldn't handle anything else except getting Zak to Annmarie ASAP.

Avoiding his eyes, she led him out of the bedroom.

Her father bundled the kids up in the living room. She saw the look in his eyes when he glanced at her.

*Like I used to--that never--learn hope he'll tell me something, anything, I need to hear.*

Walking out now and never coming back was an option. Punishing him for all the years he hurt her... She could do it if she had any anger left. But her anger had found release out there in the front yard this morning. Her father's reasons for hurting her didn't make sense to her, but she'd waited a lifetime to get his love. He wanted to give it to her now. Whether or not that made her a spineless ragdoll, she couldn't refuse it. She hugged him at the front door and told him she loved him too when he initiated the exchange.

The sense of betrayal after all the years her father held her at arms' length hadn't diminished. The edges were still rough, but the fact remained he was all she had left. Now that he'd finally taken the steps, she'd meet him halfway.

## Chapter Twenty–Seven

"MOM!"

Rori let Zak down, and he raced to his mother's bedside.

Annmarie looked completely done in, pale, bruised, weak...and something more. Rori realized it the instant she glanced at Wayne. Annmarie had accepted his proposal. Something intimate had happened between them. Somehow Annmarie's life—and–death experience gave her the motivation to break through her own fears and trust Wayne with her heart.

Rori got tears in her eyes as she watched the three of them, as Annmarie told Zak they were going to be a family. She would have left them if Annmarie hadn't reached out to her.

Rori went to her and hugged her. "Thank God. You scared me to death, babe."

"Thanks for taking care of Zak for me. I knew you'd always be there for us."

A lump rose in Rori's throat. Would she be? She couldn't even answer herself.

"Congratulations on the impending nuptials. Something tells me you guys are gonna make a great family."

She was here, she spoke the way she normally would, yet a part of her felt she watched

herself from somewhere else. Like she'd already flown and was afraid to admit it out loud because then there'd be no turning back.

Wayne followed her out of the room after she gave Annmarie a final hug.

"So how'd the tests come out?"

"Everything looks normal. Doc said it was a miracle. The placement of the blow should've killed her. They wanna keep her here for at least a week to make sure she's really OK."

"So there's a chance she might have a relapse?"

Wayne shook his head. "No. If it was gonna kill her, it would've already. She wouldn't have woke up."

Rori silently lifted a prayer of gratitude. "That's great. I'm really happy for you guys."

His endearing flush of happiness brought her a truckload of guilt.

"Do you mind if I take Zak tonight?"

"That's a good idea, Big Guy. I've got...stuff to do anyway."

She walked to the waiting room Nate was in with Jeremiah and Andrea.

"She's gonna be OK."

Both Nate and Jeremiah murmured their relief. Rori could barely keep herself from



racing out of the hospital at top speed, she was so uncomfortable.

"I've gotta get gas in my truck. I'll see you later." She did everything short of sprint out to her truck. She realized Nate knew where she lived and thought about going somewhere else, but in the end she accepted she couldn't do that. Low as her tank was, she decided to forego getting gas and drive straight home.

She got her mail as if this day was anything like normal and found her GED scores. She'd passed. Just barely on a few and a couple with flying colors, but she'd done it.

Once she unlocked her apartment, careful to leave it that way, she tossed her duffel, the mail and her jacket on the floor and changed into dance gear. God, she wanted to lose herself like never before.

She turned up the music loud enough to block out everything. She had to have this, just once, and then she'd think about what she had to do.

NATE DIDN'T race after Rori despite his first instinct. He kissed Andrea goodbye, told Jeremiah he probably wouldn't be home tonight, then drove to Rori's apartment. Something inside him accepted she wouldn't run away. She'd, in fact, be waiting for him.

When he kissed her outside her father's house this morning, her response assured him it

wasn't over between them. He'd tasted her need, her consuming *love* in that kiss.

After twenty-seven years, Nate understood. He and Rori had friendship. They'd had desire, trust, love. They'd even had commitment in their relationship. The one thing they'd never had was freedom. And they both wanted it now. Too much to walk away from the promise of it.

He heard the music as he climbed the stairs to her floor. He heard it, and he recognized it as the same song she'd danced to the night he went into Baby Dolls. His body reacted in a full-body slam of desire.

Her door stood slightly ajar, and he opened it to see her dancing as effortlessly as a falcon taking flight. Closing the door behind him, he stood watching her weave her magic spell. He knew from the first she felt his presence. And he knew this dance was for him and him alone.

Finally, when the ache hovered in his throat like a violent scream needing release, he heeded the call of passion, crossing the room and shedding his coat at the same time. When he stood before her, she slowed, meeting his eyes the way she never had the Baby Dolls' customers. Without a word, she eased one sleeve of her outfit off her shoulder and down her arm.

A lifetime of need fell on Nate. He'd loved this woman forever, and she belonged to him at last.

They stared at each other until the last barrier fell to the floor. Nate reached for her first, acutely aware he couldn't hold on. It had to be now. Everything had to happen right now.

A single kiss, and he carried her to the bed. She pulled at his clothes, succeeding in opening his pants only through blind luck.

"Now," she whispered urgently.

Her expression mirrored his own recklessness. They rode it like two organisms feeding off each others' instinct for survival. Even when they both reached the pinnacle, they couldn't allow it to be over. They'd waited too long, needed too much.

His soft words "I love you" set the desperation off inside her, fiercer than anything Nate had ever experienced. He gave her that freedom and took the same in exchange.

Later, when moonlight joined Nate in paying homage to his wife, he saw tears in her eyes and acknowledged again his mother had always been wrong about Rori. She'd never given herself to anyone like this before. She'd been with other men, just as Nate had been with another woman. But she'd never given any man her heart. She'd always belonged to Nate.

And now that was official. His mother would have to come to terms with it because, as he'd informed her outside of Pastor Mason's house, if she didn't accept Rori she didn't accept him. Even without the clarification, his mother interpreted his threat correctly. If she didn't accept Rori, then she'd never see him—or Andrea—again. It had to be that way.

Rori glanced up at him as they lay silently entwined. "This is what you were afraid would happen the first time you kissed me, isn't it? That's why you backed off—"

*And went to Jenna* was implied. And correct.

Nate smiled slightly, drawing his thumb lightly across her bottom lip. "One kiss with you...and I want it all. Body, heart, soul."

She nodded, then whispered "Only with you."

"And never enough," he added, taking her mouth again.

## Chapter Twenty–Eight

RORI SLIPPED inside her apartment again, to find Nate still asleep. It wasn't a relief, yet it had to be. Just this box, one more, and she'd hit the road.

Even she didn't have a clue where she'd go. She just knew she couldn't stay here, anywhere near Nate and Andrea. She wasn't sure what she'd say to Annmarie. Or Zak. Just that she'd visit them when she could.

She had her money, the money she'd saved and planned to put into Charlene's—*her*—dance school. She'd hire Courtney to do PR, at least until she graduated college. She'd bring Julius back to its former glory, and bring back the joy of dance...

But now she had to concede dreams didn't come true. What made her believe they did to begin with?

She made love with Nate and said goodbye at the same time. When he woke, she'd be gone and...

Nate sat up unexpectedly in the bed, combing his hair back with both hands. Her entire body reacted to him.

"Hey, you didn't have to do all that yourself. I thought we'd move you into the house this

weekend."

She stood stock still, completely unsure how to handle this. She'd wanted to steal away without a word. Let him draw whatever conclusions he wanted to.

*You knew you'd never get away without telling him you want out... You want out of the cage. You want out of a marriage with someone who believes you'll never compare to his first wife, someone who'll be embarrassed to introduce you to his parishioners, someone who doesn't trust you with his daughter...or with old boyfriends.*

"It's not gonna work," she blurted, feeling she'd tainted the magic they made in this room. She couldn't stop though. Not even when the truth came over Nate like a cloud covering the sun. "I deserve more. More trust, more love, more...respect. I'm not perfect. I haven't lived a godly life, and I can't be Jenna. But I love you. I always have, I always will. And I love Andrea like she's my own--"

A sob broke over her words, and she turned away from him, rushing over to the final box of her few possessions.

Nate got up, stumbling into his pants. Rori couldn't stick around. Nothing felt right about this, and yet she knew if she stayed it'd be just as wrong.

He caught up with her in the hall. "So you're running away again?" he shouted from her

doorway. "That's how you get what you deserve?" He shook his head angrily. "Well, at least you're punishing the right person this time. But if you run away, you better know..." He swallowed with obvious difficulty. "You'll kill me."

Unable to find any reason for his last words, she murmured, "You're pretty good at bailing on me too."

"I know I am. And I know I don't deserve your forgiveness, but I'm asking for it just like your father did."

Could she give him unconditional forgiveness the way she did her father?

"I know you'd never get involved with Brett Foxx again. And I know you're not Jenna. I don't want you to be Jenna. I want you to be you. I want you to be the mother Andrea needs." He paused, glancing unseeingly into the small box of CDs she held. "I think you are everything she needs. Everything I need."

"Then why did you...? This marriage was *wrong*. Everything is wrong."

He squinted his eyes almost as if her words confused him...or shocked him. "You... We made love... You're not on birth control, are you?"

Rori couldn't speak. She didn't need to. She'd thrown her pills away after she left Brett and not simply because she hadn't been able to afford them.

"So why did you do that when you could get pregnant? Could you really run away and take that risk?"

She hadn't thought that far ahead. Had she been trying to punish Nate by hurting herself again?

"So what can I do? You don't believe I love you, even when it was always you. Even when I had Jenna, it was you I belonged to. In my heart, I never let you go. Do you want me to prove that to you?"

She didn't believe he *could* prove it. And yet his need to do just that made his expression intense. And why did she so desperately want him to find a way to prove it?

He stepped closer and took hold of her arm. "Come home with me. Give me the chance to prove you're the only woman in my heart—past, present and future."

"How?"

"Let me show you something. And if you still don't believe me—"

He didn't say he'd let her go, and she didn't believe he would—even if only as a matter of pride. But her heart wouldn't allow her to deny him the chance to prove his love. Not when she'd wanted that very thing all her life.



THEY TOOK her truck; he drove after she secured her possession in the bed of her truck with a tarp fastened around the sides.

She glanced at him a few times and felt a full-body flush of heat steal over her. God, the things they'd done...the things *he'd* done. She'd wanted Nathan Jovanovich for as long as she could remember. All the fantasies had come to life, more potent and more addictive. A part of her wondered if he'd be conservative in the bedroom, the way she assumed he was in other areas. She'd been with other men—so-called wild men. Nate put them all to shame.

But she'd realized it had nothing to do with those other men and everything to do with Nate. *He* was the only man she could love, the only one who could love her. He was the only one she responded to.

At his house, she walked in the living room with him, but couldn't get herself to follow when he continued on to his bedroom.

The house was quiet. She glanced at the clock positioned between two rows of bookshelves against the wall. And then she noticed something. Something *missing*.

The photos. Photos of Jenna, of Nate and Jenna. They were gone, leaving decidedly forlorn empty spaces behind.

"You...took them down," she whispered in shock at his return.

He followed her gaze. "I packed everything of hers for Andrea. It was past time."

Had he done it in response to something she'd said? An implication? Or because he'd intended to make their marriage real?

"Is this what you wanted me to see? Is this your proof?"

His gaze held hers steadily. "It's part of it. But I think in the end it wouldn't be enough to make you believe in me."

When he held out his hand to her, Rori saw an envelope in it. It was an old envelope, a little battered, ragged around the edges, and obviously handled often.

"What is this?" she asked warily.

"The letter."

He said "the" as if it was a definite artifact of history. Their history.

"This is the letter I wrote after you ran away. I planned to hand deliver it to you or, at the very least, send it to you once I found out where you were."

He took her hand and placed the envelope in it.

"You never did," she said softly. No address, no name anywhere on the small package.

Nodding, he shoved his hands in his pockets. "I never did. The truth is, I went over to

your father's to demand where you were and how I could find you. But he convinced me you'd never come back with me. That you wanted to be free of him and of me. He told me you could never be happy with somebody like me."

He shook his head when she started to speak. "Don't blame him. *I* believed him. I let him convince me you didn't run away because I hurt you, but because you planned to take off anyway."

Instead of facing him, she stared at the envelope. Had Jenna seen it? Why did he even keep it?

"You really believed that?"

A rustle of clothing, and he came nearer to her. "I don't know if I did or not. It just hit me where I was most vulnerable. All my life, I was never sure you felt the same about me. That I was what you wanted. I took the easy way because I was scared of how I felt, how you might not have really felt for me."

Too late to be hurt he hadn't come after her. She'd been so shattered, needed to protect herself so desperately back then, she couldn't be sure she would have gone home with him. She probably would have given her virginity to Brett a lot sooner, thinking she hurt Nate instead of only herself.

"Open it," Nate invited softly.

She did because there was simply no way to deny how much she wanted proof Nate belonged to her, from the very beginning and forever.

The mere recognition of his handwriting as a teenager brought tears to her eyes. His compact letters so carefully written, like he didn't want to waste any space. She used to tease him about needing a magnifying glass to read anything he wrote.

Her name was written unusually large at the top.

*Rori—*

*I've told you everything there is to know about me—except that you're the only girl I've ever loved and no one can ever take your place.*

*I don't know why you left. Part of me hopes it's because of me and part of me dreads that's the reason. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I made you believe I want Jenna. I love her but just as a friend. If I marry her, she'll never have my heart. Not the way you do. You're my best friend. You're my fantasy.*

*I told you how I feel called to be a minister like your dad, but I know now that I can serve the Lord in a layman capacity too. As long as we're together, I think everything will be OK. We can get married as soon as we graduate. We can do anything you want to.*

*I love you. Please come back and tell me you love me too.*

The letter made her cry. But what moved her more than anything was the closing. He'd underlined "Forever Yours" half a dozen times before signing his name.

"I kept it with me, in my pocket Bible, the one I carried here,——" He put a hand to his heart. "—from the time I wrote it until Jenna died. Then I took it out without thinking about why. But I know now I did it because I didn't have to hide it anymore. Not even from myself."

Rori gave in to a whimper, moving into his arms. She couldn't have left him. She'd packed her truck, taking as much time as she could, praying to God he'd wake up and talk her out of it.

"How could he do that? How could he keep us apart like that?"

She felt him shake his head as he held her tightly nixed in below his chin. "It wasn't just him. He loved you and did what he thought was best for you. We made mistakes too. But we've got a second chance to have faith in each other enough to make this last. Will you give me a second chance? Can you love me that much?"

When she looked up at him, the tension in his face hurt her.

"I love you, Nate. I'll stay with you forever if you want me."

RORI WOKE IN Nate's bed to moonlight streaming in through the window. She glanced at her husband, then heeded the call of the moon.

As she pressed her fingertips to the cold windowpane, she couldn't hold back a sigh. Of relief. Of contentment. Of hope.

In the morning, she'd move into Nate's home, she'd go to see Annmarie and tell her the truth. And she would officially become a part of this family.

*Thank you, Jenna. Thank you, Jesus.*

She'd actually gotten Nate's mother's blessing earlier. His mother called, asked to speak to her, and Rori took it (a little afraid the receiver had a bomb buried inside it.) His mother said in a calm, clear voice "Welcome to our family, Aurora. I hope you'll visit us soon so we can give you a proper wedding reception."

They'd made plans, and Rori had joked with Nate later about any number of gifts they could receive that could be weapons for his mother to put an end to all this.

"Hey, it's cold out there. Come back to bed," Nate's voice, rough with sleep, murmured. He eased back the blanket, making a place for her again.

Just as she was about to turn back to the bed, something bright in the sky caught her eye.

"Nate, a falling star!"

But it was too late for him to join her in the wish. "Don't you know it's good luck to wish on a falling star?" she scolded as she crawled into the heat of his body again.

He wrapped his arms around her securely. "It's better luck to catch one. And I'm never letting go."

\* \* \*

If you enjoyed *FALLING STAR*, look for Books 2 and 3 of the Karen Wiesner's Angelfire Trilogy:

*FIRST LOVE (Darlene Foxx and Jason Radcliffe)*  
*FOREVER MAN (Brett Foxx and Savannah "Savvy" O'Brien) 2001*

only from Hard Shell Word Factory

## **Karen Wiesner**

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