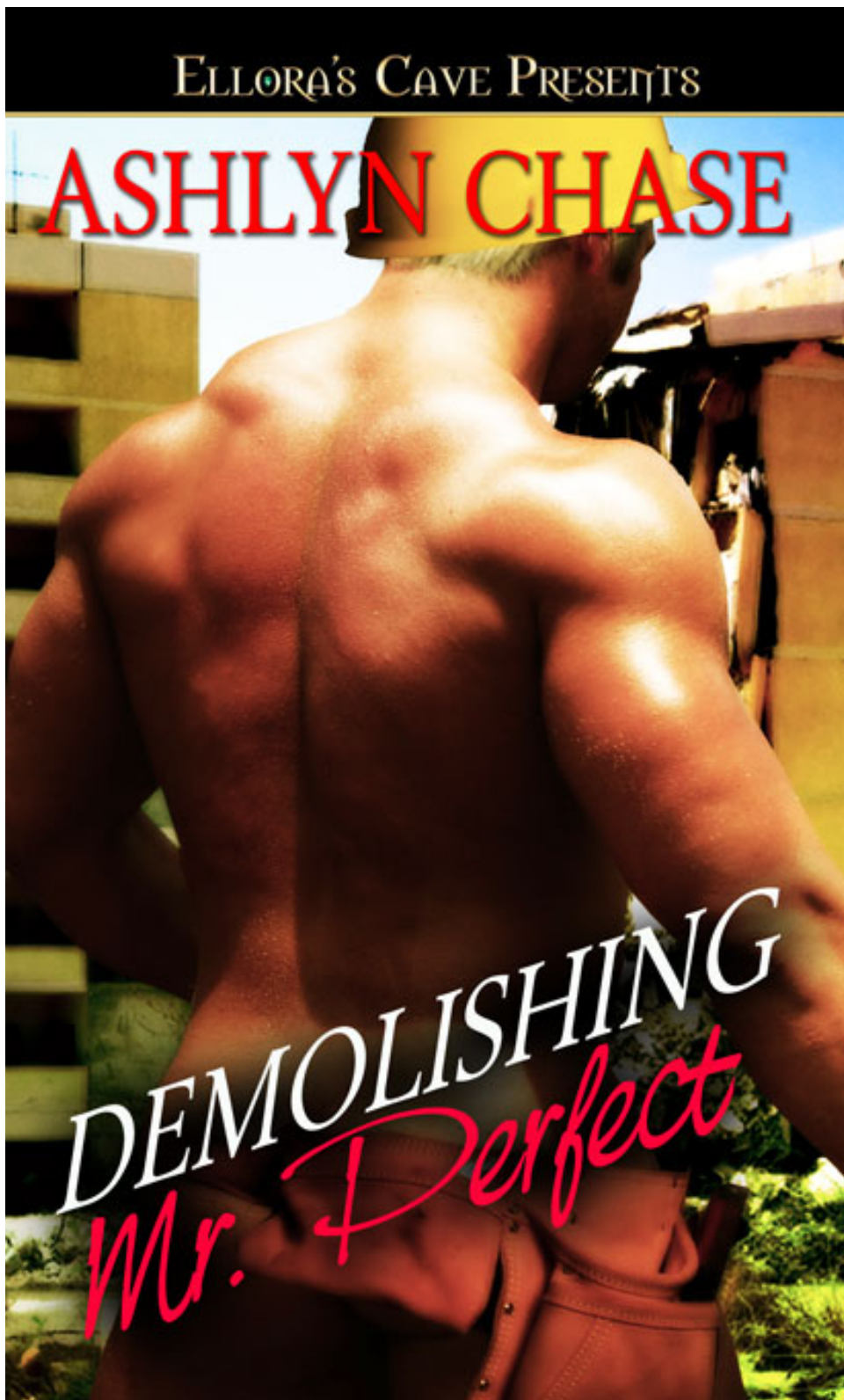


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ASHLYN CHASE

DEMOLISHING
Mr. Perfect



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Demolishing Mr. Perfect

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DEMOLISHING MR. PERFECT

Ashlyn Chase

Dedication

Dedicated to my readers, especially those who've taken the time to contact me and share their enthusiasm for my unusual stories. You make my day when you do that!

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Special thanks to my wonderful husband who inspires me every time he straps on a tool belt.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

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Chapter One

Another day, another humiliation. Natalie Watson wandered into the sperm bank like a zombie. When Liz, her coworker, offered a perky greeting, she ignored her, went straight to the break room and slumped into a chair. Dropping her Prada bag on the floor with a thump, she rested her head on the table. She was tempted to pound it a few times, but she could hear Liz scurrying in behind her. Sometimes Natalie was glad she wore her heart on her sleeve and people could pick up her nonverbal cues, but this wasn't one of them.

Liz sighed. "You got stood up, again?"

Natalie picked her head up off the table. Her long brunette hair hung over her face. "Morning, Liz. How did you know? Do you have psychic powers or something?"

"I don't need psychic powers. I just know what it means when you're slumped over the table in the break room." Liz, the clinic's ditzy blonde Licensed Practical Nurse, poured two cups of coffee, and sat beside her.

"Yep, I got stood up. Again!" Tossing her elbow-length hair over her shoulder, Natalie tried to suppress the urge to scream—not at Liz, just at life in general. "You know, I wish you were psychic. Then maybe you could tell me who's actually going to show up for our dates."

"Which perfect guy did it this time?"

"Donor Code 7945."

"Cut it out. You're the only one who memorizes their codes, and you probably shouldn't. So, was it the gorgeous Harvard University student or the MIT assistant professor with the cute butt?"

"Neither. They were last weekend and the weekend before. It was the intern from Children's Hospital."

“Oh, no. If you can’t trust a pediatrician, who can you trust?”

In answer to her coworker’s rhetorical question, Natalie shrugged and heaved a sigh.

“Why do you keep looking for guys in this place? There may be a reason they empty their sperm into donor cups instead of women, you know.”

Natalie chuckled despite her disappointment. “I want the caliber of men I meet here. These are the best and brightest Boston has to offer. “

“Yeah, we get the cream of the crop all right.” Liz elbowed her, but Natalie just rolled her eyes.

“Maybe right now they need a little extra money for student loans, but someday, most of these guys will be rich and famous.”

“And able to impress your snotty family.”

“Hey! Don’t talk about my family that way. We all blow our noses. I think the word you were looking for was ‘snooty’.”

Liz patted her shoulder. “The point is, who cares what your family wants for you. What do you want?”

Natalie propped her chin on her cupped hand. “I want a nice, intelligent guy who doesn’t leave me all dressed up with nowhere to go. These guys could be perfect. They’re incredibly bright and taking the time to do something wonderful for childless couples. I hope that someday I’ll have a child, and maybe with one of them. Who knows? I might give birth to a future president.”

“We always assume they’re being altruistic, but maybe they’re not. Maybe they’re being utterly egotistical. Some of them might like knowing that somewhere out there, little mini-thems are running around, becoming child prodigies, without them having the responsibility of raising kids.”

“I don’t believe that. These guys are too busy to raise kids, and, apparently, too busy to show up for dates. Half of them are on-call and get paged—or something.”

"Well, let's not forget that some of them are making four hundred dollars a month here. If they take you out, they might have to spend a week's pay. You believe whatever you want, but I'm getting tired of seeing those beautiful blue eyes of yours all red and puffy in the morning."

"Well, so am I." Natalie looked over at her friend and frowned. Liz had her pity face on.

"Why don't you change your policy of one 'strike and you're out'? At least give the cute ones a second chance."

"Nope. They know my rule. I hate being stood up. If they miss a date without a phone call, we're done. Come on, letting me down easy is the least they can do."

"Yet, they keep forgetting all about you! Look, Natalie, maybe these guys just aren't your type, no matter what you want to believe. I'll bet half of them don't know what a vacation is."

"My father was a brilliant surgeon, and devoted to his family. I know there's another guy like that out there, somewhere. He may be sitting in the waiting room right now."

"When is Donor what's-his-number coming in next?"

Natalie pursed her lips. "Monday."

"I'll bet he'll have some handy-dandy excuse all ready. Watch his eyes as he's telling you why he didn't call."

"I know. Down and to one side means he's lying. He didn't have to respond to an emergency and he didn't lose my number, not that it matters one way or the other." Natalie pushed her chair out, stood and grabbed her coffee. "Well, we'd better get out there. The morning rush is about to begin."

* * * * *

Shane Derby called over his shoulder to his men. "Clear!" He pushed the plunger and stepped back as the charges detonated. The decaying, four-story building imploded

and came crashing down in a pile of concrete, wood, marble, and dust. His men, many of whom were college boys working through the summer, cheered. The building had collapsed in on itself and had barely littered the street. A perfect demolition.

One of them yelled over to him. He removed his earplugs and smiled.

"Oh, sorry. I said nice job, Boss."

"Yeah, that was a thing of beauty."

He studied the site and pointed to a corner that hadn't quite come down. "We'll have to take the wrecking ball to that," he called over to his assistants. And we'll need to take down the abutting wall of the building next door brick by brick. I estimated about a week for the job, and I think that's right on target."

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Shane's attention. A cute lithe figure wearing a nurse's uniform bounded down the stairs of the building next door two at a time. Her long, shiny, dark hair fluttered in the breeze. She made purposeful strides right toward him. As she approached, he could see her cute face, but her jaw was set and her blue eyes were blazing.

"Are you in charge here?" she shouted upon reaching him.

"Shane Derby at your service, miss, but call me Crusher. What can I do for you?"

"You can start by telling me why you didn't notify the area businesses that you'd be blasting today."

"Not my job, miss... Miss? I didn't catch your name."

"Never mind my name. And what kind of irresponsible attitude is that? 'Not my job.'" She stood with her feet apart, arms folded, and as immobile as a brick wall. For a small girl, she had ample breasts that jutted over her arms and separated in two nicely delineated peaks.

Shane wasn't used to women yelling at him about his attitude or anything else. "Look, Miss never-mind-my-name, the building owner should have done that, if he

thought you needed to know. Maybe he thought it didn't matter. I was just hired to blow it up, and I do what I'm paid for."

"How arrogant. Of course we needed to know!" She took one step closer. "You just cost us some valuable samples."

This beautiful spitfire barely came up to his shoulder, but there she stood on the sidewalk, almost toe to toe with him, leaning toward him with hands on her hips. It would have been a menacing pose if she were bigger. Despite her anger, Shane felt an attraction to her full lips, cute freckled nose and intense blue eyes, as well as the passion and purpose this woman seemed to have. She was so unlike the empty-headed bimbettes he'd been meeting for the past few months. His masculinity stirred in his jeans. "What kind of samples?"

"I work at the sperm bank next door. They were donor samples. Thanks to your fireworks, two of my donors missed their cups and a third is so traumatized, he won't get another erection for a month!"

Was she joking? Could someone be putting her up to this? Her demeanor said she was dead serious. Shane reared back and an explosion of laughter erupted from deep in his diaphragm.

Her eyes widened and she glared at him. "You think this is funny? Some childless couple may have been counting on a donation from one of those men, and you think it's a laughable situation?"

Shane pulled himself together and took a deep breath before he responded. "No, darlin', but don't worry. Me and the boys will come over after we're through here and leave you a present."

The nurse clenched her fists and bristled. "How dare you! Do you think you could possibly measure up to our standards? We require college graduates or at the very least four-year college students with some sort of promising talent. You and your ragtag team would be turned down flat." She whirled on her heel and stomped off toward her four-story brick building.

Shane's amusement turned to disbelief. Arms folded, he called after her, "Perhaps I should have over-calculated and set off that detonation just a little to the left."

* * * * *

"I should never have let you talk me into this," Natalie protested.

Liz tugged her arm and dragged her friend toward the small doorway between two decrepit buildings downtown. Iron bars covered the dirty glass front door. "Too bad. The more I thought about your idea of seeing a psychic the better I liked it."

Natalie threw her only free arm in the air. "But I don't believe in this stuff. I was raised in a very scientific, intellectual family. There's no way someone can look into my teacup and tell me anything other than what kind of tea I'm drinking."

Liz buzzed the door and opened it when the answering buzzer sounded. "Well, maybe with an open mind, you'll learn something interesting." She shoved Natalie in ahead of her. "Don't be a wimp."

Natalie whipped around and glared at her friend. "I'm no wimp."

"Then prove it."

Natalie rolled her eyes and started up the stairs. She stopped halfway. "Who's paying for this brainless waste of a lunch hour?"

"We're going Dutch. You'll pay for your reading, and I'll pay for mine."

Natalie shot back with an amused smile. "Oh, so you're letting them peek under your skirts too?"

Liz shrugged. "Or into my teacup. Whatever..."

When they reached the top of the stairs Natalie froze. Liz reached around Natalie and turned the discolored brass doorknob, then she gave her a push.

Natalie stumbled into the sparsely decorated room, causing a half dozen pair of eyes to turn her way. She squared her shoulders when a brightly dressed, hunched woman with orange lips toddled toward them. Wide floorboards squeaked.

Natalie glanced around taking in the surroundings. Huge filthy windows lined one wall. Peeling wallpaper from another decade lined the other. What appeared to be a kitchenette from the Forties stood at the farthest end.

"Are you here for a reading?" the old woman asked.

"Yes," Liz answered. "A tea-reading and lunch. We have an appointment."

The old woman nodded. She led them between two tables where other patrons were having their futures foretold and escorted them to an empty table toward the kitchen. After they were seated the woman left them and proceeded to the kitchen where she took two delicate bone-china teacups off a shelf.

"I always get the table next to the kitchen," Natalie whispered.

"That's because you're always alone."

"Be quiet, she'll hear you. I don't want to give her any hints."

Liz glanced at the woman, and then back to Natalie. "Or maybe she couldn't have heard that blast this morning. She must be eighty."

"Listen Liz, I was having reservations before, but now I'm just plain unnerved. This place is eerie."

"Hush."

The old woman shuffled toward them carrying a tray. She set it on the edge of the table and placed a cup of tea in front of each of them.

"Do you have any milk?" Natalie asked.

The woman's eyes opened in shock. "Milk? My goodness, no. That would ruin the reading. Sugar is on the table." She placed two plates with watercress finger sandwiches to the side of their teacups. Clearly, tea was the main dish.

Natalie looked in the cup and wrinkled her nose as the woman walked back to the kitchen. "It's full of loose tea. They didn't even strain it."

Liz laughed. "Of course not. This isn't London at four in the afternoon. We're having our tea leaves read. Wouldn't you assume there would be tea leaves involved?"

Natalie sighed and lifted her cup. She blew on the hot liquid and sipped daintily.

The woman made her way back toward their table, saying, "I'm Zelda. Think of a question you want answered and concentrate on that while you drink your tea." She continued across the bare floor toward the door where they had entered. "I'll be back when you're finished."

"Thank you," Liz called.

Natalie murmured, "Zelda. A name like that is usually followed by, the amazing contortionist and tightrope walker."

"Look, she could be Zelda, the Great. Stop being sarcastic and drink your tea."

Zelda returned to them a few minutes later and sat in the chair between them. Natalie was straining the liquid through her nearly closed lips, so she was still working on her cup of tea while Liz had her tea leaves read.

Liz wore an engagement ring with a diamond the size of her teacup, so Natalie wasn't impressed when Zelda told her about her fiancé and their future children. Some of the stuff was fairly specific, but a lucky guess or two wasn't going to convince Natalie to modify her beliefs. And as for the future? Well how would anyone know enough to say, "You're wrong. I'm not going to adopt a baby from China?"

At last it was Natalie's turn. The woman made a couple of lucky guesses for her right off the bat. She guessed she was single and looking for Mr. Right. Not nearly enough to knock her socks off, although she could be gay and looking for Ms. Right she supposed.

Liz dug in her pocketbook and produced a pen. She took notes on her napkin for Natalie's reading. Maybe so she could wave it in her face if any of it came true.

Zelda turned the cup over and dumped the liquid, leaving the tea leaves clinging to the sides. "He's nearby. You'll get to know him soon. He's intelligent, but works with his hands as well as his brain."

Natalie looked at Liz and shrugged.

"His coloring is fair and he likes to laugh. Don't make the mistake of underestimating him. He's not perfect, but if you're willing, you'll see he's the perfect man for you."

"What's wrong with him?" Natalie asked.

Zelda looked up from the cup and studied Natalie's face. "You two could have quite a problem if you treat him with any disrespect or prejudice."

"Why would I do that? I treat all of our clients with respect."

"Maybe he's not a client," Liz interjected. She looked to Zelda as if she had a video rolling in the bottom of the teacup and asked, "Where will she meet him?"

Zelda shook her head. "I don't know. They may have met already." Turning her gaze back to Natalie she said, "Give him a chance. He'll surprise you."

Chapter Two

"What kind of cryptic nonsense was that?" Natalie complained as she and Liz walked back to work after their reading.

"What's the matter? I thought you'd love what she had to say."

"But it was so general."

"No it wasn't." Liz dug in her uniform pocket and produced the napkin on which she had jotted notes.

"He's nearby. You'll get to know him soon. He's intelligent, but works with his hands. His coloring is fair and he likes to laugh. Don't make the mistake of underestimating him. He's not perfect, but he's the perfect man for you."

"Don't you get it? That could fit any eccentric artist or scruffy sculptor, but that's not the kind of guy I'm interested in. I want someone who works with his mind, not his hands."

"There's that prejudice she was talking about." Liz elbowed her, raised her eyebrows and smiled wickedly. "I wouldn't underestimate a man with talented hands, if you know what I mean."

Natalie rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Okay, I get your drift. Hey, maybe I'll get lucky and meet a nice, clean, well-dressed concert pianist in the next few hours."

"I sure hope so." She must have caught Natalie smirking because Liz stopped and put a hand on her hip. "Hey, you were being sarcastic and making fun of the whole thing, weren't you?"

Natalie chuckled and resumed walking.

"Look, Natalie. You just never can tell... What you least expect could be the best thing for you.."

As they neared their workplace, Natalie shook her head at the rubble that used to be the building next door. "What a shame. That old building was beautiful in it's own way."

"I wonder what'll be going up in its place?"

Liz strolled past their building and continued over to watch the demolition crew that were knee-deep in debris. She called out, "Hey, do you know what's going to be built on this lot?"

Natalie's curiosity had her following until she came up beside her.

One of the young men straightened and called, "Hey Boss," over to a tall figure in the corner. The man approached them. Natalie could see his muscled thighs tighten underneath his jeans as he stepped over the wreckage. They could have been acid washed, or they could have just been covered with ash, but they fit like a glove. A tool belt hung from his lean hips and swung in a sensuous slow dance as he walked.

His face, with its strong, slanted jaw, was so covered in dirt that when he smiled, his teeth shone a brilliant white and his malachite eyes twinkled. He sported slightly lighter laugh lines furrowing through the dirt on either side of his eyes. He looked over at Natalie and tipped his hard hat revealing tousled blond hair. That's when she realized, to her horror, that it was the arrogant foreman from that morning.

"Do you ladies have a question for me?" he asked with exaggerated politeness.

"Yeah. Hi, I work next door," Liz said. "I was wondering if you knew what was going up in place of this old building."

"I could find out for you." Without waiting for an answer, he said, "It'll only take a moment." As he spoke he pulled a cell phone from a pocket on his tool belt.

Liz turned around, grinned wickedly, and waggled her eyebrows at Natalie.

Natalie gave her a quick shake of her head as if to tell her, no way in hell, and mind your own business.

"Liam! It's Crusher." He winked at Natalie. "Do you have any idea what you're putting up in place of the building I'm tearing down on Boylston?"

She couldn't believe her gut was clenching at the sight of his smile and his dancing green eyes. His voice was low and gravelly but in a sexy way, not like a two-pack-a-day smoker. But where did that phony nicey-nice act come from?

"Yeah? Sounds good. I have a couple of lovely young ladies here who'll be glad to know that. Thanks Bro'." Shane flipped the cover on his cell phone closed and dropped it back into his tool belt pocket. "Do you ladies like art?"

"Oh, I love it," Liz exclaimed. "Is it going to be a print shop?"

"Better," he said. "An upscale gallery."

Natalie spied Donor 7945 across the street, waving and smiling like nothing was wrong. Well, he was about to find out differently. "I'm going back in, Liz."

* * * * *

The office manager came out to the desk at four-thirty p.m. "Hey, Nat, we just had one more added. I know it's the end of the day, but he's probably finished with his paperwork by now."

Natalie shrugged. "If I had a date, I'd be upset, but I don't. Might as well make a little extra money in overtime. Maybe I'll be able to afford a male escort. I'll bet one of them would show up for dates."

Liz shot her a wicked grin. "Maybe it's Mr. Right. Ever think of that?"

"I doubt it." Heaving a sigh, she asked, "Where is he?"

"Exam room one." The manager shook her head and returned to her office.

Natalie attached the necessary signature papers to a clipboard, and wandered listlessly into the exam room. She shut the door behind her, glanced up, and couldn't believe her eyes. Still dirty from his day's work, Mr. Shane Derby sat before her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Watson."

Natalie almost dropped the clipboard. When she could speak, she asked, “You had your pre-screening over the telephone?”

He smiled, showing his white teeth. “I did, and apparently I passed with flying colors.”

“You’re a college student or graduate?”

“Boston University. I have an MBA. I own my own business. I’m disease-free, and I have excellent references.”

Natalie scratched her head. “You know you’re going to have to provide proof.”

His smile disappeared, and his eyes narrowed. “What makes you think I can’t?”

She shrugged. “Okay, I’m sure everything will check out. I just wanted to save you the trouble if something might not. It’s a rigorous screening with blood tests, a thorough physical, a background check...”

“As long as they don’t find the bodies buried in the backyard, I should be fine.”

She heaved a huge sigh. “Let’s get this over with.”

“You know how to make a donor feel as welcome as an ant at your picnic.”

“Why are you here? Is it because of what I said this morning?”

“Partially.”

“And what else?”

One side of his mouth curved up in a smile. “Well, I like a woman with spunk, and you’ve got spunk.” He roared laughing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I just meant I’d like to take you out and get to know you better.”

“Are you joking? You’re here to hit on me?”

“Why not? I understand that you’re doing the same thing with the donors. Only one thing you can count on with me is that I’ll never stand you up.”

Liz popped her head in. “Natalie, I’m leaving now. I’m late for a...”

“Wait just a minute, Liz!”

Liz shot a quick smile at Shane and waved. "Sorry, Nat. I gotta go. See you tomorrow." Closing the door, the traitor left her alone with someone nicknamed "Crusher" who might or might not have bodies buried in his backyard.

"I don't feel comfortable being alone with you. I think we should reschedule..."

Shane stood and walked over to her. "Don't make me use my nail gun and secure your cute, white uniform to the wall."

He pulled her up by her arms and before she knew what was happening, she learned another reason for his nickname. He crushed his lips to hers. Her anger almost choked her. Twisting in his arms, she tried to break free.

He held her securely, with one arm around her waist and his big hand cradling her head. She arched her back and he followed, supporting her body as he took her into a deep dip. The warmth of his mouth seeped into her, melting her. Her body reacted on a primal level. She reached around and clung to him. Then, to her own amazement she opened her mouth, her tongue yearning for his.

His plundered her mouth, and with the force of her own passion, she met his aggressive overture, doing more than tasting him. She wanted to devour him.

* * * * *

Natalie arrived late the next morning, but got there before the construction crew did, to her great relief. She hadn't been able to sleep well. That stupid tea leaf reading kept replaying in her head. She couldn't help wondering if...no, that was ridiculous!

"Good morning," Liz called over her shoulder as she scurried away from the desk.

Natalie found her in the break room pouring two coffees. "I've already had mine, thanks."

Liz glanced up at her with a furrowed brow. "You look like you need another. Did you get the plate number of the truck that hit you?"

Natalie sighed. "I couldn't sleep."

"Why not? Did a certain tall, blond, manly man keep you up all night?"

"No, of course not." She accepted the mug of steaming coffee. "Well, maybe."

Liz dragged Natalie to the table and chairs and plunked her down in one. "Tell me! I want to know everything."

"There's not much to say. As soon as you left, he yanked me up to his dirty face and kissed the hell out of me."

"He kissed you?" Liz gasped and grinned. "Already?"

"What do you mean, 'already'? Have you two enacted some sort of diabolical plan behind my back?"

Liz leaned back in her chair and chuckled. "No, but if we did it would have been for your own good. He just wanted to know your name and if you were single."

Natalie folded her arms. "And, of course, you told him – turncoat."

Liz shrugged. "So what did you do after he kissed you? Just sit back down and go over the paperwork?"

"Don't change the subject."

"Who's changing it? I want to know more. How was the kiss?"

Natalie leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. Clasp the mug in front of her, she relived the dream-like moment. "Would you believe me if I told you I felt weak and thought I was going to pass out? Of course that could have just been from the lack of oxygen."

"Wow, I'm impressed! Ever been kissed like that before?"

"Nope. I doubt I'll ever be kissed like that again, either."

Liz's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because I kicked him out on his keester." Natalie leaned back and sipped her coffee as if her reaction were a normal part of her day.

"You're kidding. He's a donor! Besides, that man is scrumptious, or didn't you notice?"

"It was hard to tell what he looked like under all the dirt."

“Stop it.” Liz slapped her hands over her ears. “I refuse to hear this. I’m not going to give you a smidge of sympathy the next time you get stood up. Not one bit.”

Natalie couldn’t hold it back any longer and broke into a chuckle.

Liz frowned. “What’s so funny.”

“I didn’t throw him out. I’m seeing him Saturday night. At least I’ll get to know what he looks like after he’s cleaned up.”

* * * * *

Natalie never gave an “unknown quantity” her address until she had been out with the man at least once, sometimes two or three times. But, that’s why being stood up was a risk. She’d wait at the restaurant or theatre until the last possible moment, and sometimes wind up eating alone or going home without buying a ticket. Either way, she hated the humiliation, but it was better than taking foolish chances with near strangers.

As she remembered the “bodies in the backyard” comment, she was glad she planned on meeting Crusher at a well-known pub in the Quincy Market area, Cheers. Of course, the TV show, Cheers was based on the Bull and Finch pub over on Beacon Street, but most of the tourists didn’t know that and probably didn’t care. The market carried plenty of T-shirts, hats, and memorabilia with the Cheers logo and they could shop while they waited for a table. The treasures would be taken home as souvenirs of their vacation. So they happily came.

If anything happened, even though nobody would know his name—hopefully there’d be plenty of people able to give a good description.

When Natalie arrived at the glass-enclosed bar, it was one of those relaxed, summer evenings, melting into a beautiful sunset that would become a balmy, seventy-five degree, starry night. So far, so good. She glanced toward the entrance, expecting to see a sea of unfamiliar faces. To her surprise, there was a face she recognized. Shane was standing by the door, waiting for her.

Maybe because he didn't blow up buildings on an emergency basis, she could expect this man to actually meet her when and where he said he would. What a treat. He also didn't seem like the geek genius type who couldn't match his socks, or would completely forget he had a date when his mind was occupied elsewhere.

In any case, Natalie had decided to give him a chance, and she was glad. Shane looked toward her, and when his eyes met hers he grinned. His light laugh lines crinkled in the corners filling in the tan where sun had frequently hit his face. He was absolutely gorgeous when tanned—and not dirty—skin showed off his bright green eyes and white smile.

She liked what he was wearing. He certainly wasn't as casual as he was at work. He wore crisp summer-weight gray slacks and a light blue shirt that accented his tan. He held a suit jacket next to his side. That surprised her.

"Hi," she said when he came over to her. "Been waiting long?"

"No, just got here." He bent down to kiss her, and to her relief, it was a sweet peck—the type that's socially acceptable in public. Thank goodness he hadn't kissed her the way she knew he could. But the night was young and she was hopeful.

"I have a table reserved for us."

"Reservations? Here? Since when does a bar take reservations?"

He laughed. "No, sweetheart. I reserved a table at State Street Towers for eight. But if you'd rather, I could cancel and we could eat here."

She might have objected to the familiarity of being called sweetheart right off the bat, but State Street Towers? That had to be one of the nicest restaurants in Boston. High above Boston's financial district, the view was phenomenal. As far as she was concerned, he could call her Natalie-Shmatalie if he took her there. Of course, a man who took her to State Street Towers wanted to impress her and probably wouldn't add the Shmatalie.

"No, don't do that. State Street Towers would be terrific."

He pulled a rolled-up, red-and-gray-striped tie out of his jacket pocket. "Good, because I hate waiting in long lines when I'm hungry."

She smiled as she realized another reason for his thinking and planning. If she didn't expect their relationship to go anywhere, she wouldn't let him spend that much money on her. Clever. Now, was she dressed for it?

He placed his hand on the small of her back and gently guided her out into the night air toward State Street.

"If I had known, I'd have worn something else. These slacks might be a little too casual."

"You look fine, but if you'd feel better, I happen to have a dress in the car."

"You what?"

"Don't worry. I'm not cross-dressing. It's your size according to Liz, and I have the receipt if you won't accept it."

Liz. The busybody, coconspirator was going to get an earful on Monday morning. "Why don't you take a look at it before you decide."

Was he unbelievably presumptuous, or unbelievably thoughtful? She had no idea how to react to a gesture like that. "I—um..." All she could do was stare at his innocent-looking face and wonder.

"It's totally up to you, of course," he was saying.

Natalie barely heard him over the questions whirling through her mind. How on earth would he know what kind of dress to pick out for her? What her taste was? Or was it his fantasy dress? Some kind of micro-mini with a plunging neckline?

In the end, she couldn't help being morbidly curious. "Sure, I'll at least have a look." As they walked, she crossed her arms and stared at the pavement. "I have to admit, it's a little unusual to have a man buy clothing for our date, but my curiosity is getting the better of me."

He shot her a grin. "Well, I didn't want anything to make you feel uncomfortable on our first date, including dressing for a bar when there was the possibility we'd end up someplace a lot nicer. I think you'll like it. I have good taste."

Moments later, they were in a parking garage heading toward a white Lexus. White? Isn't that an impractical color with the job you do?"

He laughed and extracted his keys from his pants pocket. "I drive my truck to job sites, but I like to have a nice car too. I belong to a luxury car club. Nice rentals whenever needed. I have other hobbies besides blowing things up."

"Well, that's good." She would have gone on to ask him what else he liked to do, but he opened the back door and reached for a hanger.

Out came a simple, elegant, black dress with a V neckline that didn't plunge too far and a hemline that, if anything, was long! She touched the silky material. It was the type of thing she would have bought for herself. In fact, if she could afford it, she might just buy it from him. She certainly wouldn't let him pay for her clothing—but something about it looked odd.

"What size is it?"

"An eight. That's what Liz said you wore."

"Uh oh. She didn't remember to say petite, did she?"

Shane looked surprised. He glanced at the dress and then at her. He must have realized it wouldn't look right, but he held it up to her anyway. "I don't suppose you could grow into it?"

"Tonight? Not likely."

The awkward moment was broken when he chuckled and shrugged. Did nothing bother this man? So many of the highly strung guys she had dated would have been furious with themselves for not noticing the difference, or worse, with Liz for giving them the wrong size. Shane hung it on its hook over the back window, and locked the door.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure you don't mind being seen with me, underdressed like this?"

"I'll ask them to seat us in the back next to the restrooms." He shot her that winning grin, the one she was beginning to recognize as his signature look when he was teasing her. Placing his hand on the small of her back, he strolled toward the garage exit seemingly as comfortable with her as he was with himself.

Chapter Three

They had been lucky enough to sit right next to the window enjoying an unobstructed view of the city as sunset faded into darkness, and a starry sky emerged. Dinner was unhurried, but thankfully, they found enough to talk about to avoid many awkward moments.

Their waiter kept their wineglasses full, and Shane hoped that wasn't the only reason Natalie relaxed and seemed to be enjoying her evening. He had discovered things about her and allowed her to know things about himself that he had never expected to share. He had told her he loved the symphony and played piano. She had picked up his hands and studied his long fingers and a smile told him she might be wondering in what other areas, requiring manual dexterity, he might be adept. The fact that she wasn't afraid to touch him was certainly a good sign, and he took the opportunity to hold one of her warm, satin hands and ask a risky question.

"Natalie, would you be open to the idea of a second date, and a third, and possibly a standing every Saturday night affair?"

To his astonishment, she grinned and squeezed his hand. "I like the idea of a second date, and possibly the rest, but I'm kind of hoping that the first one's not over yet."

Shane offered Natalie the mints that arrived with the bill and grabbed his wallet. Would she try to pay half? Would she think he'd "expect something" in return for such an extravagant evening? He could hope. There wasn't any convenient way of making that happen though. They both had their own cars, and she wasn't about to follow him in hers to a make-out spot.

Natalie excused herself to go to the ladies' room. He waited on tenterhooks, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. Something must be wrong. She was being altogether too nice to him.

When she returned and settled into her chair, she smiled warmly. "Shane, this was an incredible first date. I have to admit I didn't think it was going to go this well."

"I have to say the same. What changed your mind about me?"

She looked at her lap and chuckled. "I think it was when I realized how nice I've been to most guys, and how carelessly I've been treated. And here, I've been a total bitch to you, and you've treated me like a queen."

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms letting his satisfaction show. "The rest of my night is yours. What would you like to do after this, your majesty?"

Natalie leaned toward him and lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "Can you follow me to my place?"

Could he follow her to her place? *Shit, yeah!*

* * * * *

When he had finally found a spot to park, he strode up the hill to where Natalie was nervously waiting for him on her doorstep.

"Parking is terrible around here," he called out.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry you had to walk all the way up here."

"Hell, I'd park in Cambridge and walk across the bridge if I had to." He tossed her a grin and she smiled shyly. *Don't get skittish now, Nat.*

"What street are we on?"

"Joy Street."

"Sounds promising." He winked.

As she led him inside her townhouse and up the narrow stairs, she hoped they'd find joy in the evening ahead. Even if she wasn't ready for the whole shebang, it might be fun to be plied with kisses and feel herself turn into putty again.

Just as she opened the door, her downstairs neighbor appeared at the bottom of the stairs and called up to her.

"Natalie, dear?"

Damn. "Hi, Mrs. Green. Is everything all right?"

"No, dear. The alley light is out again. You know how we worry when it gets dark back there."

"Oh, of course. I'll take care of it first thing in the morning."

"But it's at night when we need it to be lit, dear."

Natalie took a deep breath and looked at Shane as she answered the elderly woman. "I'll take care of it now, then, Mrs. Green. Thanks for letting me know about it."

Shane smiled at her neighbor as if he understood the worries of the elderly.

Mrs. Green thanked her and shuffled back to her own apartment. Natalie opened the door wide for Shane to enter. He looked around.

"Nice place. Are you the building super?"

She chuckled. "No, although you might think so. Maintenance is only available during the day, during the week. When things go wrong on the weekends or at night, Mr. or Mrs. Green will call upstairs. If I'm home, I try to help. They're nice neighbors." She opened a closet door, pulled out a box of light bulbs from the shelf inside and grabbed a hanger for Shane. "I'll be right back."

Shane tossed his coat on the back of a chair and held out his hand for the light bulb. "I'll do it."

With a sigh, she said, "Ordinarily, I'd say 'no' and do it myself, but I wouldn't mind your help. It's a tricky place to reach."

Shane removed his tie and tossed it over his jacket. "Take me to it, then."

She led him into her bedroom and noticed him glancing around and smiling. She always made her bed and kept it neat, but maybe he was noticing some of the more personal touches. Her comforter was a rose satin with a georgette bed-skirt and shams. Her vanity held a tray of perfumes, and oddly enough, she hadn't used any tonight.

She drew back her white washable silk curtains and the white sheers. "It's out on the fire escape," she said. "I hate going out there. I hate the idea of criminals breaking into the building more, though."

Shane removed a cuff link and set it on her dresser. Natalie enjoyed watching men roll up their sleeves. She wasn't sure what it was about the simple act that made it so sexy, but she was suddenly glad she had allowed Shane the honor of changing the bulb for her.

She unlocked and opened the window next to her bed. Shane's tanned, muscled forearms flexed as he gradually revealed one and then the other. She nearly drooled. He must have seen her staring because his smile widened and his eyes sparkled. His movements slowed, becoming more deliberate, as if he were doing a striptease.

Natalie cleared her throat. "Um, I'll just go, and..."

"Hey, you're going to spot me in case I fall, aren't you? You know how rusty and rickety these old things are." His eyes said he had something up his sleeve besides nice, sinewy arms.

"Oh, sure. You shouldn't fall, but if you'd feel better, I'll hang onto you...or something."

He stepped through the window and winked. "Naw. Just be here when I get back."

She nodded, staring at his twinkling green eyes, and her throat went dry. Maybe she'd calm down and figure out what he was up to in a moment. As soon as he was out on the fire escape, she stepped over to her closet and hung up her sweater.

"Arghhh!"

Natalie whipped around to see white fingers gripping her windowsill. "Oh, my God! Hang on Shane!" She rushed to the window and leaned out.

There he was, crouched underneath it. When he saw her, he cackled his head off.

"I can't believe you did that! I nearly had a heart attack."

He was still chuckling as he stepped inside. "Sorry, construction humor." He took her shoulders and pulled her close. Enveloped in a warm, protective hug, she didn't know whether to forgive him or not.

"Were you really worried about me?" he purred in her ear.

"Yes, damn it. Don't do things like that to me."

He tipped her chin up and smiled into her eyes. "I can think of several other things I'd rather do to you." He swooped in and captured her lips. His finger traced her jaw and ear so gently, she shivered. He brushed the dark hair away from her face, cupped the back of her head and pushed against her lips harder. As she opened to him, her heart began to pound. His tongue sought hers and swirled with it.

She could feel his ragged breathing and his hand moving over her back. He stroked the length of her and paused to cup her bottom. He squeezed and she couldn't help her reaction any more than she could have prevented a landslide. Her stomach tightened, her womb clenched, and her breath caught in her throat. His velvety tongue withdrew from her mouth and slid to her ear as she moaned. She felt an airy flutter as if soft fairy wings beat near her. His hot breath whispered, "I want you, Natalie."

She tried to step away so she could breathe. She only got far enough to look up at his face. The heated arousal in his eyes scorched her. Blood flowed into her face and her temperature rose. "Shane, I..." Whatever she had been meaning to say vanished from her mind. His sexual magnetism drew her to him. He peered at her intently raking his gaze over her face down her to her breasts and back up. She closed her eyes and found his lips on hers again. Her heart turned inside out.

He gripped her body and clutched her to him, stoking her fire. Her breasts ached for his touch, and she ground her chest into his. Her feet seemed to be drifting, as if on a

cloud, and then she sensed herself leaving the floor. Her body was supine, completely given over to his control, and he carried her to the bed.

She felt his fingers plying the buttons of her blouse until each one popped open. His hand slipped around her back and unfastened her bra. She wondered how far she should let this go and then he cupped her bare breast with his whole hand, stroking the hardened nipple and she arched into it. Unable to help herself, she moaned into his mouth. She wanted him to do savage things to her.

“Natalie, honey,” he whispered.

She half-opened her heavy eyelids and stared at his moist, swollen mouth. She watched it move, but felt she was hearing him from far away.

“I’m going to get undressed. Any objections?”

She shook her head. “Please turn off the light, first.”

He grinned and unbuttoned his shirt while he walked to the light switch next to the door. “I want to see you naked before I turn it off.”

“Forget it.”

He shrugged and switched off the light. He finished stripping right there in the dim light from the next room. She rolled off the bed, pulled down the covers, and quickly shed the rest of her clothes. Standing in the doorway, his body a glowing silhouette, she could see the length and thickness of his arousal. She jumped into bed and began to pull the sheet up.

He was next to her in an instant and ripped the sheet out of her hand. “No. Let me see you.” Before she could protest, he ran his hands over her torso from her neck through her cleavage over her stomach to her lightly covered mound. She lowered her back to the mattress and let him possess her while she moaned, softly. “I don’t mind you looking at me like you’re reading a book of Braille.”

“Why are women embarrassed about their bodies? Females are much more beautiful than males with all the curves and softness.”

"I may have a soft spot or two that I'm not exactly proud of."

"Oh yeah? Let me find it." Shane proceeded to tickle every soft spot he could get a hold of as she shrieked and thrashed, trying to wriggle away from his torturous fingers.

"Stop! Cut it out. No more."

"What are the magic words?"

Natalie wanted to punch him and say the magic word was him yelling, "Oww." The man was merciless. "Stop it, Shane. I mean it." Her giggles had turned to gasps.

He eased up and said, "I'll stop, but you haven't said the magic words, yet. You know what they say about ticklishness?"

Her sides ached, but she managed to answer him, hoping he'd stop if she said it. "That it means you're horny?"

"Oh, is that what it means?"

He tickled her some more, but not significantly. Her skin was still so sensitized that she jumped about a foot off the mattress and laughed again.

"Hmm. You must be horny, then."

"If I say I am, will you stop?"

"If you say you are, I'll do something else."

"I am." She hadn't really planned to make love tonight, but she really was horny. Her center craved to be filled, and as she had just witnessed, there were worse things he could do to her.

He rested a stilled hand on her stomach and leaned over her. "You're beautiful, Natalie. Every inch of you."

Her pussy was dripping it was so wet. She reached around his neck and pulled his face to hers so she could kiss him. He suddenly became tender and rubbed his open lips back and forth over hers. Then he nibbled them and let his mouth kiss across her face to her ear. He nipped her earlobe and worked his way down her neck. She shivered and an involuntary moan left her throat.

His hand moved lower, descending from her tummy to her thigh. She wanted his mouth on her breasts, suckling. She arched as his mouth drew near. He took the hint and fastened onto one distended nipple. Sucking her soundly, his hand made its way to her apex and blood flowed into her quivering clit. As soon as he touched her there, her nerves short-circuited. She arched her back and yelped. Ripples of fire tumbled through her, and she tossed her head from side to side. He moved to the other breast and suckled that one just as thoroughly. He did a slow, circular massage around her clit, but didn't quite touch the magic, swollen bundle of nerves. She writhed in agony. It had been much too long since she'd had anything but a *wham-bam-thank you ma'am* and her cunt throbbed.

"Please, Shane...for the love of God."

He let her breast pop out of his mouth and leaned back, gazing at her face with a satisfied smile. His fingers found her opening and slid inside, stroking slowly in and out of her slippery center. "Please what, Natalie?" His voice was low and smooth, completely in control.

"Oh God!" she ground out. "What are the damn magic words? I'll say anything if you'll let me come."

"I want to hear you say, that you want me to make love to you."

"I want you, Shane!" Her vaginal muscles clamped his fingers frantically. Hot desire readied her to be swept to sweet release. "Take me there, please." His fingers left her pussy, tapped her knees and she spread her legs wide for him. She didn't care if he finished her off with his finger, his mouth, or his cock. She was ready to come with the slightest touch.

Shane reached for something over the edge of the bed. She heard the change in his pants pocket jingle and desperately hoped he was getting a condom ready. He positioned himself between her legs and poised himself at her opening. "Do you want me to fuck you, Natalie?"

"Yes...yes," she begged.

He opened a packet with his teeth and rolled a condom over his erection. Then he plunged his cock into her opening all the way up to the hilt, and her cunt exploded. She jerked and cried out. He rode her hard, grinding into her pussy. She was flying and her body was completely out of her control. Before she touched down, another orgasm rolled right through her like the other side of a hurricane. She spasmed under his relentless attention, yet still he thrust into her without letting up. She felt like she was drowning and gurgled her bliss.

If she didn't focus on giving him his pleasure, she'd lose her mind. Passion and desire gripped his face. He was deep in concentration, so without a word she met his thrusts with her own and clenched her pussy muscles around his penis. He pounded into her center and she gripped the sheets with her fists. Dear God, was she building to another climax? She arched her back right off the bed and knew she was going to come a third time. This time he crashed over the edge, grunting, taking her with him.

* * * * *

He held her tight and rolled over so that she was on top. He allowed her a short respite to breathe before he began smoothing her damp hair away from her face.

"Thank you, Queen Natalie."

She giggled between deep breaths. "Queen, huh?"

"Absolutely."

She angled her mouth over his and kissed him. He twisted her hair behind her head and held her there, deepening the kiss and teasing her with his tongue.

When he finally let her lips leave his she said, "Ick, I'm all sweaty."

He laughed, heartily. "No one's ever said 'Ick' to me afterwards. Am I doing some thing wrong, my sweet?"

"Hell no!"

"I'll take that as a compliment, then." He rolled her onto her side and slipped out of her. As he removed the condom and stood, her eyes followed him and traveled the

length of his body. He stayed there proudly in the dim light from the next room, letting her look her fill.

“Natalie, I...”

“I know. You have to get going. You have to get up early for a ‘thing’. Your best friend is counting on you to go fishing with him or something.”

Shane stood immobile with his hands hanging by his hips and stared at her, mute.

She propped herself on her elbows. “It’s okay. I mean, I understand.”

“Will you stop talking for a minute?” He saw her eyes open wide and wondered if she was offended, but so what if she was? So was he. “I’m going to the bathroom to wash up, and then I want to do some of the things to you that we skipped over.”

“Oh...sorry.” Tension left her voice. “Go ahead. I’ll wait ‘til you’re done and clean up too.”

He saw the hint of a smile. Shane held out his hand. “Come with me. I’ll wash you, and you can wash me.”

“How can I say no to that?”

Chapter Four

Shane wanted the water nice and steamy before they got in. Natalie enjoyed looking over his taut body every time he turned and tested the water temperature. His tan covered his entire upper half, from his neck to his lean hips. His member dangled nicely as did his generous sac.

She felt as if she was under some kind of spell. Maybe that tea leaf reader was really a witch and cast some sort of spell over her and the next man she met. She wouldn't doubt it. But if this was just a spell, she hoped it would never wear off.

Finally he turned and said, "The water's nice and hot. Have you looked at my ass enough?"

She gasped then giggled. "Never enough."

"Good." He grinned, then stepped in sending the forceful spray everywhere. Sheepishly, he said, "Looks like we'll clean ourselves and the bathroom at the same time."

"How convenient." He held his hand out to Natalie and she stepped in without worrying about sopping up the floor first.

As soon as she closed the shower curtain, he dropped to his knees and held her in place with his hands on her ass. "I'm going to clean the dirtiest part, right now."

She saw his tongue headed for her pussy, and said, "Wait. Don't you want me to wash the area first?"

"You nurses worry too much about cleanliness." He dove in and licked her clit right away.

She moaned and arched against the wall, giving him fuller access to her bud. She shuddered as he licked up and down her labia, through the folds, and even swirled his tongue in her opening.

"Oh, God."

Shane glanced up at her and grinned. "Never been cleaned this way before?"

"Never," she said, breathily.

He returned his attention to her clit and laved it over and around, as she stifled a whimper. Finally, he concentrated on the swollen nub of her arousal. She moaned out loud and liquefied, sagging against the back of the shower.

He inserted first one finger into her vagina, then another. She wove her fingers through his hair and reveled in the feel of having oral sex and being finger-fucked at the same time. Of course, she had experienced that combination before, but never standing with the steam of a shower adding to her own sensuous heat.

She rocked against his fingers, once, twice, then exploded. The thrill of his fingers filling her while rubbing her highly sensitized clit sent lightning bolts through her. She bucked against the shower wall, crying out.

"Stop," she begged.

When he didn't, she started to sob. He looked up and concern filled his face. He withdrew his fingers quickly and held her hips. "Are you all right, darlin'?"

She nodded and tried to hide her face against her shoulder.

He stood and wrapped her in his arms. "It seems like I can't do anything right tonight. What is it, Natalie? Tell me."

"I..." She tried to answer, but couldn't because she didn't know what the answer was.

Shane just held her, wrapped in his strong arms until she stopped shaking.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that was about. I do know that you didn't do anything wrong, though." She managed a shy smile.

“Well, I was going to turn you around and do your back, but...”

“I think it’s your turn.” She looked up at him through lowered lashes and one side of her mouth curled up. “After all, you’re a dirty, dirty boy.”

They traded places and Natalie knelt under the warm spray. She had cooled, so the warm water falling over her back, running around her torso and down her legs, felt heavenly.

Shane’s cock was already beginning to rise and stiffen. She took it in her hand and let her eyes wander over the satin, reddening skin. She licked around the sensitive head and slid her tongue down and around his shaft like it was a barber’s pole.

He braced one hand against the wall, closed his eyes and let out a soft moan.

She returned her moist lips to the top and sucked his firm cock into her warm, wet mouth. She pulled back, slowly, using moderate suction.

“Oh... I like that, baby.”

If he liked it, she’d do it again, and again...then more and faster. And she wouldn’t stop, just as he hadn’t when she asked him to. It would serve him right.

Shane groaned as she went down on him exactly how she had planned it. She glanced up at his face and saw his eyes roll. That filled her with deep inner, evil satisfaction. He was getting close. She sucked him hard while massaging and squeezing his balls. He let out a loud moan and she suddenly switched. She licked and sucked his balls while sliding her hands up and down his cock. She was driving him into a frenzy of need and she knew it.

She returned her mouth to his bursting cock and sucked hard and fast. When she inserted her finger into his anus, he groaned out loud and tried to pull her head away. “I’m gonna come, baby. I don’t want to do it in your face.”

She held him in deep with the strongest suction she had and consumed him until he growled and begged her to stop. When she didn’t, he shot into her mouth.

While his body jerked, Natalie milked him and gulped down every drop, making sure he experienced all the aftershocks.

At last he stilled, and she let his cock fall from her mouth. He gaped at her in amazement. He offered her his hand and helped her up. He pulled her into his arms and delivered a long, deep, almost reverent kiss.

When their lips parted, he when down on one knee in front of her and crossed his hands over his thigh. "I bow to you your majesty. You have slayed me, and I offer you my respect and devotion."

"Rise, good sir," she said. "For it is you who have conquered me."

* * * * *

The following morning, waking up in Shane's arms, Natalie realized she had just spent the most exciting night of her sexual life, up to that point. After having oral sex in the shower, they went back to bed for two more rounds of foreplay and fucking, once with Natalie on top followed by doggy style, then with both on their sides, facing each other. She couldn't believe how deeply he penetrated her that way. Score another one for long cocks.

Before they fell asleep, they had "the talk". The one a couple has when they want to know about their partner's sexual history when they run out of condoms. Crusher donated blood every eight weeks like clockwork. Natalie knew for a fact, the Red Cross tested all blood donations thoroughly and since he hadn't had sex for several months he was clean.

Natalie hadn't had sex for several months either and with most of her partners being paranoid, even though she was on the Pill and her donor-partners had been tested, they used condoms anyway.

Then complete exhaustion set in, carrying her off to a restful, rejuvenating sleep. She felt like she could take on the world this morning.

But with him, who knew? He seemed to find a powerful release each time, but she wondered if this was really as incredible for him as he made it seem. He had referred to others before her in an oblique way, giving her the impression that there may have been many.

He stirred and opened his eyes. Glancing over at her, his eyes crinkled at the corners and his mouth turned up, as if awareness of their night together slowly dawned. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Good morning my queen."

She had to admit, she liked her new nickname. She liked her new lover too, a lot. He pulled back the sheet and ran his hand over her torso, making her quiver. She had lost all shyness about revealing her body to him. After all, he had seen, touched, and worshipped every inch of it. He insisted she was beautiful all over, and, more importantly, he made her believe it.

He stroked upward until his fingers traced her jaw and bottom lip. "That was quite a night. Was it good for you too?"

She burst out laughing. *You must know I experienced complete ecstasy, multiple times, you nut.*

She stroked the stubble on his chin as he nuzzled her neck. "So did you enjoy yourself?" As much as she hadn't intended it, her insecurity came through in her voice.

He raised himself up on one elbow and looked at her with disbelief. "Lover, I don't think I've ever enjoyed myself so much. In fact, I wouldn't mind enjoying myself with you again, right now."

"First thing in the morning?"

"Why not? You've got something against mornings?"

She smiled and slipped her arms around his neck. "Not anymore. But you must be starving. Would you like some breakfast first?"

He nuzzled her neck and murmured, "If I can't have you for breakfast, I suppose."

She bounded out of bed, and wrapped herself in her silky blue robe that matched her eyes. Now, what to make for breakfast? She hadn't expected company. While she was in the bathroom, she took a mental inventory of the contents of her refrigerator and pantry and came up with something.

He was standing in the hall, naked, stretching like a cat. With his arms overhead, back arched, and leg muscles quivering, she stopped and stared. Every inch of him was muscle. Glorious, hard, rippling muscle.

When he relaxed, she cocked an eyebrow. "Showoff."

He grinned at her and she grinned in response, as if their faces were stuck in permanent smiles.

"I'll get breakfast started while you're washing up."

"I won't be long," he said. As they passed each other, they paused for a peck on the lips.

* * * * *

As soon as Shane had choked down the dried-out scrambled eggs and nearly burnt English muffins that Natalie had made for breakfast, he insisted she relax while he cleared the table. He eyed the countertop and figured it might be just about the right height. There was only a bowl of fruit in the middle. He piled all the dishes in the sink, snatched the bowl of fruit and brought it to Natalie, still sitting at the dinette table.

"Oh, no thanks. I'm full. I usually just put fruit on cereal in the morning," she said.

"Okay." He took a banana and peeled it. He ate it slowly, gazing at her beautiful blue eyes and enjoying the contentment he saw there. Then his appraisal dropped to the barely closed robe showing her cleavage almost to her waist and leg up to the thigh. "Not to be crass or anything, but I can't believe you don't realize what a beautiful body you have. Your breasts are perfect, your bottom, so squeezable... I love fucking you, Natalie."

She smiled and glanced at her lap. "I have to admit, I love fucking you too."

"So, do we have a standing Saturday night date? Rain or shine? No need to worry or ask, only confirm?"

She looked up at him with an expression that beamed ease and relief.

"Good." Shane pulled her chair out, grabbed her underneath her thighs and lifted her. As he expected her to do, she squealed and grabbed him around the neck.

Between giggles she asked, "What are you doing?"

Shane didn't answer. He simply walked to the counter and sat her on the end of it. With a husky voice, he said, "Lie back." He was already hard. All he wanted to do was get her wet and plunge right in...if she'd let him.

"But don't you have a little old lady to drive to church or something?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Not at all! I just wanted to be sure..."

"The little old lady can walk," he ground out. He unzipped and dropped his pants.

She gave him a coy look. "So does that mean I can ride?"

"If you want to, it sure does." He untied her robe and helped her shrug out of it.

Natalie reclined on the counter and Shane leaned over to lick her pussy. He went right for her clit. She arched and let out a long, loud moan. He loved that stimulating her bud, always so sensitized, made her wet almost immediately. Her cheeks deepened to dusky rose and she shivered under his ministrations. He grasped her hands and held them to her breasts. "Play with your beautiful breasts, sweetheart. See why I love them so much."

She ran her fingers over her pebbled nipples while he lapped and teased her pussy. She moaned even louder. Shane loved the sight before him. A sexy, sensuous woman, cupping, squeezing and stroking her own breasts while she writhed with every motion of his tongue. He inserted two fingers in her hot, slick vagina and finger-fucked her. Shortly, he poked another finger into her anus and concentrated his tongue on her clit.

She went nuts. She let go of her breasts and held onto the sides of the counter as if preventing a launch into the next room.

Her orgasm broke over her. She bucked and screamed while thrashing wildly. Shane delighted in watching her let go and completely give herself over to experiencing her own pleasure. He grabbed onto her hips, still licking her clit, and let her ride it out to the very end. Eventually, she whimpered and panted, "That's it. No more."

He let go of her and straightened his posture. "I'm afraid we're not quite finished. I have a ferocious need to fuck you now. But are you okay with that?"

With her eyes still closed, she said, "I'm a limp noodle. Do what you will. I couldn't stop you if I wanted to," and chuckled.

"I don't have a condom."

She opened her eyes. "I know. I also know we're safe from pregnancy and AIDS if what you told me is true."

"It is."

"Fuck me, Shane. I want you to fuck me."

"Are you sure?"

She held his gaze, her eyes lidded. "Yes. We're both safe and I love the feel of your big cock stuffing me. Fucking me. I want you, Shane. I want you to fuck me now."

Shane yanked her toward him until her hips teetered on the edge of the counter. "Drape your legs over my shoulders," he ground out, sounding hoarse to his own ears.

"Do it for me. I can't move."

Shane grinned, pleased with the idea of turning his lover's muscles liquid. He raised one shapely leg, laid its dead weight over his shoulder, and then the other. His cock was already nudging the entrance to her drenched cunt. He didn't ask if she was ready. He penetrated hard.

As his shaft disappeared, she enveloped the sensitive skin with her muscular passage, and he reared back, groaning. An electrical fire spread along his nerves. He built his rhythm up until he was pistoning inside of her.

“Touch yourself, Natalie.”

“What?”

“Rub your clit for me, baby. I want to see you come again.”

She hesitantly reached for her pussy and moved her fingers over her clit slowly. Her moans commenced almost immediately, building in strength as she increased her motions. Soon vibrations shook her all over. Her fingers on her clit stroked frantically.

A primitive guttural noise escaped from Shane’s throat as heated blood roared through his ears. He gritted his teeth and slid toward the sharp edge of climax. With the full power of his arousal, he pounded into her. Her inner body clenched his searing flesh. He roared out his orgasm as he came. She cried out and shook. Her cunt quivered and wept. Feeling as though he might pass out, he let go of her hips and braced his hand on the counter.

* * * * *

Natalie floated down the sidewalk on her way to work with a smile on her face Monday morning. Shane left her apartment about an hour after telling her that he had just experienced the most mind-blowing orgasms of his life. He had a regularly scheduled Sunday dinner invitation at his aunt and uncle’s house and offered to cancel, but she wouldn’t let him. She liked the fact that this guy believed in some predictability in his life, and she knew they would have plenty of opportunities for great, no, mind-blowing sex in the future. Lots and lots of luscious, lascivious frantic fucking. She wondered if the tea leaf reader saw that in her future and almost chuckled out loud.

Approaching the job site next door, she scanned the young workers looking for the tall, lanky, blond boss. When she didn’t see him, her mood sunk a notch. Her eyes downcast, she followed the walkway up the stairs and into the front door.

There he stood.

She looked up into his glowing, jade green eyes and they twinkled. He pulled a rectangular box from behind his back and handed it to her without a word.

"Is this for me?"

He leaned toward her ear and whispered, "No, they're for the other beautiful, brunette nurse I want to make love to every weekend."

She couldn't resist the urge to kiss him and planted a moist one on his leathery cheek giving it a sexy little lick at the end. "Thank you. Can I open it now?"

"Nope. You have to wait until I tell you to, unless you want to be scandalized right here in the foyer."

She squinted at him. "Why? What's in the box?"

He just winked.

"Tell me!"

"Not a chance. You'll have to be patient."

Now her curiosity would kill her all day. She stared at the box until an awkward silence settled over them.

At last Shane cleared his throat. "Let's just say it's something for two weekends from now, but you can give it back without opening it if..."

"No way in hell."

He chuckled. "I had hoped you'd say that. Listen, before I go, I want to be sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

He leveled his eyes at her wearing the most serious expression she had seen on his face so far. "I want to be sure you're not seeing anyone but me."

What now? Play it cool or tell him what he wants to hear and put him out of his misery? As she stood there mute, he placed his hands on her arms and stroked them

gently. "You see, Natalie, I already have feelings for you, and I don't want to open my heart only to have it stepped on."

"That seems reasonable. What's in the box?"

He leaned back and laughed. "Resorting to bribery, huh?"

"Maybe just a little."

"Answer my question, or I'll take back the present." Shane leaned against the wall, hovering over her, looking damn smug.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, you win. No, I'm not seeing anyone else."

"Good. Keep it that way."

He crushed her and the mystery box against his chest delivering a long, powerful, French kiss that took her breath away. When he released her, she saw Donor Code 7945 frozen in the doorway, gaping at her. She couldn't help the smirk that flitted across her face.

Gazing at Shane and in her sexiest voice she said, "I'll see you next weekend, lover."

* * * * *

Liz smacked a sterile collection cup on the counter in front of the Donor 7945 and said, "You know what to do," without her usual welcoming smile. Natalie winked at Liz and sashayed into the break room.

Liz hurried after her. "I hope that isn't some sort of guilt gift from him," she said, pointing her thumb toward the guy at the nurse's station.

"No, it's from Shane."

Liz raised an eyebrow. "So how was your evening with him?"

Natalie tried to sound nonchalant. "It was nice."

"That's it? Just nice?"

Natalie couldn't keep the grin from taking over. "It was amazing. The night and next morning were even better."

Liz beamed. "I told you!" and then nodding at the box, she asked, "What's that?"

Natalie frowned. "Something for two weekends from now, but I can't look at it until he tells me to."

"What? He gave you a gift and said you couldn't open it?"

She nodded, opened her locker, and set the box on the floor inside.

"Give me that," Liz demanded.

"No. He told me to be patient."

"Luckily that doesn't apply to me." Before Natalie could say another word, Liz had snatched the box and ripped it open.

It was the same gorgeous black dress he had bought for her, but with a note that boldly read, "Petite" pinned to the designer's label at the neck.

"Holy shit," Liz exclaimed. "It's a Stella McCartney."

"You didn't tell him I liked designer names?"

"No, I didn't. Maybe he noticed your Prada bag and figured it out for himself."

Natalie snorted. "I doubt it. He couldn't even figure out that I wore a petite. The dress he bought originally would have been enormous on me."

Liz laughed. "I guess he's a real guy, then. He probably wanted to impress you, so he just bought the most expensive dress in the store."

Natalie stared at the stunning black dress, in her correct size, made by her favorite designer. "What should I do? It's too expensive a gift for a date, yet I don't want to give it back and offend him."

Liz touched the slinky material and her eyes bulged. "I think it's silk. Put it on."

"I really shouldn't, especially if I'm not going to keep it." Sadly, she gazed at the dress of her dreams and knew that no matter how mind-blowing the sex was, she couldn't and wouldn't let him spend that much money on her.

“Why aren’t you going to keep it? You said you didn’t want to offend him, right?”

“I know, but...”

Liz shoved her toward the bathroom. “Just try it on. Please, for me?”

Natalie rolled her eyes, but closed the door to the restroom and gently removed the dress from the box. The minute she had it on, she knew she had made a mistake. It looked absolutely gorgeous on her. In the full-length bathroom mirror on the back of the door, she saw the flirty hem hit her right at the knee and the fit was perfect. Damn.

“Are you coming out or what?”

Liz’s impatient voice joggled her out of her trance. She opened the door and stood immobilized. She could tell by Liz’s expression that her first impression had been correct.

“Well come out here and turn around. I want to see you walk in it.”

Natalie took a few steps, turned and headed back toward the bathroom, but not before she noticed how beautifully it flowed around her body and how fabulous she felt in it. Why was he buying her clothes, anyway? Did he think she didn’t have any because she wore uniforms everyday? And why did she have to wait to open a boxed dress? He had her thinking it was lingerie.

Liz grabbed her arm. “You have to have this dress.”

Natalie looked down and sighed. “I know. Maybe I can pay him back for it.”

Liz nodded. “We’ll think of something. I’ve got to get back out there, but take as long a look at yourself in the mirror as you want. Damn, I wish I looked that good in any dress.”

Chapter Five

Shane had plenty to do and being distracted by thoughts of her every six seconds wasn't helping. Having Natalie right next door, yet not seeing her had been driving him crazy. By Thursday, it seemed as if he might go insane before Saturday arrived. He found himself saying, "What?" frequently when one of his guys asked him a question just because he was daydreaming – again. Soon he'd have to pretend he was going deaf.

It was as if his Natalie had an addictive substance painted all over her body. If he wasn't with her, he was obsessively thinking about all the things he wanted to do to her. Where he wanted to lick, nibble and kiss her. In what positions he wanted to fuck her. And outdoor sex. He wanted to fuck her on a beach or a grassy hillside.

Shane placed his hands on the small of his back and leaned backward to stretch his muscles. At this rate, he'd probably appear senile by the time Saturday night arrived. Well, he couldn't let that happen, could he?

"Lunch, everybody," he yelled.

The guys stopped working gratefully and wandered to their trucks to grab their lunches, but Shane didn't join them. Instead, he walked straight over to the clinic and jogged up to the entrance. Stepping inside, he scanned the area and noticed that Natalie's cute freckled face was missing behind the nurse's desk.

Liz looked up and smiled. "She's in the break room, there."

Shane followed where her finger pointed and sauntered over to the only door she could mean. He nodded his thanks and strode right in like he owned the place. Natalie sat at a round table, her back to him.

Chomping into a sandwich, she turned partway around and paused in mid-chew.

"Am I too late to take a beautiful nurse to lunch?"

She smiled but resumed chewing and held up one finger, as if to say, "Give me a minute."

Shane crossed his arms prepared to wait, but couldn't help noticing how her little nose wiggled slightly as she chewed. He'd have to tease her about chewing like a bunny rabbit sometime. *Damn Crusher. You've got it bad.*

She swallowed and took a sip of her water. "Is it Saturday already? Wow. That week flew by."

"I'm glad yours is going fast. My week's moving so slowly I'm afraid I'll be an old man by Saturday."

She chuckled as he pulled a chair around and sat on it backward. "I can't wait until the weekend, Natalie. I want to see you sooner than that."

"Well, I'm afraid it's too late to take me out to lunch. I'm more than halfway through this sandwich. For some reason I was really hungry today."

"Fine, let me take you out to dinner after work tonight."

She looked as if she might be considering it, then raised one shoulder in a half-shrug. "Can you wait until Saturday night?"

"Why?"

"Well, tonight I have a hot date with twins."

Shane's eyebrows shot up and his mouth went dry. "I thought you said..."

"I'm sorry. I really have to keep this date each week. They're quite a pair. Dryer's hot, but Washer is really steamy. They're the Maytag twins." She grinned.

"Oh, you're evil."

"Maybe, or maybe you're too easy."

"Well, I'd like to see you before Saturday so I can quiz you about your likes and dislikes since I'm going to cook for you at my place Saturday night."

A grin spread across her face. "Really? You can cook?"

"I'm no Julia Child, but I can make a few meals you wouldn't hate."

"How do you know?"

"My point exactly. That's why I need to see you before Saturday. If you don't like grilled salmon, I won't buy fish. Maybe I'll find out that you like Italian food and I'll buy what I need to make my delicious marinara sauce."

"This is an excuse, isn't it?"

"Best one I could come up with on the spur of the moment."

She scratched her head. "Okay, Shane. You're either in for a fun-filled night of watching my clothes go 'round and 'round, or we can grocery shop together. That's what I had on tap for tomorrow night."

"You can do laundry after dinner tonight, right?"

"You and I both know what will happen if we get together outside of work, right? My clothes will never get clean, and we will never make it to the store."

"So?"

Natalie laid her head on the table and softly pounded it a couple of times.

"Okay. I understand. I can get pushy sometimes. So here's what we're going to do. Saturday morning I'll pick you up and take you to Haymarket. That way I'll know what you like and can buy the freshest ingredients for whatever I make." He stood, feeling triumphant.

Natalie sighed. "I'm glad you back right down when you know you're being pushy."

"Yeah, I'm good like that." He kissed the top of her head and said, "I'll pick you up Saturday morning. Is eight okay?"

"Wouldn't you rather sleep late? Read the paper? Let me wake up slowly so I'm not all bitchy from giving up my sleep-in day?"

"Ten o'clock it is."

* * * * *

Shane stood in her lobby looking scrumptiously tall, tan and surprisingly clean. He wore khaki pants and a white open-collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Mrs. Green had let him in and she flashed Natalie a knowing smile before returning to her own apartment.

"Hello sunshine. Am I too early?"

"Nope. I'm ready." Natalie grabbed her purse from the hall table where she'd stashed it for a fast getaway. She jogged down the stairs, caught his arm and hurried him outside. Then she yanked him along the sidewalk for a few paces before he halted. When the big man stopped, there was no moving him.

"What's the rush? Want to get there before all the good snappers are snapped up?"

She smiled up at him. "Just couldn't wait to kiss you. Mrs. Green was probably standing in front of her peephole or the windows."

"Oh?" Instead of leaning down to kiss her, he scooped her up in his arms and lifted her right off the sidewalk. As he kissed her soundly, she experienced a surreal feeling that made her think that maybe this was what *being swept off one's feet* felt like.

When her sandals touched cement again, she sucked in a deep breath. Looking up into his eyes, she saw that they glowed as if he got the exact reaction he wanted.

"My truck is across the street. See that old, red heap? Do you mind being seen in it?"

"I'll duck down if I see anyone I know."

Shane glanced over at her and noticed her grin. He draped an arm around her shoulder and escorted her to his ride.

As they neared Haymarket in companionable silence, he asked, "What are you thinking over there, buttercup?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking you clean up nicely. How did you manage to get all the grime out of every pore like that? Even your fingernails are clean."

"Ah, it's a secret. Maybe next Friday you can come home with me after work and I'll show you how it's done."

"Yeah, we both know what'll happen. I just wanted to acknowledge the effort."

"It's an effort, all right. I usually show the guys I'm willing to work as hard as they are and by Friday, I'm pretty grubby unless I really do some preening. I don't want to get too complacent about dirt under the fingernails all the time, like some guys do."

"That's admirable."

"Which? Staying clean or working hard?"

She raised her eyebrows and looked right at the bulge in the V of his jeans. "Staying hard."

He laughed and hooked his hand around her shoulder to pull her close. The old truck had one advantage. Bench seats. She slid right next to him and laid her head on his shoulder. Her hand glided across his thigh and found his erection.

"Yeesh, Natalie. If you're not careful..."

"Yeah? What are you going to do?"

"Pull over and ravage you right here."

She giggled but drew back her hand. "I'll try to control myself until we get to your apartment."

"That sounds encouraging. Now if I can only find a parking space quickly and shop real fast..."

"Maybe you could let me off in front and drive around the block? I'll grab the closest thing that looks edible."

"Now that sounds *very* promising."

"I was kidding."

"Damn."

* * * * *

Shane took Natalie's hand and they wove their way through the open-air market. A stand of vegetables that gleamed in the morning sun, incredibly fresh and tempting caught his eye. Ripe, red tomatoes the size of his fist would be perfect for his marinara sauce, but when they got there, Natalie picked up a couple of shiny green peppers.

"Do you know how to make stuffed peppers? I haven't had those in ages."

"Absolutely, but I like making them with red peppers instead of green. They're not as tart."

"That does sound good."

The vendor grabbed two of his largest red peppers and turned them over. "I have the kind you want. Nice and flat on the bottom. These'll stand up properly for you in the pan. How many you want?"

"Shane said, 'I'll take those two and four more just like them.'"

Natalie cleared her throat. "I hope you're planning on eating five of those..."

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and chuckled. "I'll bring a couple of them to my uncle on Sunday. He likes my leftovers."

After paying the man, they moved on. Natalie had the bag of peppers grasped in one hand and held her purse with the other, so Shane wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Her warmth reached him through her light pink cotton sweater. Enjoying the contact, he couldn't wait to get her somewhere private where he could touch her more intimately.

A middle-aged woman in what looked like a waitress's uniform approached the couple with wide ice-blue eyes. "Natalie! What are you doing here?" she asked with a crisp English accent.

"Oh!" Natalie's eyes rounded, making her look like the proverbial deer in the headlights. She quickly recovered her decorum and exclaimed, "Marcy. Nice to see you. I'm shopping." She giggled and stepped out from under Shane's arm to hug the woman. "Well, I guess that's obvious."

"Who is this?" The woman ran her eyes over Shane, giving him an appreciative once-over.

"Oh, this is Shane. Shane, Marcy is my family's cook." Turning toward the woman, she waved a hand in his direction and said, "Marcy, Shane's my..."

What's the matter? She can't say boyfriend? Shane extended his right hand. "I wish there were a better term for grown men, but the label seems to be boyfriend." He gave the woman a warm handshake.

Marcy chuckled and said, "I think that's obvious too."

Natalie quickly asked, "So, Marcy, how's everything with you? How's your family back in old London town?"

Marcy rolled her eyes but grinned, giving away her true feelings for the folks back home. "You'll be delighted to know that Miss Wow has a new boyfriend! We're calling him Mr. Lucky, although the relationship is quite scandalous!"

Natalie leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Scandalous?"

"Oh yes," Marcy straightened and folded her arms, still looking pleased as punch. "Mr. Lucky is a younger man. Much younger. He's only in his sixties!"

Natalie giggled and shook her head. "Leave it to Miss Wow. What is she? Eighty-four? Eighty-five?"

"She's eighty-seven years young and loving every minute of it."

"What does her daughter think of this?"

Marcy waved her hand as if she had rolled her eyes. "Miss Oh-my-goodness is horrified, of course." Marcy winked at Shane. "She used to worry about her mother's tendency to cheat at cards. Now she *really* has something to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know her young friend, Emma. The one who keeps me informed of her every adventure?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well she says they went shopping recently, and Miss Wow insisted on going to an adult store where she bought a..." Marcy glanced around, then leaned in close and whispered something right in Natalie's ear that made them both burst out laughing.

As Natalie wiped the tears from her eyes, Shane said, "I hope you'll share that with me later. Sounds like quite the story."

Marcy nodded. "Oh, it is. I'm sorry to be so rude and leave you out of the conversation, Shane, but I'm sure I could not have said that to a gentleman without turning beet red."

He smiled and shrugged. "I guess I'll have to wait until Natalie tells me later."

"I'm glad to see her with someone so patient. What do you do, Shane?"

Natalie dropped her head and shuffled her feet, looking uncomfortable.

He figured out the reason why pretty quickly. Even though she seemed like more of a friend than a servant, having a cook meant Natalie's family had to be pretty well off. It also explained why she couldn't cook worth a darn. Was he supposed to be ashamed because he did manual labor? *To hell with that.*

"I'm a demolitions expert, Marcy. I blow up buildings."

Marcy raised graying eyebrows, said "Oh," and then focused her stare at Natalie.

"He owns the company," she added quickly.

"Ah..." Marcy visibly relaxed and her smile returned.

"Well, give my best to my parents, Marcy. Shane and I need to get some meat before the flies finish it off."

If she's ashamed of me, that's the only meat she's going to get tonight.

Chapter Six

Natalie admired Shane's taut ass while he jostled the full paper bag in one arm and fished his keys out of his pocket. After opening the door to his apartment, he stepped back and let her enter the foyer first.

"Very nice," she said, gazing around the one-bedroom luxury apartment. A surprisingly clean ivory carpet blanketed the place. His furniture reminded her of the man who chose it. Sturdy yet sumptuous, black leather sofa and chairs and a mahogany coffee table the size of a door. The ivory drapes along one wall shut out the afternoon sun.

"The kitchen's on the right."

Shane had been quiet while they finished their shopping and most of the way back to his place, yet she hadn't asked him if something was wrong. Now that they were no longer in public, she'd find out. Hopefully, she hadn't said or done anything hurtful, but something seemed to be bothering him.

She entered a typical galley kitchen, except that the curtainless window over the sink overlooked the harbor. She set her bag on the counter and wandered over to take a peek. She couldn't see the marina below, but that was because she was short. She did see sailboats enjoying a sunny Saturday on the deep blue water and an endless cerulean sky with occasional puffy clouds.

"Shane this view is beautiful. Why do you have your drapes drawn in the living room?"

One side of his mouth curled. "In case I want to walk around naked. I usually strip at the tiled entrance and toss my dirty clothes in the laundry room next to the half bath. That's the only way I can keep the carpet clean."

"Ah, so that's your secret. I did wonder..."

He braced one hand on the counter and faced her squarely. "Natalie, are you ashamed of me for having a job that means I get dirty?"

"Huh?" *Was that it?* "What are you talking about? Did I say anything about getting dirty? Because if I did, I'm sure it was a double entendre." She tried her best coquettish look but his stone-like serious expression didn't change.

"It seemed as if I wasn't good enough for you according to your family's cook until you jumped in and said that I owned the company."

"You thought Marcy judged you as not good enough? Don't be daft. She wouldn't care if you made mud pies for a living. She was probably concerned about what my parents might think."

"And what might they think?"

"Look, Shane, I'm not going to lie to you. My parents, particularly my mother, tend to think their children need to achieve greatness, and that includes marrying well. I have a sister in Beverly Hills married to a plastic surgeon. My brother is a bona-fide rocket scientist and works for NASA, and he's married to a former model. My other sister is living in Paris with an up and coming designer. I'm already the black sheep. I'm the youngest, but I should have become so much more than a nurse by now, at least in their eyes."

"Screw their eyes!"

Shane's outburst surprised her. She'd never seen him lose his cool and now his brow furrowed and he paced the ten feet of the kitchen floor.

"If they can't see and appreciate the person you are without all the bragging rights attached, maybe they deserve to be shaken up a bit."

"And you'd be just the one to do it."

He stopped pacing and stared at her, his jaw set and eyes narrowing. Natalie wished she could suck the words back into her mouth and swallow them.

"Is that what I am? A useful way to lash out at Mommy and Daddy for putting too much pressure on you?"

"Hell, no! Stop putting words in my mouth. Maybe you're just oversensitive."

"Maybe I am." Shane's shoulders slumped. "You're right. I didn't mean to assume... Can we start over?"

Confused, Natalie asked, "From what point?"

Shane stepped forward and pulled her into his grasp. "From the point where I feel damn lucky to be with you and you feel damn lucky to be with me."

Relieved, she said, "Yeah, we can do that."

"Good. Now let's unload these groceries so I can impress you with my culinary skills."

* * * * *

Natalie came up beside Shane and rubbed his back as he was setting the rice to simmer. "Please can I help?"

Uh oh. This sounds like a recipe for trouble. "I've got it, hon." He rolled up his sleeves prepared to work on the meal himself. "Why don't you just relax?"

"Because I'd like to do this *with* you, not just watch you."

She looked up at him, pleading with her beautiful blue eyes. He could feel his resolve slipping.

"Okay, sure. You can puree the tomatoes in the food processor."

She pointed to the right appliance, thank God, and said, "Just put them in there and turn it on?"

"Pretty much. They're washed. Just cut the stems out first. I'll brown the meat while you're doing that."

Shane retrieved the ground beef from the refrigerator and set it browning in the pan. As he watched it closely, Natalie dropped the last of the tomatoes in the processor

and it whirled to life. Suddenly she shrieked and Shane was hit by something cold and wet. Natalie held the cover to the food processor in her hand as tomatoes splattered everywhere.

"For God's sake!" Shane reached over and hit the off button.

Natalie cringed like she'd given a bad performance on stage and had been hit with the audience's tomatoey disapproval. Then she glanced down. "My sweater!"

"Quick. Take it off and I'll wash it. If we get it right away it should be all right."

Natalie quickly removed her gloppy red sweater that was previously pink and handed it to him. He rinsed it off in the sink, then put it in a large plastic bag.

"I'll wash up here while you're doing that, Shane. I don't want to accidentally stain your carpet."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. How are your pants?"

She glanced down further and found that her pants leg had also been hit. "Oh no," she groaned.

"Take them off too."

She unzipped her pants and let them fall to the floor. "I'm really sorry, Shane. I didn't know the top would blow off like that. I wouldn't have started it at top speed if I knew that could happen. I probably should have to build up to it."

"That's what all the other buttons are for, sweetheart. Did you lock the top by turning it?"

"Turning it? I thought it was like a blender where you just stick the cover on and push the highest speed to puree."

He rinsed her pants and shook his head, giving her almost nude body an appreciative once-over.

She looked like she was about to cross her arms, then noticed more splatters on her feet. "Where are your paper towels?"

He pointed to the roll hanging under the cabinet next to the sink and turned off the items simmering on the stove.

"I'll clean up your kitchen while you're getting the laundry started. Okay?"

"Fine by me." Shane removed his own white shirt and rinsed it. When all the clothing casualties were in the plastic bag, he said, "There's some of those antibacterial wipes under the sink. After you get the big pieces you can use those. I think they have bleach in them."

"You got it."

Shane took one last look at himself to be sure his shirt was the only thing he needed to wash, then took the bag to the laundry room.

It took no time at all to toss the clothes in the washer with some detergent and start it up. He thought to himself about Natalie's reference to the Maytag twins and pictured himself taking her atop the washer during the spin cycle.

He adjusted the setting to the much shorter cycle for delicates and turned it back on again – then he waited.

* * * * *

Natalie had cleaned up every speck of tomato juice, every seed, every peel in the kitchen, which now sparkled, and wondered why Shane hadn't returned yet. Was he upset and this was his way of dealing with it? Maybe he had to take some deep breaths before he could come back – but how many deep breaths did it take?

She peered around the corner of the kitchen into the living and dining area.
"Shane?"

When there was no answer, she checked to be sure her feet were perfectly clean and padded across the carpet, calling out a little louder, "Shane?"

Where could he have gone?

Perhaps he was waiting in the bedroom, ready to let her make it up to him. But why wasn't he answering? She tiptoed to the open door on the other side of the apartment and peeked inside. *Wow, what a beautiful bed!*

Standing proudly and facing the windows, a king size, well-elevated bed with a carved wooden headboard and footboard graced the room. The golden sheen of the wood was only interrupted by an intricate carved Celtic design. It looked hand-hewn and she wouldn't have been surprised if the Renaissance man had made it himself. She wanted to go in and admire it, but not until she located Shane.

Could he have slipped out? Maybe he was still in the laundry room and couldn't hear her over the washing machine. She followed that lead and walked through the pocket door into the laundry room. Natalie yelped in surprise as someone growled, grabbed her from behind, and lifted her off her feet.

The assailant bent her over the washing machine and yanked down her panties. "Dear God!"

Shane's laughter both relieved and infuriated her. "Shane Crusher Derby let go of me!" She struggled to turn around but couldn't. His big body pressed her against the gyrating machine. "Oh. Wait. That feels kind of good."

"Hold on to the back of the machine," he said in a gravelly voice. She grabbed the back panel and noted the cycle was set for delicates. *Wow, a man who knows how to treat a sweater.*

All thoughts flew out of her head when Shane's erection teased the crack of her ass and he deliberately slid it up and down seductively. He unfastened her bra, then snaked his arms around her and tugged it away. Natalie moaned when his big hands gripped and massaged her bare breasts. All the while, the spin cycle was doing its thing against her clit.

"How's that vibration, sweetheart?"

"Ooooh, iiiit's niiice."

They both chuckled to hear her voice vibrate with the washing machine. Then she let out a choppy moan as his fingers strummed her breasts.

He pinched her erect nipples, then rubbed them in slow circles. "Do you want me to fuck you right here, honey, or just get you warmed up, then take you to bed?"

"Yeeeeesss." She giggled again and Shane slipped a finger into her channel.

"Good, you're nice and wet for me. I'll make up for the lack of foreplay later. Promise." He dipped down behind her and came up probing her pussy's entrance with his rubbery tip. Finally, he penetrated her opening and sunk his cock deep inside.

They moaned together. Shane started pumping slowly and deliberately, thrusting in and out of her in long, even strokes. The delicious way he filled her then pulled back created a glorious natural suction and she trembled with every sensation.

"I've been dying to do this all day, Natalie."

"Yooouuu plaaanned thhiiiiiss?"

He laughed. "Not on the washing machine, but I'll take you wherever and whenever I can."

They lapsed into moans and groans of pleasure, abandoning conversation, for which Natalie was grateful. She simply wanted to concentrate on how good everything felt jiggling.

Shane must have read her mind when he sped up and ground against her. Quivering led to shivering. A deep, fulfilling climax was on the way, she just knew it. Clenching in her womb spread and intensified. She took in deep, sharp breaths as her bliss built to an incredible peak. Just as she roared into the onslaught of her climax, she shook uncontrollably and tried with only limited success to stifle a scream since the laundry room was near the front door.

Shane grunted and jerked into her as Natalie cried out with each exhalation, finally whimpering the last of her spent intensity. He collapsed over her and thankfully she

couldn't move. Had he pulled out and stood back she would have melted, boneless, onto the tile floor.

Chapter Seven

"Who knew cooking could be so sensual?" Shane filled the open, deseeded pepper shells with the meat, the small amount of tomato that remained in the food processor and rice mixture. Natalie stood behind him with her arms around his waist. She gave him an affectionate squeeze then let go and sidled up next to him. He smiled at her as she rubbed his back and watched.

"Are you sure you don't need my help?"

"Nah. Once I got the meat browned without spattering your exquisite naked body, I was all set."

Her hand wandered downward over his ass and she continued her one-handed caress.

His cock twitched and he groaned. "You know what? There is something you can do. I'm almost finished, and this has to bake for about half an hour. Why don't you go turn down the sheets and wait for me in my bed?"

"I guess you're planning to cook up something else in there?"

"You betcha."

As soon as she had pattered out the kitchen, he crammed the rest of the filling into the remaining shells as fast as he could without breaking them. The oven had preheated close enough to the desired temperature, so he slid the baking dish into the oven and shut the door. Setting the timer was the last task and as soon as he'd done that he jogged to the bedroom.

Natalie lay on her side on the clean, white sheets, her head propped on her hand. Her top leg, slightly bent, kept her balance but did nothing to hide her pretty trimmed pussy from his gaze. "Hey, cowboy. Want to go for a ride?"

"Is this the same woman who thought she should hide her luscious body under the covers in a dark room?"

"Yeah, thanks for helping me get over that."

Shane crawled in next to her and mirrored her posture, running his hand over her arm, down her side and hip, and slowly back up, all the while staring into her eyes. "I want to make love to you, Natalie."

"I kind of thought so."

He ran his hand over her again, his eyes following the path this time. "I don't mean fucking."

Her eyebrows knit. "Okay, now I'm confused."

"About before. I'm sorry. I'm afraid I wasn't thinking about anything but getting my rocks off. You deserve more than that." Smiling, he held her chin and leaned in to kiss her tenderly. He nibbled on her bottom lip, then her top. Trying to show her how much she meant to him as a woman, not just a fuck buddy, Shane held himself in check. As much as he wanted to plunder her mouth and crush her body to his, he wanted her to see the gentle side he possessed too.

He gathered her in his arms and rolled enough to rest her head on the pillow, but not so far as to rest his weight on top of her. As he'd hoped, she responded in kind. She ran her fingers through his hair and loosely cupped the back of his head while welcoming his kisses with her soft lips.

Shane hadn't felt like taking a woman in his arms and only kissing her for a very long time. When making out was all he could get, he settled for it. But this wasn't settling. This was wanting.

After what must have been the longest tongue-less kiss of his life, Shane was thrilled to feel her probe his mouth with her tongue. He pulled her closer as he opened to her and their tongues danced while their bodies melded together. Fervently kissing and holding each other close not only aroused him but was fulfilling in another way. A slight head-rush invaded his senses. He leaned back and focused on her face.

Her eyelids drifted halfway open, as if too heavy to open all the way, but Natalie held his gaze. She took in a deep breath. "I feel punch drunk. I've never been kissed like that before."

"I don't remember kissing anyone like that before, either." He resumed their lip lock and thoroughly enjoyed her warm mouth on his. After what seemed like the best kiss he could hope to have without giving her beard burn, he pulled away reluctantly.

A smile crept across her face and she smoothed the hair that had fallen forward away from his face. "You amaze me sometimes."

The timer buzzed from the kitchen and she chuckled. "I completely forgot about dinner."

He ginned, astonished that he'd somehow whisked her away from reality with only a kiss. His own perception, at least of time, must have been altered too. Never had a half hour passed so quickly.

A second later, the dryer buzzed. Shane rolled his eyes. "And I completely forgot about the laundry."

Natalie fell back on his pillow and stretched. "I don't think I'll ever forget that load of laundry."

* * * * *

Eating their meal reminded Natalie of the scene from *Tom Jones*, where he and the redheaded wench sitting across the wooden table from each other noshed as if they were ready to sweep the food aside and devour flesh instead of turkey. Except that Shane sat on the other side of a round, sage green, damask tablecloth graced by a single candle while he barely took his eyes off of her. Of course they were both still naked.

When she had spotted a bit of tomato sauce dripping from the corner of his mouth, she reached over, caught it with her finger and inserted her entire finger in her mouth to slowly and seductively suck it off. She thought he was going to toss her off her chair

and plunder her pirate-style. At any rate, they both ate a little faster and left the dishes right where they were.

"I've never had a naked dinner party before," Shane said as he stood. "I'll bring desert into the bedroom. Why don't you meet me there?"

"Won't it get messy if we eat in there?"

Shane lifted his eyebrows. "I think it may get messy anyway."

Natalie chuckled and took off for the bedroom as if she couldn't wait and the truth was, she couldn't. The way his eyes roamed over her body made her as hot as hell. It felt like he was grazing every square inch of her and her nipples hardened to diamond-tipped points.

She dove onto the disheveled bed and wondered how she could make herself more alluring this time. Deciding to give him a view of her ass, she flipped over, faced the door, and propped herself up on her elbows. That way her breasts would look even bigger as they hung down and rested on the mattress. She couldn't wait for him to suckle her highly sensitized pebbles.

Shane didn't take long at all. He was heading her way with a bowl of fresh strawberries. *Perfect*, she thought. She'd get his cock nice and juicy and then suck him senseless. Not enough to come, though. She wanted to fuck! If Shane thought he was going to take a boatload of time "making love" she'd have to suck that idea right out of his little head!

Glancing at her, he did a double take and halted in his tracks. "Whoa!"

"Is that 'Whoa', good, or 'Whoa, stop what you're doing'?"

"Both. I was going to take it nice and slowly, but if you keep looking at me like that, I'll just wind up ravaging you."

She gave him her best coquettish smile. "And what if I want you to?"

"I aim to please."

She nodded toward his hardening erection, "It looks like you've risen to the occasion. Come closer, lover."

Shane flashed his knowing grin and sauntered up to the edge of the bed. Natalie took hold of his cock and guided it into her open mouth.

"Ohhh, nice," he crooned.

Natalie swirled her tongue around his shaft, getting it nice and wet. Then she grasped the base and began to work his member with both her hand and suctioning mouth.

Shane closed his eyes, reared back and moaned.

That was the reaction she wanted. She hoped to get him so hot, he couldn't wait. She wanted him inside, stroking her G-spot. Her aching breasts also wanted some attention. She let go of his cock just long enough to flip over and let her head hang over the edge. "Fuck my mouth, Shane. And if you can do it at the same time, play with my breasts."

"I'm sure I'll find a way." He set the bowl of strawberries on the bedside table, then turned his full attention to the matter at hand.

Shane carefully inserted his penis into her waiting mouth and leaned over her torso. He reached her breasts easily and massaged them while pumping his cock between her lips. With her head tipped back, being fed, and having her breasts worshipped at the same time, Natalie felt like a goddess.

The rigid staff seemed as swollen as it could get and Shane's groans grew louder and more frequent. When he pinched her nipples and circled them with his fingers, she moaned around his cock and knew she couldn't take much more foreplay.

Gently touching his hips, she eased him out of her mouth. "I need you," she whispered.

Shane crawled onto the bed and kneeled over her supine body in the sixty-nine position. Without a word, he leaned over and feasted on her pussy.

Natalie gasped and moaned her pleasure and relief. The electricity shot through her at the pressure of his tongue on her clit already partially relieved her sexual angst. Her legs trembled. She wanted to come. She needed to come!

As if he understood her craving, he flicked his tongue over her clit faster and firmer. Her moans mounted to where she wished she had a pillow handy to stifle the noise. She quivered uncontrollably and slapped a hand over her mouth, stifling her outcry as long as she could.

Sensation mounted until it burst from her womb and rushed to every nerve ending, her release racking her body. She tossed her head from side to side and tried not to scream, yet sound escaped from her lips anyway. Her orgasm lasted so long it seemed white-hot, almost excruciating. Barely aware of herself, the noise she made reminded her of a wild animal howling.

At last, the climax subsided and her cacophony turned into a whimper. Shane raised himself up onto his knees and let Natalie topple to one side, panting. When she no longer felt as if her lungs were going to burst, she stared up into his handsome face.

"I heard about strawberries being an aphrodisiac, but I thought you'd have to eat them first," he said.

Natalie didn't even have the energy to laugh. She wanted to, but the best she could do was pant with a dumb smile on her face like a Labrador Retriever.

Shane eased off the bed, erection still intact. He took a strawberry from the bowl, popped it into his mouth and chewed slowly. "You need a break?"

She shook her head and chuckled.

"You sure?"

"Maybe."

He didn't have the heart to make her move, but he wanted to try a position he thought would maximize her pleasure. So he grabbed the bowl, climbed up and laid beside her. "Here. Eat. I made these for you."

She grinned, then realized she hadn't thanked him for dinner yet. *Oops*. "I never got around to telling you what an excellent cook you are, did I?" Her voice sounded hoarse.

"No, but I just got some kind of compliment from you. I couldn't really understand the words, but I'll take enthusiasm over mere words any day."

She would have slapped him, playfully, but didn't have the energy for that either. He poised a strawberry over her mouth and held it while she took a bite. A drop of juice ran out of the corner of her mouth. He swooped in, licked it off, and then kissed her neck as she chewed.

As soon as she had swallowed, she chuckled and asked, "Do you want to kiss or do you want to eat? Because I can't do both at the same time."

"How hungry are you? Because truthfully, I'm hungry for something else." His eyes traveled the length of her nude body.

"Everything's ready for you. Why don't you come and get it?"

Shane wanted her on top, but she hardly seemed ready for anything more strenuous than the missionary position. He could do what she asked. Just climb on and take her, or he could do what he really wanted to do. Make her feel thoroughly satisfied every time they coupled.

He glanced over at his overstuffed chaise and had an idea. "Tell you what, I'll be over there. You can relax until you're really ready for more, and then *you* can come and get it."

"Huh?"

He didn't stop to explain. He simply bounded out of bed, grabbed a sheet from the closet and unfolded it partially. He then spread it over the seat of the chaise and sat on it. He stroked himself, keeping his erection hard.

Natalie raised her eyebrows. "What are you doing?"

"Showing you what a considerate lover I am."

“Oh.” He was certainly comfortable in his own skin. Natalie wondered if she had ever felt that comfortable with her body – before Shane. She pried herself out of bed and approached him. “Where do you want me?”

“Where do you want to be?”

Instead of answering him, she climbed onto the chaise facing him with her knees on either side of his lap and positioned herself over his cock.

He smiled. “Are you ready for me?” His voice seemed deeper, more serious.

She nodded.

He probed her entrance with the head of his cock and circled her waist with his other hand, supporting her back. She rested her hands on his shoulders and sank down on his thick shaft, groaning in ecstasy.

Shane cupped her breast from underneath and teased the nipple with his tongue while she raised up a few inches and sank back down, holding his cock tight in her channel.

“That’s it, darlin’, go slowly.”

He captured her nipple in his mouth and suckled as they continued to fuck. She dropped her head back, shuddered and moaned. “That feels so good.”

He released the suction on her nipple only enough to reply, “Yes, it does,” in a husky voice. He switched hands behind her, moved to the other breast and suckled deeper.

“Oh, Crusher.” It was the first time she’d used his nickname and she didn’t know why it came out that time. It just felt natural. Every stroke of his cock in her body felt like the most natural thing in the world, as if he’d been shaped to fit her – perfectly.

He let go of her breast and cupped her head, pulling her face close enough to kiss her. His warm tongue swirled in her mouth where it mated with her tongue, meanwhile their bodies mated in a slow and steady rhythm.

Natalie had never climaxed without clitoral stimulation before, but something felt different this time. As a nurse she knew the clitoris was much larger than the little button on the outside. There was a whole hidden internal part of the organ that if stimulated in just the right way could lead to something magical. Something deeper...or so she'd heard. Something was happening and she wondered if—

A tremor began as an involuntarily shudder. It spread quickly and engulfed her whole body in sensation. Not the same screaming, shaking, out of control explosion, but an all-encompassing pleasure that almost effervesced. Her whole body tingled as if little bubbles traveled through her bloodstream.

“Dear God,” she murmured. “Oh, dear God.”

When the sensation abated, she opened her eyes and gazed at her lover. Shane smiled, as if pleased that he had accomplished something he wanted to do.

Soon his eyes scrunched tight and his breathing became erratic. He dropped his head forward, his blond bangs hiding his expression. She didn't need to see his face to know that his own satisfaction was imminent. A new sense of joy unfolded as his body quaked beneath her.

The power to bring a lover to completion and fulfillment had never felt so good, so right. And Natalie wanted to spend the rest of their Saturday evening together doing just that.

* * * * *

The following week went by a little faster since Shane's crew had changed locations. Natalie wasn't right next door and he didn't have to fight the urge to go over there every few minutes. The front-end loaders filled the dump trucks hauling away the last of the debris on Friday afternoon. He was glad they could knock off early since he wanted his whole weekend free. He hadn't told Natalie yet, but he was taking her to a charity benefit—in New York. He had pictured a romantic ride in a horse-drawn

carriage around Central Park first. Since she said she'd be seeing only him, he figured she'd be free too.

It was about time to spring his surprise and he couldn't wait another minute to see her. He waved to the dump truck driver as the last load was hauled away, brushed the dust off his jeans, hopped into his vehicle, and headed to the clinic.

He hoped she'd be able to go away for the whole weekend, but even if all they had was Saturday afternoon and night in the Big Apple, that would be okay too. He approached the desk and when she looked up an automatic smile lit up her face.

"Hi stranger. Care to make a donation?"

"I'm scheduled for my physical next week. Until then, I'll just practice."

She lowered her voice and said, "I don't think you need any practice."

"Yeah, and with you around I don't need any of those men's magazines either."

She grinned.

"I'm here to tell you I'd like to take you away for a mystery weekend. Go home and pack that box and whatever else you'd like to wear. Don't open the box yet, though."

A shadow of doubt passed over her face. "I, uh..." Biting her bottom lip, she glanced from his face to her lap.

He cocked his head as she hesitated and wondered what she could be worried about. She knew he wasn't a serial killer by now. She couldn't have another date. Or could she?

She heaved a deep sigh. "I already opened it."

He was relieved and disappointed at the same time. She ruined his surprise, but at least she didn't have other plans. "Oh." He tucked his hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, Shane. Liz grabbed the box, and before I could stop her..."

"Don't worry about it, hon. It would have been fun to see the surprise on your face, but I still have plenty of surprises left."

"Whew, I'm glad you're not upset."

"No. I don't get upset over little stuff. Can you get away for the weekend, though?"

"I didn't have any other plans, but a whole weekend together so soon? I'm not sure that's a good idea."

He leaned on the counter. "Why? Are you afraid you'll get sick of me or that I'll wear you out?"

"No, but I'm worried that you might get sick of me."

"Not gonna happen."

Natalie smiled, grabbed a clipboard, some papers, stood and walked around the desk. "And there's another thing we have to talk about."

"Uh oh."

"Nothing serious. Don't worry. Let's go to the interview room."

If it wasn't serious, why did she have to speak to him privately? This wasn't going the way he had planned it at all. She led the way and he followed, closing the door behind them.

Natalie was about to sit in the chair with the desk attached, but before she could, he pulled her upright and into his arms. He hoped that a reminder of their mutual passion would make her forget whatever she was going to say, especially if it was going to ruin his surprise. Bending to her lips, he placed a hand behind her head and drew her to him. At first he was gentle, just nibbling, and then he couldn't control his yearning for her another minute and crushed his mouth to hers. She responded viscerally and opened to him.

When he finally allowed her lips to leave his, she sighed. "Let's not start that again." She waved the clipboard still in her hand. "That's why we didn't get this paperwork finished the last time you came in."

Relieved, he chuckled. "Is that what this is about?"

"Partially. But we need to go over the form, so let's get that out of the way, first."

"Okay, nurse Natalie. Let's do it."

His eyes twinkled and he raised his eyebrows when he said, do it. This wasn't going to be easy, but she had to stay focused. One of her concerns about going away with him was the idea that she still didn't know him that well. She intuitively felt as if she could trust him, but if something did happen, she'd feel pretty stupid before being raped and murdered. Why add to the misery?

"I need to verify the information. Can I see your driver's license?"

Shane pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed the license to her without protest. She scanned his address and date of birth. They matched what she knew.

"Is this your only address?"

"Yep."

"Whew. No bodies buried in the backyard, then." Unless he meant the ocean!

He chuckled.

Stop it, Natalie. He was joking. He's always joking. "Okay, your year of birth is 1969?"

"A very good year."

She remembered with wistful nostalgia their experience with the sixty-nine position. *For God's sake, get a hold of yourself or we'll never get this damn form finished!*

"I can verify your physical description by looking at you, so we can skip that part. *Oh, but how I love looking at your green eyes, straight blond hair, and two hundred pounds of solid muscle.*

"What are your ancestral origins and religion again?"

"Irish mother, Irish father, and recovering Roman Catholic."

She smiled and nodded. "Education?"

"I already told you. High school, four years of college, and then two years of graduate school. My major and minor as an undergrad were business and music. I earned an MBA in graduate school. I plan to get a CPA and save the company the

expense of an accountant, someday. But even more than that, I want to marry the right woman and start a family."

Why did he say that? Those questions weren't on the form. Did he think she was the right woman? *Cut that out, Natalie. Just get the facts straight.*

"Your parents are in good health?"

"My father retired, but both parents are in good health. He was driving my mother crazy for a while after his retirement, but she didn't require medication." Again, he shot her that teasing grin.

She rolled her eyes and handed him the clipboard. "Okay, wise guy. Sign the bottom, and then tell me why you're buying me expensive dresses."

Shane signed the form with a flourish and handed it back to her. With a sly smile, he said, "I bought the designer dress you were salivating over last weekend, in a wearable size, because even though you're a tasty morsel when you're naked, I might like to take you to elegant places that require clothes. I gave it to you two weeks early so it couldn't be returned."

She shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

He folded his arms and cocked his head. "Don't worry. You'll learn to love that about me."

* * * * *

Liz had Shane's address, phone number, cell phone number and license number. Natalie felt she had covered herself well enough to go away with him for one night, but didn't agree to two. Leave him wanting more, Liz had advised.

Natalie still didn't know where he was taking her, so she prepared for anything. Scratching her head, she mentally ran through the list she had made and checked off everything that was already in her garment bag. Toiletries, casual cool clothes, dressy cool clothes, casual warm clothes, dressy warm clothes, one pair of casual and dressy shoes, one pair of casual and dressy sandals, sneakers, socks, pantyhose, stockings,

garters, lingerie, a bathing suit, and a spa robe. Finally, on top of everything, she lovingly packed the silky Stella McCartney dress that still took her breath away.

Shane had insisted that she keep it and refused to take a dime. She shook her head remembering how he said he'd take it if they broke up, and then jokingly said that the dress would keep them together through the tough times. What a nut. He was right about one thing. She was learning to love that about him.

He was due any minute, and she couldn't wait to see him. When the phone rang, she bounded into the living room to answer it. Maybe he had some last minute instructions that would let her know where they were going. She'd love to lighten her suitcase if she could get him to give up a hint.

"Hello?"

"Natalie, promise you'll hear everything I have to say, and you won't hang up on me." Shane's voice was deadly serious.

Shit. This can't be good. "I'll do my best."

"Please. This is important. You'll need to take down a phone number. Do you have a pencil and paper handy?"

"Uh, yeah. Hang on a sec." She jogged to the kitchen and grabbed the pad of paper she used for shopping lists. "Got it. Now, tell me what's wrong."

"First, here's my brother Liam's phone number. 555-2368. Did you get that?"

Frowning, Natalie jotted down the number. "Okay, I wrote it down. Now, are you going to tell me why?"

"Because I need him to come to the Charles Street jail and bail me out."

Natalie mouth went dry. She couldn't speak. Not one word would come out of her mouth.

"Listen, hon, I only get one phone call. I called you so you wouldn't think I stood you up. I was in an accident on the way to your place. When the cops came, I had to get my registration out of my glove compartment and something fell out. A switchblade

that I took away from my cousin's kid last weekend. I tried to explain it to the cop, but all he cared about was the fact that it was an illegal weapon, so here I am—under arrest.”

Natalie's mind was whirling. Was he telling the truth? If so, was it really his nephew's knife? Or did Shane use it on unsuspecting girlfriends? “I-I'll call your brother.”

“Thanks, hon. I'm sorry about our plans for tonight. Since they were out of state, I doubt I'll be able to go, but I'll call you as soon as I get out of here.”

She uttered a chilly, “Don't bother,” and hung up.

Damn. Just when I thought... Natalie slumped onto her couch and cried.

Chapter Eight

Shane ran his hands through his hair and slumped over his desk. Liz had called his cell phone and said that his physical had been cancelled, and due to the recent arrest, he was no longer eligible to be a donor. When he asked about Natalie, Liz had just said, "I'm sorry. I tried."

He wanted to call her at work, but he knew that wasn't the place or time for a personal discussion, and it would be too easy for her to say so and hang up on him.

Each time he had tried to call her at home, her answering machine greeted him. He must have left a dozen messages, and none had been returned. Instead of panicking, he let her have a few days to calm down. He was sure that once she realized it wasn't his fault, and that he had used his only phone call from jail to cancel their date instead of standing her up, she'd have to see reason.

Now what? He had to talk to her. The most recent job was finished and he was supposed to have a few days off before starting another one. He'd go crazy if he couldn't talk to her. Ambush seemed to be the only option.

* * * * *

Natalie approached the weekend with a mixture of dread and relief. It had been a rough week. She welcomed the long walks home on nice days, but today the weather matched her mood. Dismal. Still grieving over the loss of the relationship that had barely started, she avoided eye contact on the sidewalk and on the subway. Her emotions wouldn't leave her alone, forcing her to obsess about Shane, her rigid criteria for dating, and what the hell she should do now. He had treated her with all the care and respect she had been craving for so long, and losing that brought a lump to her throat.

Somehow, it had felt so right. She “just knew” she had finally found the perfect man. How wrong could she be? Could she trust her own judgment? Liz had been hounding her all week to call him. Maybe she was right, but it was probably too late now since he had stopped calling and leaving messages.

She turned up her trench coat’s collar against the misty rain as she climbed the stairs and resurfaced at street level. Following the cobblestones, she trudged up the steep hill to her sanctuary. She stopped, looked up toward her apartment through tear-filled eyes and sighed. Her home would be cold and empty. Yet it was private, and she had to have the good cry she had been holding in all week. *Damn him.* “Crusher” had crushed her.

She had just turned the key in the lock and stepped inside when Mrs. Green’s door opened. *Oh no. What does she want me to fix now?* A large figure stepped into the hall—too large to be Mrs. Green. Turning her head, she looked up into the sad jade eyes of Shane Derby.

“Natalie,” was all he said, but it was the way he said it that almost melted her icy heart. His voice was soft and raspy, as if needed a good cry too.

Mrs. Green appeared behind him. “I hope you don’t mind, dear. I let him wait with me instead of out in the hall.” She looked up at Shane and her eyes twinkled. “We’ve had a lovely chat. It seems as if you’ve finally found yourself a nice young man.” She winked at Natalie and closed the door.

An awkward silence followed. Finally Natalie said, “I guess you came for the dress? You’re in luck. It’s never been worn.”

“Keep it. I came because we need to talk.”

Natalie had never seen him so serious. She sighed as she led him up the stairs, wondering what she wanted to happen. Part of her wanted to run into her apartment and slam the door in his face. Another part of her, a much larger part, wanted to dive into his arms and kiss him like crazy. But she couldn’t. How would she tell her family she had fallen in love with a jailbird?

As that thought struck, she froze. Her keys in midair, she stood immobile in front of her apartment door. Have I fallen in love?

"Please don't worry," he was saying. "All I want to do is talk."

She processed his words slowly. Too slowly. She was still stuck on integrating her own startling realization.

He reached for her keys and startled her out of her trance.

"Oh, I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I just remembered that I have to be somewhere soon. I can only talk for a few minutes." There. That would keep her from falling into bed with him. She hoped. She knew she needed to spend a little more time thinking about this clearly. There was no way she could remain logical and dispassionate with him standing there all tall, tan, and muscular, smelling like expensive cologne. Her mouth began to water—or was it her damn eyes again? *Stop it, Natalie. Wait until you hear what he has to say.*

Shane took the keys from her and opened the door. He stood aside to let her enter, then followed and closed the door gently behind him. She set her purse on an end table and perched on the edge of her side chair.

He sat on the couch, leaned over the arm, and looked into her eyes with purpose. "I love you, Natalie."

Of all the things she had thought he might say, that wasn't one of them. She blinked rapidly, hoping not to cry. "But how is that possible?"

"I know what I want in a woman, and you're all of it. I want an intelligent woman with good, humanitarian values. Someone who can speak her mind and stand up for what she believes is right. Someone who knows her worth and won't allow anyone to treat her like dirt."

He stood and walked over to stand in front of her. Then, as if he wanted to put them on equal footing, he squatted in front of her and took her shaking hands in his. "But I also want someone who can give her heart and her body to me without

reservations, shame or regret. I want someone who can make me a better person because I want to deserve her."

Natalie couldn't hold back the tears any longer. Neither could she hold back her heart or her body. She let go of his hands, leaned forward, and melted into him. He grasped her and crushed her to his chest. She felt his hot breath in deep gusts on her neck.

"I love you too," she managed to whimper.

He pulled away enough to smile into her eyes. Then she saw that wicked twinkle in his eyes and the creases in the corners appear.

"What do you love about me?" he asked.

"Everything." The dam burst and she sobbed. Her family would just have to understand. She was in love with a jailbird, and that was that.

He stood and lifted her with him. Then he sat in her place and gathered her onto his lap. Almost as if she were a crying child, he soothed her with comforting words murmured into her hair. He stroked her back and placed sweet little kisses on her right temple, and then worked his way down her jaw, over to her upturned mouth.

How someone with such a forceful personality could turn into the gentlest soul she'd ever known mystified her. She hoped prison wouldn't change him.

"So how long do we have before you stand trial?"

He set her on her feet and smiled. "There isn't going to be one. Every member of my family came to my hearing and gave the same explanation. They each swore that I had taken the knife away from my cousin's kid that day and put it in my glove compartment until I could dispose of it properly."

"Thank goodness you have a supportive family who loves you."

"They're going to love you too. I want you to meet them."

"I want you to meet my family too."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I haven't told them much about you, but Marcy has. She called you Mr. Perfect."

Remembering how the Watson's cook had a nickname for everyone, he had to rear back and laugh at his.

"How about tomorrow?"

"I don't see why not. After all, tomorrow's Saturday, our standing date night."

"Soon I want every night to be our standing date night."

"So do I, lover. So do I."

About the Author

Kidnapped by gypsies as an infant, Ashlyn Chase was left on the doorstep of the Massachusetts home in which she grew up—at least that's what her older siblings told her. It seems that storytelling runs in the family.

Ashlyn worked as a psychiatric nurse for several years, holds a degree in behavioral sciences and has been trained as a fine artist, registered nurse, hypnotherapist, and interior designer. Writing is one career she wasn't formally educated in, yet by sheer determination she's become a multi-published, award-winning author.

Most writers, whether they're aware of it or not, have a "theme", some sort of thread that runs through all of their books, uniting the whole mishmash into an identifiable signature. Ashlyn's identified her theme as involving characters who reinvent themselves. It's no wonder, since she has reinvented herself numerous times. Finally content with her life, she lives in beautiful New Hampshire with her true-life hero husband and a spoiled brat cat.

Ashlyn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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