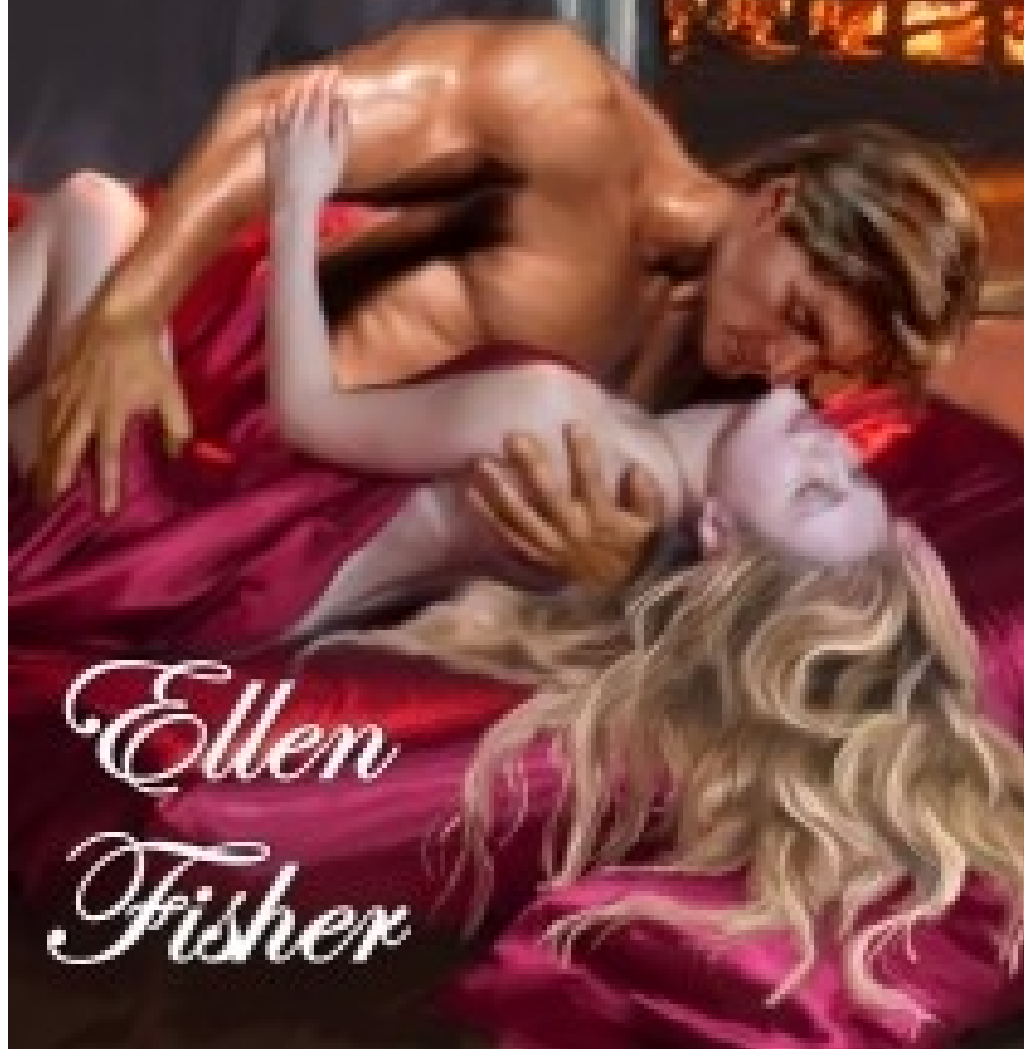


All I Ever Wanted



*Ellen
Fisher*

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by

Ellen Fisher

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Chapter 1

The galaxy is a dangerous place.

Learn to duck.

Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

"I've never seen so many space aliens."

Drew Cooper rolled her eyes. "Exactly how many space aliens have you seen in your lifetime, Tiffani?"

Her younger sister giggled. "You know what I mean, Drew. Look around you."

"I'm trying not to. I'm trying extremely hard."

Tiffani had dragged Drew to a Farthest Space convention against her will and against her better judgment. As a professor of literature, Drew considered science fiction to be beneath her, and this convention was only reaffirming her convictions. The people packed into the convention hall were, well, weird.

If weird wasn't an enormous understatement.

Drew and her sister were apparently the only two people dressed in normal clothes in the entire building. Around them thronged men dressed in black, vaguely militaristic-looking outfits, with futuristic-looking plastic guns or swords hanging from their waists. Quite a few women wore purple robes and some sort of thing on their heads that looked like a cross between a crown and a Sioux feather headdress. And at least a hundred people wore latex masks that made them look like creepy, gray-skinned aliens. Drew backed slowly away from the nearest one, who was enthusiastically examining a stack of trading cards.

"This is an extremely bizarre way to spend the weekend, Tiffani."

Tiffani grinned cheerfully, and Drew knew that her words had whizzed right over her sister's head. Words had a way of doing that. "It's fun, isn't it?"

Drew heaved a long sigh and bowed to the inevitable. She was stuck here, at least until lunch. Maybe at lunchtime she could make a break for it, under the pretext of grabbing something to eat. "Yeah. Fun."

"Fuh," echoed Tiffani's year-old daughter, Alice, who was strapped into a stroller and gazing at the oddly attired crowd as placidly as if she saw extraterrestrials every day of her life. Tiffani grinned proudly and ruffled the toddler's mop of blonde hair.

"That's right, Alice. Fun. Something Auntie Drew knows absolutely nothing about." Tiffani was half a foot shorter than her sister, her dark gold hair cut in short corkscrew curls, and cute was the word that sprang to everyone's mind the moment they met her. The way her nose tilted up at the end, the way her cheeks were covered with freckles, the way she giggled charmingly at the slightest hint of a joke—cute, Drew thought sourly, was the only word that could adequately describe her.

Drew had always wanted to be cute. Homely would have been even better. Instead she was built like a centerfold, with a model's face, and with natural platinum blonde hair for which most women would have traded at least one arm. And, as a result, no one took her seriously, despite her Ph.D. in English literature. No matter how hard she worked, no matter how many dark gray woolen suits she bought, no

matter how conservatively she styled her hair, she still looked like a Playboy bunny with glasses.

The painful truth was that she worked very hard at not having fun. Even so, she felt the need to defend herself. "I know how to have fun," she protested.

"Uh-huh. Your idea of a fun way to spend Friday night is staying up late to watch Masterpiece Theatre."

Drew frowned, baffled. "So what's wrong with that?"

It was Tiffani's turn to roll her eyes. "Nothing, I guess, if you're eighty-five. Come on. I need to find Max Sinclair. I want to get him to come by the bookstore and sign some books."

Tiffani started pushing her way through the crowd, using her stroller and its small occupant to gently nudge people aside. Drew followed her, puzzled.

"Books?" she repeated. "I thought this whole Far Place thing was a TV show. You watch it every week."

"That's Farthest Space, silly. Yeah, it's a TV show now, but the show is based on a series of books."

"Written by this Sinclair guy?"

Tiffani nodded and shoved her way past a big, armor-clad alien whose snarling latex face seemed to glare at them malevolently. The alien wore a weird-looking weapon thrust into his belt, which Drew supposed was a ray gun. "He wrote the first one about ten years ago, I think. It was a huge hit. He wrote a bunch more before it became a TV show. He's like a god to these people."

"Fabulous," Drew said dryly. "I've always wanted to meet a god."

Tiffani glanced over her shoulder. "Look," she said with a touch of annoyance, "my boss wants me to get Max Sinclair to come by and sign some books. If I'm lucky I'll be able to talk him into a book signing. But I can't do that if you keep making snide comments."

"I hardly ever make snide comments."

"Oh, no. Only every time you open your mouth."

"Fine," Drew said huffily. "I won't be snide."

Tiffani snorted. "The day you're not snide will be the day we bury you, Drew."

Drew ignored that comment with dignity. "Couldn't you have gotten this Sinclair guy to come by the bookstore before now? I think I've heard of him. He lives here in Swift Creek, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't do many appearances, just a couple of conventions a year. He's kind of reclusive, I think. My boss will kiss my feet if I talk him into doing a book signing."

"You're just using your job as an excuse," Drew accused. "You've always loved this show. I think you want to meet this Sinclair guy."

"Have you ever seen his picture?"

"Don't be absurd. How could I have seen his picture?"

"It's on the back cover of all of his books."

"I don't read science fiction. I read literature. I'm a professor of English literature, remember? If anyone at the university caught me reading this stuff I'd never hear the end of it."

Tiffani snorted again. "If you'd ever seen his picture, you wouldn't be surprised that I want to meet him. You'd want to meet him too. Trust me. He's gorgeous."

That observation caught Drew by surprise. If Tiffani said he was gorgeous, then maybe he was, but Drew was pretty certain sci-fi fans and writers didn't come in the hunk variety. Looking around her, she had no difficulty picturing the guy. Geeky, thin, stoop-shouldered, and probably wearing inch-thick glasses.

Gorgeous? Yeah, right, she scoffed.

"Look," Tiffani said, gesturing at a table that could hardly be seen for all the people crowded around it. "He's over there."

Drew, with the advantage of her much greater height, could see quite clearly the long purple banner that proclaimed MAX SINCLAIR, CREATOR OF FARTHEST SPACE in extremely large letters. She could also see that the chair behind the table was empty.

"He's not there right now," she said.

Tiffani came to a halt, scowling with disappointment. "He's supposed to be signing books, darn it."

"Maybe he had to take a break." The crowd began dispersing as Max Sinclair's devoted fans began to move away from the table. Drew grinned as she looked back at her sister. "Even gods have to pee, you know."

"Well, let's go over there. We can be first in line when he gets back."

Swift Creek, Virginia, was a small college town. Drew was pretty sure there were more people packed into this convention hall than lived in the entire town. She guessed the convention center was crowded with attendees from Richmond, the nearby state capital, as well as with the tourists that flooded Williamsburg and Virginia Beach this time of year. "Why are there so many people here?" she said irritably as a black-clad man stepped on her toes.

"I told you already," Tiffani said, deftly sidestepping an alien. "Farthest Space is a big thing. And the conventions that Max Sinclair attends are really big, because he doesn't go to many. There was an article in the paper this morning that said people from as far away as Washington would be attending."

Pushing their way through the crowd, they halted next to the table, piled high with a very large quantity of paperback and hardback books. "Jeez," Tiffani said. "Look at them all."

Drew glanced idly over the brilliantly colored covers. One in particular caught her eye, a hardback that showed two men fighting with some sort of swords, while near them stood a woman clad in an extremely revealing, and very uncomfortable-looking, metallic bikini.

"I bet that gets really hot in the summer," she muttered, and picked the book up. She turned it over, curious despite herself, and found herself looking at a full-color photograph of Max Sinclair.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Tiffani gushed.

Gorgeous wasn't the word Drew would have chosen. Incredible was more like it. Max Sinclair was a big, broad-shouldered guy with rough-hewn features, a crooked grin, and blazing green eyes. If he wasn't a male model in his spare time, he certainly ought to be.

Max Sinclair was undeniably a hunk, through and through.

"He's not my type," she lied, and flipped the book open at the middle. After a few paragraphs she snorted. "This is tripe, Tiffani."

Tiffani scowled, looking as irritated as she was capable of looking, which wasn't very. Irritation didn't go well with perpetual perkiness. "I happen to like his books, Drew."

"But it's sheer escapism. It has no literary quality whatsoever. I mean, listen to this ..."

"I am not listening to you," Tiffani said, covering her ears.

Drew ignored her, cleared her throat, and began reading loudly. "'Despite her orange skin, she was the most breathtakingly lovely creature he'd ever seen. Her huge purple eyes stared at him, begging him to do something, anything, to save her, and he uttered a silent vow that, somehow, he would rescue her.'"

"So what's wrong with that?" Tiffani demanded in an annoyed tone, dropping her hands. Drew noticed a few other nearby people were looking at her with irritation as well. She'd forgotten this writer was a "god." She forged ahead anyway, raising her voice to encompass the nearby fans as well as her sister. It wouldn't hurt these weirdos to hear something less than positive about these books. Maybe some of them would be inspired by her words to go read something genuinely interesting, something challenging. Something along the lines of Austin or Fielding. It wasn't likely, but it could happen.

"It's a throwback to a hundred years ago, that's what's wrong with it. Not only is it bad writing, but it's typical male fantasy—saving a helpless damsel in distress. Hasn't this Sinclair guy ever heard of feminism?"

"Lots of women like these books, too. Maybe women like to dream about being rescued."

"I doubt it. All these nerdy guys—" Drew waved a hand to encompass the entire vast room—"like to imagine they could save women. They like to imagine they might have a social life someday. But if they really think like this, they might as well forget it. No modern woman would go for a man with thought processes like this. This Sinclair guy is a Neanderthal. He makes Tarzan look enlightened."

A couple of the "nerdy guys" near her were starting to look distinctly angry, and Tiffani glared at her. "Will you please keep your voice down?"

Drew met the dark glower of the nearest fan, a skinny sixteen-year-old with a pimple-studded face, unflinchingly. "No. Someone might learn something."

"This isn't a lecture hall at the university, Drew. If someone wants to learn something from you, they can enroll in your History of Western Poetry class. I don't think anyone here wants to hear your opinions on Farthest Space. I know I don't." Clearly miffed, Tiffani stepped away, heading for a table laden with plastic action toys. "Keep an eye on Alice, will you?"

Drew shrugged and put the book back on the table. "Fine," she said huffily to her sister's retreating back. "I'm just trying to say that Max Sinclair is a sexist pig. That's all."

"So I take it you won't be buying one of my books."

At the unexpected baritone voice behind her, Drew spun around. An extremely large man, even taller than she was, stood there, regarding her with a bemused expression. His golden-brown hair was a little too long, but combed very neatly, and he wore a white polo shirt and a pair of pressed khaki slacks.

And he had eyes like emeralds. Eyes she'd seen not two minutes before, looking out from the cover of a Farthest Space book.

Drew hadn't felt her cheeks grow so hot since she was fourteen and a tampon had dropped out of her purse in the middle of algebra class. She decided her best option would be to sink through the floor and disappear.

Maxfield Sinclair regarded the tall woman in front of him with curiosity. It wasn't often someone badmouthed him at a Farthest Space convention. Most of the fans who attended these conventions were, to put it mildly, obsessed. They spent hours online discussing the probable plot of his next book, they discussed every detail of every TV episode with a frenzied fanaticism most people saved for

presidential elections, and they lived for the day they could meet the actors, and, to a lesser degree, himself. On fan websites he was usually reverently referred to as "The Creator."

It wasn't cheap to attend a convention, either. So why had this woman, who was clearly not a fan, chosen to attend? Just for the sake of disparaging his books?

Noticing she'd gone beet red, he felt some pity for her. "You know," he said mildly, "it's easy enough to criticize. Most people think they could do better than a professional writer, but they don't realize how hard it is to turn out a hundred thousand words a year."

She lifted her chin and met his eyes, and he noticed that she barely had to look up to meet his gaze. She was easily the tallest woman he'd ever met. The tallest woman — and one of the most gorgeous. She wouldn't have looked in the least out of place on the cover of his latest book, except for the gold-framed glasses that gave her a slightly intellectual look. She had platinum blonde hair, scraped tightly back into a long ponytail, and an incredibly lush mouth. And despite the very unglamorous faded jeans and university T-shirt she wore, there could be no doubt that her figure was amazing. She looked for all the world like an extremely tall Barbie.

"I write articles for professional journals all the time," she informed him coolly, "and I've published three books."

"Nonfiction books, I suppose."

She barely inclined her head. "Works of criticism."

"Criticism is certainly something you're adept at."

If anything, she went redder. "Look, I ... I'm sorry you heard all that."

Max shrugged. "You might be right." Flashing a self-deprecating smile, he tilted his head toward the table and its mountains of books. "I know it isn't great literature. But a lot of people like it."

"I can see that," she said, nodding toward the room at large. "Evidently there's something about your writing that appeals to the average person." She broke off abruptly, apparently reconsidering what she said, and turned red all over again. "I mean, people who aren't interested in literature." Her cheeks went so hot that Max idly wondered if he should call the fire department. "I mean ..." She trailed off.

"I get your meaning," he said. Despite himself, he was getting a bit annoyed. "You mean anyone who reads my books is an uneducated moron."

She swallowed. "I think that's a little harsh."

"I think you're a little harsh. Sometimes people like to read for entertainment. Where's the harm in that?"

She fell silent, apparently considering what he had said, and he noted from the corner of his eye that a wave of fans was moving in his direction. It looked like his break was over. Just behind the oncoming swarm of humanity, he saw a fan dressed as a Va'ra, one of the gray-skinned aliens, leaning against a wall and staring in his direction. At least, he thought the guy was looking at him, although behind the latex mask it was all but impossible to tell. All the same, something about the Va'ra's steady regard made him uneasy.

"Excuse me," he said to Barbie. "Duty calls."

He started around the table, and a movement caught his eye. The Va'ra had pulled his gun from his belt and was pointing it in his general direction. It looked like a particle weapon—a ray gun, as the uninitiated were wont to call it—but the noise it made when it fired was unmistakably not a science fiction sound.

Fortunately, the fan wasn't as good a shot as the Va'ra warriors that populated his books. The first bullet missed him, digging into the wall behind him. As the crowd began to mill in panic, the blonde woman stood still, glancing around at the mob with confusion. Evidently she hadn't figured out what was going on. Either that or she was simply frozen with fear. Realizing that she was directly in the line of fire, he grabbed her and hauled her bodily over the table—no mean feat, considering she was almost as tall as he was—and knocked the table over, hoping against hope its metal top would provide some sort of protection for them. As Farthest Space books cascaded in every direction, he yanked her to the floor with him, knocking the breath out of her. Which at least had the positive effect of shutting her up.

And then he heard a baby crying.

"Shit," he muttered, vaguely recalling seeing a toddler sitting in a stroller a few feet away. The last thing he had expected this morning was to be on the receiving end of some psycho's fire. But better him than a baby.

Without conscious thought he bounded to his feet, leaped over the table, and headed for the toddler. There was another sharp crack, and he felt a searing pain in his shoulder. He staggered but kept going, grateful that the child wasn't far away.

Skidding to a halt next to her, he didn't bother wasting the time to unbuckle the strap that held her into the stroller, just picked her up, stroller and all, cradling her protectively against his chest, and dashed back toward the table. He slammed the toddler down on the far side of the table and vaulted over himself.

The psycho was still firing. Max couldn't see him and wasn't inclined to lift his head to look around for him, but he heard the occasional unmistakable cracking sound of a gun. Abruptly there were yells of "Halt! Security!" and then the noises ceased, although the huge room was still filled with the tumult of panicking people.

Max collapsed against the table, realizing with relief the guy had run for it. He looked back at the toddler who was crying, startled and frightened by the abrupt way he'd grabbed her, slung her through the air, and slammed her down again. Barbie grabbed the little girl's hand and began looking her over carefully, reassuring her in a soft, gentle tone at complete odds with the razor-edged voice she'd used when criticizing his books. The child's crying stopped almost at once.

Max's pounding heart nearly jerked to a halt as he saw the streaks of blood that were smeared on the toddler's face, all but obscuring her cherubic features. "Oh, my God," he whispered in horror. "Is she all right?"

Barbie lifted her head and looked at him. He saw shock in her eyes and wondered vaguely what had caused it. "She's fine. But you—"

He heard the horrified concern in her voice, and for the first time it occurred to him to wonder how badly he'd been hurt. He dimly recalled feeling a pain in his shoulder, but it didn't seem to hurt too much now. He glanced down and saw that the front of his white polo shirt was soaked through, crimson with blood. His own blood.

Abruptly his head whirled, and he felt like his shoulder had suddenly caught on fire. Pain crashed over him in an agonizing wave.

Just before he passed out, it occurred to him that his life had hit an all-time low.

He'd been shot by one of his own characters.

Chapter 2

A woman is a dangerous adversary.
— Captain Steven T. McNeill, *Farthest Space*

Maxfield pushed the remote control and watched the flickering TV screen without the least amount of interest. The bullet had hit him just beneath the collarbone—not a very serious injury despite all the blood that had ruined his favorite shirt—and he was bored out of his mind after a day in the hospital. He was stuck in this damned bed with absolutely nothing to look at but talk shows, soap operas, and sitcoms that were at least as old as he was. Where the hell was the Sci-Fi channel when he needed it?

The door opened. Another nurse, he guessed, coming to take his temperature for the eighth time today. Without turning his head, he growled, "You people are charging me a thousand dollars a night, and you don't even have decent cable service."

"Don't blame me."

At the unexpected voice, his head whipped around, and instantly a stab of pain lanced through his shoulder. He gasped with pain and dropped the remote control to the floor.

"Goddamnit!"

The very last person in the world he'd ever expected to come visit him, the stunning blonde woman who'd criticized *Farthest Space* at the convention, paused at the entrance to his room with a quizzical expression. "Nice to see you again, too."

Max gritted his teeth together. "I'm sorry," he apologized as soon as he could make a coherent sound. "I don't usually greet guests that way. It's just that my shoulder still hurts a lot, and I moved too fast."

"Quite all right," she said, resuming her progress toward him. Despite the sharp pain in his shoulder, he couldn't help but notice the way her hips swayed when she walked. He would have to be dead to fail to notice. "I'm a college professor. I've heard just about every vulgar expression in the English language."

"From the students? Or from Chaucer?"

He saw her lift her delicately arched eyebrows and realized, with a touch of annoyance, she was surprised to find he'd heard of Chaucer. Evidently she'd concluded he was uncultured, if not entirely illiterate, based on the fact that he wrote science fiction instead of what she thought of as literature. But she didn't comment on it, probably figuring he'd read *The Canterbury Tales* in graphic novel format.

"Both," she responded with a spark of humor in her eyes. "Although my students don't compare with Chaucer for either bawdiness or originality." She paused next to him. "Mind if I sit down?"

At his nod, she sat in the vinyl-upholstered chair next to his bed. She bent, picked up the remote control, and handed it to him. "Looking for *Star Trek*?"

In fact, he had been, but he wasn't about to admit that to her. He might as well tattoo NERD on his forehead in big red letters. "I was looking for ESPN," he snapped.

"Are you a football fan?"

"Not an intellectual enough pursuit for you, I suppose?"

To his surprise, she actually cracked a smile. "We intellectual types prefer basketball."

He studied her appraisingly. "I'm not surprised. I bet you played basketball in college. You're tall

enough."

"I'm not that tall," she said repressively.

"Oh? Isn't six foot three considered tall for a woman nowadays?"

"I'm six foot one," she snapped. "And I didn't have time in college. I was busy studying."

"Naturally."

He saw the militant glint behind her glasses and felt ashamed of himself for tweaking her. He had suspected she was self-conscious about her height, as he had never met a tall woman who wasn't. And he had deliberately set out to annoy her, simply because she'd irritated him at the convention.

It occurred to him belatedly that she was the first person who'd come to visit him in the hospital. The least he could do was be polite.

"I don't think we got off on the best foot," he said. He shot her a wry smile. "We haven't even been introduced."

"My name is Drew. Dr. Drew Cooper." She stretched out a manicured hand, and he took it politely. Her hand was soft and warm, the short nails polished a pale pink. Not showy, just neat. He stole a glance at her other hand, noticing she didn't wear a wedding band.

For some reason the gentle pressure of her hand in his felt sexy as hell. Obviously he'd been out of the dating scene way too long, he thought morosely, or holding a woman's hand wouldn't have that kind of effect on him. Or maybe it might, if it was this particular woman. She could make an octogenarian sit up and take notice. Hell, she could bring a corpse back from the dead.

He forced himself to drop her hand, although it wasn't easy, and attempted to cover the awkward moment with an artificial heartiness. "Nice to meet you, Drew. I'm—"

"But I know who you are, remember? It's not easy to forget when you've seen it on a banner in two-foot letters. Max Sinclair."

"Maxfield, actually. But everyone calls me Max."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "Maxfield. That's an unusual name."

"My mother loved Maxfield Parrish."

"The artist?"

"Yeah. Mom thought his paintings were the greatest, so she named me Maxfield Parrish Sinclair. She hoped I'd grow up to be an artist, I guess. She was a little disappointed when I started writing, and a lot disappointed when I started writing science fiction."

"Didn't she care for science fiction?"

"No. Her idea of light reading is Henry James and John Donne." He grinned briefly. "She's kind of like you."

"So have your parents been here to see you?"

Max shook his head. "Actually," he admitted, "you're my first visitor. My dad's been dead for years, and Mom lives in Florida. It's a long trip for someone who's past sixty."

She gave him a knowing smile. "You haven't called her and told her you were injured, have you?"

Max stared at her for a long moment. "Now how the hell did you know that?"

"I'm psychic," she said with a twinkle. At his disbelieving snort, she added more seriously, "I just

know that I wouldn't want to worry my family, if something like this happened to me. But you know, you really should let her know what happened, tell her you're okay. You're big news."

"News?"

"Sure. Haven't you seen the paper yet? 'Local author rescues child from gunfire,' or something along those lines."

Max sank back against his pillow, shut his eyes, and groaned.

"Chin up," she said cheerfully. "It's good publicity, isn't it?"

He opened his eyes a crack and glared at her balefully. "Believe it or not, I don't think of getting shot in the shoulder as a publicity stunt."

"It might help your sales."

"My sales don't need help, thank you." He scowled. It hadn't occurred to him that the incident might have been publicized. He hoped to God his mother hadn't seen it in the news. Of course Farthest Space fans all over the world in chat rooms would avidly discuss it, but fortunately his mother wasn't on the Internet. "At any rate, I bet I haven't made headlines as far away as Florida."

She looked at him for a long moment, and some of the impish humor faded from her eyes. "Actually," she said, more seriously, "if it were up to me, you would have made headlines across the country. You deserve national exposure for what you did. I wanted to thank you myself."

"Thank me? For what? All I did was haul you across the table and drop you on the floor. Given your attitude, I was seriously considering doing that anyway."

She smiled apologetically. "The little girl," she said. "The baby you saved. She's my niece."

Max opened his eyes wide and stared at her.

"I was at the convention with my sister, and she left Alice with me for a minute. When the shooting started, I should have grabbed Alice, but—"

"I prevented you."

"No," she said with brutal self-honesty. "I'm not sure I could have gotten her. When the shooting started, I was just— just paralyzed. I couldn't move. And when you tossed me down behind that table, I simply couldn't get up. I was scared half to death. I'm really not sure I would have had the courage to get the baby." She sighed heavily. "I don't suppose it says anything very good about my character, that I wasn't brave enough to try to save my own niece."

"It says you're human," Max said gently.

She studied him for a long moment. Her eyes, he noticed, were an unusual color, a pale, silvery blue. There was a reluctant respect in her steady gaze. "You were extremely brave."

"Look, I'm not some sort of a hero, okay? I realized a baby was in danger and I grabbed her. It was more like an instinct, a reflex, than it was courage. If I'd stopped to think about it I probably wouldn't have done it at all."

"How fortunate for my niece that you didn't stop to think."

"I never do. Gets me into trouble every time."

"I wondered..." Drew hesitated. "Actually, my sister would have come here herself, but she had to work today. She and I both wondered if you'd like to come to a barbecue we're having this weekend."

Max could hardly believe his luck. Ordinarily he had no social life whatsoever, yet today a gorgeous

blonde stranger had walked into his hospital room and invited him to her house. He was stunned to realize that the most attractive and intriguing woman he'd met in the past eight years was providing him with an excuse to see her again.

Yesterday he'd thought his life had hit rock bottom. But today things were definitely looking up.

It was all he could do not to shout, Yes! "I'd like that," he said, forcing himself to sound nonchalant. Casual. Or at the least, not pathetically grateful.

There was a sudden noise in the hall, very different from the squeaking of nurses' shoes and muted intercom requests that Max had gotten used to hearing over the past twenty-four hours. "You can't—" a voice objected, and then a tall, slim woman, her dark hair cropped into a professional, no-nonsense cut, entered the room. She was dressed in a red power suit and carried herself with assurance, and two men with cameras followed her.

She walked over to Max's bed, brushing past Drew as if she wasn't even there, and thrust out a hand. "Hi, I'm Charity Rogers, Channel 9 News," she said, flashing a smile. "I'm your greatest fan, Mr. Sinclair, and I wondered if you'd be willing to be interviewed."

Max looked warily at her hand. Her dagger-like nails were extremely long and painted the same shade of scarlet as her suit. Dragon lady nails, he thought. He took her hand reluctantly, concerned she might stab him by accident, and dropped it as hastily as courtesy permitted. "Um ... I'm kind of in the middle of a conversation here."

"No, that's all right," Drew said. She scrawled something on a piece of paper and thrust it toward him. "Here. My address and the time we're having the party."

"Thanks," he said, taking the slip of paper from her. He wanted to beg her to stay, but she was already standing. Charity Rogers had stepped away, apparently to give her cameramen directions, and he shot Drew an imploring look. "I hate being interviewed on TV. I never have a clue what to say."

"I only have one suggestion," Drew said. "Don't turn around."

He thought of the way his hospital gown was cut in the back, just like every other hospital gown since the dawn of time, and imagined the headline: Local Author Bares All for News Broadcast. He felt heat run up his cheeks.

God help him. He was blushing like a sixteen-year-old.

Drew grinned at his reaction. "Gives a whole new meaning to the words national exposure, doesn't it?"

She disappeared through the door, and Max stared wistfully after her. Charity Rogers walked back over to his bedside. "Your girlfriend?"

Figuring being nosy was an occupational hazard for her, Max bit down on his automatic response, which was to tell her to mind her own damned business. "No. Just an acquaintance."

"Was she in the convention center when the shooting occurred?"

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. He didn't want to talk about Drew with the dragon lady. In fact, he realized, he didn't want to talk at all. He just wanted to lie here and think about Drew.

Charity Rogers, however, obviously didn't intend to give him time to himself. "Are you ready for an interview, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Uh—I think I need to comb my hair first. And maybe shave."

"No, you don't. Trust me, you look great."

Yeah, sure, Max thought wryly. The floral-patterned, pastel blue hospital gown was probably real flattering. He mentally cursed the gunman who'd gotten him into this mess. Earlier today, the police had asked him a bunch of questions, and they'd told him the guy hadn't been apprehended yet. They were evidently operating under the assumption that the guy was a deranged fan—an assumption that, while perfectly logical, didn't make Max happy in the least.

He didn't want to be shot at again, and he hoped like hell they'd found the guy by now. He ought to check the local news.

Then again, why bother with TV when he had a real live reporter right here in his room?

"Hey," he said, "do you know what happened to the gunman? Have they taken him into custody yet?"

"No. They still haven't found him."

Max blinked. That was not the answer he wanted to hear. "How'd the police manage to lose him?"

"He was wearing a mask."

"Yeah. I noticed that."

"Well, no one got a look at his face, and in the panic he managed to get away. They put out a bulletin on his car, but his getaway vehicle was stolen, and he ditched it before they caught up to him. He got away on foot. Unless they get new leads, it looks like he got away clean."

Max thought about that for a long moment. It gave him the chills to realize that a psycho who wanted him dead was still on the loose. Even worse, a psycho who didn't have a problem with firing a gun into a crowd of innocent people was on the loose somewhere. Max didn't want to die, but he sure as hell didn't want anyone else endangered by a crazy fan. "I hope they catch the bastard," he said softly.

"You and me both," Charity Rogers agreed. She turned around and faced the camera, switching on her professional mode. "Hi, I'm Charity Rogers, with local author Maxfield Sinclair ..."

Max concentrated hard on facing forward.

"He is such a hunk."

Drew rolled her eyes as Tiffani stared raptly at the television, where Maxfield Sinclair was being interviewed for about the hundredth time that day. They were seated in Drew's spotless white kitchen, drinking diet Cokes and splitting a bag of low-fat potato chips—their favorite way of spending quality time together.

Since their mother had died, six years before, Drew had virtually raised Tiffani. Ten years older than Tiffani, and with a PhD, a decent job, and a roomy house inherited from her mom, Drew had been more than willing to act as a mother figure to her younger sister. Tiffani, however, had been only sixteen when their mother had died, and she had possessed a full measure of adolescent rebellion. Despite Drew's efforts she hadn't finished her college education. In fact, she'd barely started it, getting married before she was twenty.

Unfortunately, Tiffani's husband had been a world-class jerk, and their marriage hadn't lasted. Tiffani and her newborn daughter had moved back in with Drew after her husband left her a little over a year ago. Drew loved the company and dreaded the thought that someday her sister would move out again, leaving her rattling around alone in her big, empty house. Despite the fact that she adored her sister, however, Tiffani frequently got on her nerves, and this was definitely one of those times.

"He is so gorgeous," Tiffani bubbled with her customary enthusiasm for any unmarried male under the

age of fifty. "I can't believe you actually got to talk to him. Will you introduce us? Please?"

"He's really not that handsome in real life," Drew lied. In fact, Maxfield Sinclair was one of the best-looking men she had ever laid eyes on, with a hard, muscular body to die for. And he had the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. But she wasn't about to admit that to Tiffani.

She had no idea why her sister's repeated salivating over the man was grating so on her nerves. She told herself it was because Max wasn't her type, but she had a sneaking suspicion that wasn't all that was bothering her. She found she didn't care to analyze her feelings about the situation too closely.

"I don't care. I want to meet him," Tiffani said.

Drew grinned wickedly. "Just to talk about getting him to do a book signing, right?"

Tiffani looked abashed. "Not exactly, no."

"You want to ask him out, don't you?"

Tiffani turned imploring eyes on her. "Well ... sort of. I want to go out with him. I want to marry him. I want to spend every day with him for the rest of eternity. You have to help me, Drew. You have to introduce us."

"I've only met him twice," Drew said. "And I'm afraid I didn't make a very good impression the first time."

Tiffani giggled. "No kidding. I can't believe he came up to you right after you said all that stuff about his book. You had to have been so embarrassed."

Drew lifted her chin. "My comments were perfectly valid. His writing is sexist and of poor quality. Besides — he writes science fiction."

"You say that like he's carrying the plague or something. Not everyone considers *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* light reading, you know. I like the *Farthest Space* novels even better than the TV series. Did he mention when he'll be finished with the next one?"

"We didn't have a lot of time to discuss it," Drew said wryly.

"I want to meet him. I have to meet him."

"Then go meet him."

"I want you to introduce us," Tiffani persisted. "You know him, kind of."

"We had a five-minute conversation in a hospital room," Drew said wearily. "For all I know he's married."

"Was he wearing a wedding band?"

"Um ... I'm not sure."

"You meet a gorgeous, incredibly brave guy, and you don't notice whether he's wearing a wedding band or not?" Tiffani gave her a look of exasperation. "You are just not normal, do you realize that?"

"Thank you."

"It was not intended as a compliment!" Tiffani stood up and captured Alice, who had been heading for the stairs. Alice had learned to walk two weeks before, and since then had been drawn to the staircase like a moth to flame. "Don't you even miss having a man in your life?"

"After James, can you blame me?"

Tiffani held the toddler in her arms and looked over the curly blonde head at her sister. "I guess not,"

she admitted. "James was kind of a jerk."

"Kind of a jerk?"

"Okay," Tiffani sighed. "You're right. He was a total asshole. But Drew, all men aren't like that. Some guys are pretty nice."

"Like Lucas?"

Lucas was Tiffani's ex-husband, who had filed for divorce two weeks before Alice was born. Tiffani blinked. "That was a low blow, Drew."

"I'm just pointing out that neither you nor I have a really good track record when it comes to picking out men. Maybe we're better off staying away from guys entirely."

"That seems pretty drastic. Anyway, maybe our luck is due to change."

"And maybe we're just cursed to be attracted to pond scum for the rest of our lives."

"He was willing to risk his life to save Alice, Drew. I really don't think Maxfield Sinclair is pond scum."

Drew exhaled slowly. "Neither do I," she admitted. "That's why I invited him to the barbecue on Saturday."

"You did? Really?" Tiffani looked delighted, then scowled. "I guess this means you want him yourself, huh?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Oh, right. He writes science fiction." Tiffani rolled her eyes and giggled. "Honestly, Drew, you're such a snob."

"I am not a snob," Drew said with dignity. "I merely believe in upholding certain standards."

"You're a snob." Tiffani put Alice down with a grin. "Lucky for me."

"You might not think you're so lucky when you meet him in person. Suppose you don't like him? Suppose you think he's a jerk?"

"Are you crazy?" Tiffani looked at the TV, where Maxfield Sinclair's rugged, masculine, and all-American visage was being flashed yet again. Even on the tiny thirteen-inch set, his eyes looked amazingly green. "I'm already in love."

"Oh, God, not again," Drew said.

Chapter 3

Never lower your shields.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, *Farthest Space*

Maxfield pulled his red Mustang up to the curb and checked the address a second time, then turned off the ignition. Drew Cooper's residence, an old, two-story brick house within walking distance of the university, was covered with ivy and shaded by ancient oak trees, its wide emerald lawn bordered by tall boxwood hedges. It was an attractive old house, and almost precisely the sort of dwelling he would have expected a professor to own.

He got out of the convertible, noticing there was already a number of other cars parked along the road, and walked up the gravel driveway toward the house. From the backyard floated the sounds of music and laughter. Oddly enough, the music didn't seem to be Mozart or Beethoven, but something much more modern, judging from the beat. He didn't listen to contemporary popular music, but this sounded like Top 40 stuff. Odd for a woman who scorned science fiction as anti-intellectual.

He debated going around to the back of the house, but the sheer number of people in the backyard was intimidating. He wasn't sure he'd ever find his hostess in the mass of laughing people, although he had to admit Drew, with her height and her mane of platinum hair, would tend to stand out in a crowd. Still, he didn't feel like wandering into a group of fifty or so strangers, so he strode up the brick steps and rang the doorbell instead. It was unusually hot for early September, and a ray of hot sunshine sliced between two enormous oak trees and beat down on the back of his neck.

No one seemed to hear his first ring, but a slender woman with dark blonde, incredibly curly hair and an impish smile responded to his second effort. He observed that she bore a striking resemblance to Shirley Temple. "Hi," she said cheerfully. "You're Maxfield Sinclair, aren't you?"

"Uh, yeah," Max said. "Are you Ms. Cooper?"

"Walters, actually. But yes, I'm Drew's sister. Tiffani. With an i." She giggled, as if she had said something very amusing, and held out her hand. He took it politely, noticing that he felt not a single spark of the electricity he'd felt when holding Drew Cooper's impeccably manicured hand.

"Uh ... hi, Ms. Walters," he said awkwardly.

"Call me Tiffani," she said, looking up at him with big blue eyes. "You saved my baby. I want to thank you."

"I'm glad I was there," Max said sincerely.

Tiffani-with-an-i wrinkled her nose at him. It was a pert nose, covered with golden brown freckles, and looked as if it were wrinkled often. She hardly looked old enough to be married, let alone to have a toddler. "I just love your books."

"Thank you," Maxfield said, wondering if she planned to actually invite him inside.

"I do, really. I've been watching the series for years, and I started reading the books a couple of years ago. My husband introduced me to them. I work in a bookstore, and I love science fiction, unlike my sister. I recommend your books to customers all the time. I especially loved *The Point of No Return*. The way you described the Va'raan culture and their religion—it was just so real. It's like you're a modern-day Frank Herbert or something."

Max decided to open his mouth when she took a breath. Otherwise he had the distinct suspicion he might stand here forever. "Thanks, but I don't think I'm ever going to be anywhere near Herbert's

league."

It was ninety-five degrees out, the sun was hammering down on his back, and a beer would have been more welcome than compliments at this point, but it was nice hearing what a great writer he was. Tiffani didn't seem to have much in common with her sister, he thought, remembering Drew loudly criticizing his book. For some reason he had to fight back a grin.

"And The Greatest of These was terrific too. I thought Captain McNeill was done for. I stayed up half the night reading it. I couldn't begin to guess how you'd get him out of that situation on Va'rana."

"Thanks," Max murmured again, feeling a trickle of sweat run between his shoulder blades.

"Tiffani. What are you doing?"

He recognized the tart voice instantly. Just behind Tiffani, in the gloom of the hallway, Drew Cooper appeared. Evidently for parties she shed her jeans and T-shirt and wore something more attractive. Today she was dressed in a white sundress that showed off her spectacular figure. It clung to her torso — and there was a hell of a lot there to cling to — then billowed out in a wide skirt that fell to her knees. Beneath the hem of her skirt were several miles' worth of the most gorgeous legs he'd ever seen in his life. He blinked and tried his damndest to avert his gaze, aware that it might not be the best form to gape at his hostess.

Drew regarded them with a hint of amusement on her striking features. He had the uncomfortable feeling she'd noticed his stunned expression. "Are you ever going to let him in, or are you going to make him stand out there in the sun all day?"

Tiffani's cheeks turned pink. She stepped aside and waved him in. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Sinclair."

"Max," he said.

"Max. Would you like something to drink?"

In the kitchen there was a swarm of people, and through the glass doors that led to the patio he could see more people outside, some of them playing volleyball, lots of them just lounging around and chatting. It was an interesting group of people—about half of them looked like teenagers, complete with pimples and baggy jeans, and most of the rest were gray-haired and professorial. He supposed it was a combination of Drew's students and colleagues.

Still looking embarrassed, Tiffani excused herself briefly, claiming she had to go outside to check the status of the potato chips. Smiling politely, Drew handed him a beer, and for the first time he noticed small lines radiating from the corners of her eyes, lines that suggested she smiled often. Lines that suggested she was probably in her thirties, despite her incredible figure. He was pleased to realize she was close to his own age.

"Thanks," he said with real gratitude, taking a long swig. She looked at him consideringly.

"I'm glad you could come," she said at last.

He lifted an eyebrow and grinned. "Are you, really? I mean, won't socializing with a science fiction writer ruin your professional reputation?"

"I imagine my reputation will survive the scandal."

Max looked at her for a long moment, unable to entirely prevent himself from enjoying the view. Drew Cooper was unbelievably gorgeous in that filmy white dress. Hell, she'd be gorgeous in rags.

Words he hadn't had the slightest intention of uttering suddenly developed a mind of their own and leaped recklessly out of his mouth. "What about dating a science fiction writer?"

The minute he uttered the words, he cursed himself for ten kinds of a fool. What the hell was wrong with him, blurting out his half-formed thoughts like that? Must be the beer, he told himself. Hell of a kick in that stuff. He lifted the bottle and looked at the label.

Budweiser. There couldn't possibly be enough alcohol in a mouthful of Bud to make him drunk.

But damned if he didn't sound drunk.

Drew raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Sinclair?"

He noticed with dismay that her voice had turned every bit as cold as the beer in his hand. Well, he'd never been real smooth when it came to asking women out. In fact, he couldn't think of the last time he'd even tried. Small wonder he'd screwed up so badly. But he'd never made quite so much of an idiot of himself before.

What was it about this woman that reduced him to a gauche teenager?

"Uh ..." he said. For a moment that was the most articulate statement he could come up with, then he recovered. He flashed her his best effort at a boyishly charming grin. "I just wondered if you'd be interested in going out, Drew."

"Going out," she repeated slowly. She seemed to be testing the words out, as if he'd uttered them in some obscure foreign language. It was as if she were bewildered by the question, although she couldn't begin to guess how far out on a limb he'd gone in daring to ask her. Swallowing nervously, he forged on with grim determination.

"Yeah, you know, go see a movie or something."

"I doubt very much that you and I have similar tastes in cinema, Mr. Sinclair."

Cinema. Not movies, but cinema. He imagined she liked foreign films, the kind they showed at that old movie theater downtown. The kind that was incomprehensible even with subtitles. The only foreign films he liked were Jackie Chan movies.

"Well, then ..." He floundered for a moment. He thought of suggesting a concert, but he had a bad feeling that the classic rock he favored probably wasn't highbrow enough for her. A concert for her probably meant some unfathomable opera, or maybe an excruciatingly dull three hours at the symphony. He didn't know Bach from Beethoven, and didn't really want to expose his ignorance on a first date. "How about we go out to eat?"

"Out to eat," she repeated.

His fingers tightened on the beer bottle with annoyance. He found that he was growing tired of her repeating every suggestion he made, as if he were speaking some sort of unintelligible dialect. "Out to eat," he agreed shortly. "You know, at a restaurant." Generally speaking he preferred hamburger joints, but he imagined he could survive one evening at a fancy French restaurant.

Hell, for the privilege of seeing her legs again he'd spend the rest of his life at a French restaurant.

He squashed that thought, aware that it wasn't just her legs he was interested in. There was something special about her that attracted him, something beyond her obvious physical attributes. Maybe it was her conviction in the correctness of her opinions, the assurance of a woman who could read two paragraphs of a book and determine the writer was a sexist pig. Maybe it was her wicked sense of humor, the outrageous streak in her nature that let her tease a virtual stranger about his gaping hospital gown.

Or maybe it was the way she'd looked at him in his hospital room, her huge silver-blue eyes brimming with sincerity, and told him he was brave.

No one had ever made him feel like a hero before.

Unfortunately, she wasn't looking at him as if he were a hero now. "Mr. Sinclair," she said.

"Max."

"Max. I am immensely grateful to you for saving my niece's life, but as to going out with you—"

Christ. Was that what she thought, that he was trying to capitalize on her gratitude by getting a date with her, and maybe a roll in the hay? He felt his cheeks grow red. He had really messed this up. She went on, oblivious to his embarrassment.

"I simply don't feel that we have enough in common."

That was the understatement of the year, he thought moodily. What had possessed him to think a woman like her might be interested in him, anyway? She was class personified, and he— he was just a guy who thought fine cuisine meant a Big Mac instead of a plain old cheeseburger. He was definitely in over his head here, and floundering desperately for a breath of air.

He forced a smile to his lips, hoping he looked like a confident, casual man of the world, a guy who asked out gorgeous women on a regular basis, instead of what he really was— a loser with absolutely no social life to speak of. The classic nerd, who spent most of his spare time with Captain Kirk and the Enterprise. "Yeah, you're probably right, Drew. But you never know. It might be fun."

Drew looked at him coolly, and he realized abruptly what a lousy position he'd put her in. Out of gratitude, she'd invited him to a party, and he'd caused an awkward situation by asking her out. Even worse, he was monopolizing her time when she had dozens of guests to attend to.

"Look," he said, "I know you're pretty busy right now. Just think about it, okay?"

Drew sucked in a deep breath. "I don't have to think about it," she said.

He experienced a brief moment of crazily soaring hope. His instincts told him she was going to say yes.

The first woman he'd asked out in years, the most beautiful and intriguing woman he'd ever met, was going to agree to go out with him.

"It's very kind of you to ask," she said, "but the answer is no."

His soaring hopes crashed abruptly to the ground and burst into flame.

He hardly noticed when, a moment later, she excused herself and went to talk to another guest, leaving Max to stare at the magnets on the refrigerator. So much for my instincts, he thought sourly. He took a long swig of beer, but it wasn't enough to drown the embarrassment and the stinging pain of rejection.

Forget the damned beer. What he needed was a shot or two of whiskey.

He asked me out.

Drew stood on the flagstones of the patio, staring blankly at the intense game of volleyball that was taking place in the back yard. Usually she would have been playing herself, leaping up to spike the white ball into the opposing team's teeth, or diving violently for it without the least concern for her white dress. She was tall enough to be a pretty good player, and she had a latent killer instinct that came to the fore when she played. But today she hadn't chosen to play.

She'd been waiting for Maxfield Sinclair.

Oh, she hadn't admitted it to Tiffani, or even to herself, but it was the simple truth, nothing more. Despite the sixty or seventy people milling around, she hadn't felt as if the party had started until

Maxfield arrived.

And then within ten seconds of his arrival he'd asked her out. An echo of his baritone voice reverberated in her head.

You never know. It might be fun.

It figured that a man who looked like that would be a smooth operator, she thought glumly. Probably he had women throwing themselves at his feet on a regular basis. He certainly couldn't be short on female companionship, since most female Farthest Space fans would probably give up their right arms to have sex with him. Most likely he went out with a different woman every night of the week and just saw her as another potential conquest.

Or maybe he really liked her.

She reminded herself that wasn't really likely, considering they'd only met twice. He hardly knew her well enough to have an opinion on her personality. She recalled the way she'd criticized his book and felt a wave of heat rush up her cheeks. If he had any opinion whatsoever about her personality, she doubted it was a good one.

Therefore, logically, he must be solely interested in her looks. Just like every other sexist, chauvinist pig she'd ever dated.

Just like James.

She sighed and reminded herself that this entire matter was academic anyway. Tiffani was interested in Max, and she couldn't try to snag him herself. That definitely went against the Loyal Sister Code, straight into the dry, dusty outback of backstabbing territory.

As if she'd conjured her up, Tiffani appeared from behind a group of frat boys who had taken up a strategic position next to a cooler full of beer bottles. Drew fixed a smile on her face as her sister approached, wending her way through the throng of cheerful students and professors. The students were cheerful because a barbecue at Professor Cooper's house meant no paper was due in her class on Monday, and the professors were cheerful because Dr. Cooper always had lots of beer at her parties. Tiffani herself wore a happy expression on her cute face, probably because Maxfield had finally arrived. She paused next to Drew and spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone.

"So, did you talk to him for me?"

Drew heaved a sigh, thinking things would be a whole lot easier if her sister would just take responsibility for her own love life, instead of depending on help from her. As if Drew were Dear Abby, instead of a single woman with problems of her own. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly? You guys talked for like ten minutes! What did you talk about?"

He asked me out.

Drew firmly repressed the confession. When they had been younger, Drew's looks and abilities had been a source of friction between the sisters. Tiffani had spent most of her adolescence bemoaning the fact that her older sister looked like a supermodel. Drew had also been the family academic star, always on the honor roll, always loved by her teachers. She had learned to read at two, and never really slowed down. Her parents had boasted to anyone that would listen that she had been admitted to college at fifteen.

Not surprisingly, Tiffani had resented her, even after their mother had died and Drew had taken responsibility for her sister. At that point she'd had to cope with adolescent rebellion as well as with sisterly envy. It had taken years for their relationship to progress to the doting sister stage.

The last thing she wanted was to screw it up now.

"We just kind of talked," she said vaguely.

Her evasiveness was not lost on Tiffani, who despite her childlike cuteness and Valley Girl speech was a good deal brighter than most people supposed. "About what?" she said suspiciously. "No, let me guess. Was he interested in comparing Robert Fagle's translation of The Iliad to the W.H Rouse version?"

"Tiffani—"

"Or maybe he wanted to discuss the feminist implications of Emily Dickinson's poetry?"

Drew was unaccountably annoyed that Tiffani thought she was incapable of making small talk that didn't revolve around literature. What was even more annoying was that it was probably true. "Look," she said, more sharply than usual, "you don't want to look desperate, do you?"

Tiffani giggled. "But I am desperate, Drew."

"The hell you are," Drew retorted. "You're an intelligent, lovely woman who has everything going for her."

"Except a man."

"You've got a great life, Tiff. You don't need a man."

Tiffani shrugged. "Maybe I don't need one. But I want one. And Maxfield Sinclair is a pretty nice one, don't you think?"

Nice, Drew reflected, was not exactly the word that came to mind when she thought about Maxfield. He was at least six foot three, and with those heavy, corded muscles and that gorgeous face, he didn't look a lot like the boy next door. Anyway, there was something about those outrageously green eyes, the way they looked at her, that didn't make her think nice. She realized he had been staring at her with what she thought of as a bad-boy expression.

And she'd liked it.

You never know. It might be fun.

Drew firmly squelched the memory of his baritone voice, rumbling with unaccountably seductive depths. She decided she wasn't talking to Maxfield again. It just wasn't safe. Somehow her feelings were a jumble where he was concerned. "I'm not going to help you out on this one," she said firmly.

"But Drew—"

Drew cut off her sister's appealing whine with an annoyed glare that would have sliced through rock. "You're a big girl now, Tiffani. If you want to go out with Maxfield Sinclair, you ask him."

Standing in the kitchen and contemplating a magnet that read, naturally, The best man for the job is a woman, Maxfield was unpleasantly reminded of the reason he usually avoided parties. All around him was a babble of voices, the happy sound of people enjoying each other's company. And here he stood, drinking a beer and staring at the fridge, not knowing anyone.

Despite the twenty or so people clustered in the kitchen, he might as well have been completely alone.

He knew he should head for one of the knots of people, introduce himself, and start talking, but he couldn't. He was just too shy. It was one of the reasons he hated conventions and avoided them as much as humanly possible. He had managed to keep his schedule to only two a year, but he dreaded

those two annual occasions, where he had no choice but to talk with people, to come out of his shell a bit.

Trying to deal with a huge group of strangers intimidated the hell out of him, whether at a Farthest Space convention or a party.

Ordinarily he might have tried to get into the volleyball game out back, since he was a pretty good player. But his shoulder was still way too sore to allow him to participate in any kind of sports. He was considering ducking out the front door, jumping in his car, and driving on back to his house, when a voice said, "Hey."

He turned to see Drew's sister, Tiffani-with-an-i. "Hi," he said with a brilliant grin, born of incredible relief. There was very little more humiliating to him than standing alone at a party. At this point he would have been happy to talk to just about anyone.

Tiffani looked up at him. Unlike her sister, she was not particularly tall— maybe a little on the tall side, five foot eight or so, but nevertheless pretty short next to him. She had a slim figure that contrasted rather sharply with Drew's curves. In fact, he realized, the two sisters didn't seem to have much in common, either in looks or personality.

He wondered vaguely where Tiffani's husband was. He imagined he was out in the crowd of people somewhere, probably watching the little girl—Alice?—while Tiffani handed out drinks and helped Drew in her hostess duties.

"Hi," she said. "Did Drew walk off on you?"

I asked her out and she said no. "She had things to do," he explained.

Tiffani smiled, wrinkling her nose again. "Yeah, it's hard keeping enough beers in the coolers."

"I guess all the frat boys like their beer."

"No," she said with her charmingly effervescent giggle. "It's the professors who keep drinking up our supply."

Almost involuntarily he grinned back at her. Tiffani had a nice personality, he thought, even if she wasn't tall, voluptuous, and stunningly beautiful. Even if she didn't have mile-long legs, silver eyes, and a smart-ass attitude.

He tried very hard to push the vision of Drew out of his mind, without much success.

Tiffani was looking at him intently, and he wondered with chagrin if she could tell what he was thinking about. "Listen, Max," she said at last, "Drew and I were wondering ..."

She trailed off as if flustered. "What?" he prodded gently.

"We just wondered if you'd like to come to dinner here this week."

"Dinner?" he repeated stupidly.

"Uh-huh. We thought you might like to come to a family dinner."

"Uh ..." he said, unable to think of a more articulate comment. He couldn't figure out why Tiffani would be inviting him here, to Drew's house, but decided they probably ate together fairly frequently, living in the same town as they evidently did. Once again, he wondered where Tiffani's husband was.

"Maybe you have other plans," Tiffani said. She sounded disappointed.

"No," he said hastily. Plans were definitely not his problem. He never had plans, unless you counted ordering pizza. "I just, uh—"

"We just wanted you to know we were grateful to you for what you did," Tiffani said. "All of us. Drew, too. Anyway ... sometimes it's lonely, being single. Don't you think?"

Max stared at her, befuddled. Why on earth would Drew want him to come to dinner, after the uncomfortable position he'd put her in? Earlier he had gotten the distinct impression she never wanted to see him again. So why ...?

He finally processed the remainder of Tiffani's speech. It's lonely, being single.

Tiffani thought Drew was lonely. She thought he was lonely. Finally he realized what was going on here.

Tiffani was trying to set him up with Drew.

He thought about warning her that Drew had already squelched that idea, but decided against it. There was a chance Drew might respect her sister's judgment. Maybe she'd consider going out with him, if Tiffani made the suggestion. Then again, maybe not.

But at the least he'd get to see Drew again.

"Sure," he said. "I'd like that a lot."

Chapter 4

Captain McNeill reached behind him in the darkness of the cave. "Are you still with me, Elonai?"

"I'm fine," she said tartly, snatching her fingers from his. "I am capable of walking, you know."

McNeill swallowed back an angry retort. Couldn't the woman answer a simple query without snapping? If she had been a member of his crew—

But she wasn't. She wasn't even human. Perhaps he was expecting too much, hoping for human courtesy from an alien.

At last he saw a patch of light up ahead. His steps quickened, and he heard her light footfalls just behind him. They emerged into the strange bluish light of a Va'raan day. He turned to face her, seeing her silver-blond hair blaze brilliantly in the sunlight...

Max's fingers paused in their steady progression over the keyboard and he frowned at the words on the monitor.

"Since when does Elonai have blond hair?"

At the sound of his voice, his collie, Blue, thumped his tail lazily. The mottled gray, tan, and white dog was stretched out on the carpet, his slim muzzle resting on Max's grass-stained jogging shoes. Writing was a solitary business, but Blue's loyal presence made it seem a little less lonely. The dog never left Max's office when Max was writing, and Max talked to the collie almost constantly as he wrote, as if the dog were capable of rendering informed critical judgments rather than simply wagging his plumed tail and licking his master's hand.

The office was one of the few places in Max's house that actually boasted furniture. In the wake of his first few bestsellers, eight years ago, he had bought an enormous stucco house with the intention of filling it with a wife and children. But things hadn't turned out the way he'd planned.

He'd found himself living alone in an anonymous suburban house that was way too huge for one person. The only good thing about the house was the big backyard for Blue—a backyard he hadn't even bothered to landscape. It looked as much like a field as it had the day he moved in. He hadn't done much with the inside of the house, either. The walls were still white, unadorned by paintings or even photographs, and there were shades on the windows but no curtains. He did possess the necessities, though—a bed, a TV, and a computer and desk. That was enough for him, although if he went bankrupt tomorrow he'd happily give up everything except the computer. Writing was pretty much his whole life, and had been for a long time now.

The Farthest Space books were generally described as science fiction, but they were really good old-fashioned space opera. He'd started writing them in high school, inspired by E. E. "Doc" Smith, who'd written the Lensman series sixty years ago, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' swashbuckling Barsoom books. They weren't hard science fiction by any stretch of the imagination, featuring as they did a lot of action and space battles, and not too much in the way of science. Even so, he enjoyed creating a different culture in each book and thought he did a pretty good job of it.

Elonai was a Regala, capable of killing telepathically. She had been tempted to kill McNeill quite a few times already, but she'd succumb to his charms eventually. Women always did. And when she did, the telepathic angle should make for some pretty interesting sex.

Max scrolled back a few pages. Just as he had thought, Elonai's hair had been black in the first chapter, when Captain McNeill had first rescued her. He'd actually waxed a little poetic about it, describing it as inky as the night sky. At any rate, her hair was definitely black.

Definitely not blond.

He scowled. "So how did her hair become blonde?"

He had the uncomfortable feeling he didn't want to know the answer to that question. Blue sat up, concerned by the irritation in his master's tone, and whined questioningly. Max reached over absently and rubbed the silky ears.

"I guess Elonai had a close encounter with a rogue bottle of bleach in that cave," he said. "Either that, or the sun on Va'raan has a weird effect on her species. Maybe I better go back and write that in, huh?"

Reassured, Blue settled back down on the floor again, and Max returned to the page he'd been working on. It was an easy enough matter to replace words, thanks to the modern miracle of word processing. He could fix his error in about two seconds. Giving silent thanks for the demise of the typewriter, he clicked on the phrase silver-blond.

And paused.

After a brief but fierce internal debate, he scrolled back and clicked on the word black instead, replacing it with blond.

Blue cocked an ear at him.

"I really think blond sounds better," Max muttered defensively.

The collie wagged his tail.

"I just don't understand what you want, Dr. Cooper."

Staring at the earnest young face seated across from her in her book-lined office, Drew stifled an irritated sigh. Don't they teach these kids anything in high school anymore? she wondered, but kept her aggravation to herself. It was obvious from his deep frown of concentration that Ken Harshaw was trying his best to understand her assignment.

Ken had somehow gotten through Freshman English last year without understanding the first principle of writing, spelling, or even thinking. Over the past few weeks, she had reached the inescapable conclusion that the reason he'd passed had less to do with his academic abilities than the fact that he was six foot four, weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, and was an indispensable part of the football team. She had already given him two failing grades on papers, and wasn't looking forward to giving him a third.

"I want you to analyze a poem," she repeated, as patiently as she was able.

"You mean like write about the author?"

"No, I mean I want you to write about what the writer meant when he or she wrote the poem. I want you to determine the meaning of the poem, line by line, and detail it in your paper."

"The meaning?" Ken gaped at her with horror. "You mean figure out what the writer's trying to say?"

"Precisely, Mr. Harshaw."

Ken stared at her for a moment longer, as aghast as if she'd told him he had to write the paper in Sanskrit, then wailed in anguish, "How am I supposed to do that?"

Drew resisted the urge to bang her head against the wall behind her. "Just think, Mr. Harshaw. Examine the imagery the poet uses, the metaphors, and draw conclusions about what he or she is trying to say. Support those conclusions by citing examples from the poem."

Ken was staring blankly at her, and she realized that she had lost him some time ago. "What is it, Mr.

Harshaw?"

Ken hesitated, then blurted, "Dr. Cooper, what's a metaphor?"

It was obvious to her that Ken either hadn't been paying attention in class, or that he simply wasn't capable of understanding any sort of abstract concept beyond, say, the alphabet. She forced herself not to start screaming. Screaming would not help.

It wouldn't help, but it would sure feel good about now.

"Mr. Harshaw," she said in the cool, professional voice she had developed over the years, "I believe you may need a bit of tutoring. I don't have time to go over all the concepts in my class, one on one, but perhaps I can recommend someone who can help you." She scribbled the name and number of an English major who often tutored to make money and handed it to him.

"Thanks, Dr. Cooper," he said gratefully. "I gotta start passing your class, or the coach says he'll kick me off the team."

"Ken," she said in a gentler tone as he got up to go. "Tell me, what made you decide to take a poetry class?"

Ken hesitated for a long moment. "Uh—"

He seemed embarrassed. Obviously, she thought sympathetically, he was trying to better himself. He wanted to learn something more uplifting, something worthwhile. That was actually quite a noble goal. She thought it was rather sweet of him.

"My roommate last year told me you were a babe," he said at last.

Drew felt a flush composed equally of embarrassment and anger suffuse her cheeks. If there was one thing she hated, it was being called a babe. She was an intelligent, well-educated woman, damn it.

She decided she was going to kill Ken's former roommate. No, she was going to kill Ken, no matter how utterly clueless he was.

Then her sense of humor kicked in, and she smiled wryly.

"I'm not a babe, Ken. I'm a slave driver."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I figured that out." He hefted his backpack onto his broad shoulders and all but ran from her office.

The moment the door closed behind him she opened the right-hand drawer of her oak desk, where she kept all her personal stuff, and drew out a book.

Not just any book.

Farthest Space: The Beginning, by Max Sinclair.

Last night she'd been standing in The Tome Place, paging through a Maya Angelou book, when she'd suddenly become aware of the science fiction section, as if it had abruptly materialized in the middle of the store. She'd never before so much as noticed there was a science fiction section, yet she'd suddenly felt an overwhelming compulsion to go over and look at Max Sinclair's novels.

Trekking into the science fiction and fantasy section of the bookstore, boldly going where no professor of literature had gone before, had been oddly embarrassing. Everyone knew her—Tiffani worked there, after all—and she rarely ventured past the literature section. Even though Tiffani hadn't happened to be in the store, she had felt as flustered and conspicuous as if she were purchasing a vibrator. But the three men browsing amidst Tolkien and Robert Jordan books hadn't appeared to notice. One guy had even

taken a look at the volume she snatched furtively off the shelf and said in a friendly tone, "That's a really good one. You'll like it."

She very much doubted she'd like it. In fact, she wasn't even really sure why she'd bought the book, although she'd assured herself it was because she wanted to find out more about the guy Tiffani was currently interested in. She flipped the novel open, doing her best to ignore the muscular, half-naked man brandishing an enormous ray gun on the cover. "If that isn't Freudian, I don't know what is," she muttered.

The first thing she noticed was that Max had dedicated the book to his mother, and not a girlfriend. Now why do I care? she scolded herself. Of course, the answer was obvious and reassuring: she was worried about Tiffani's feelings.

Yes, she decided. That was definitely the reason for her concern.

Flipping to Chapter One, she began reading. Max definitely knew how to start with a bang, she noticed, throwing his hero, the muscular and noble Captain McNeill, into a dangerous situation from the very first page. In this case his battleship, the Arisia, was beset by pirates and suffering from a hull breach.

She read for three pages, trying to suspend the more critical portion of her brain and just enjoy it. The fact was it wasn't half bad—not nearly as awful as she'd thought at the convention. She didn't pretend to know much about science fiction, but the writing was tight, if a little excessively descriptive, and the dialogue was fairly realistic. And Captain McNeill had a female executive officer, so perhaps the book wasn't as sexist as she had thought. Maybe Max was right. Maybe she just needed to give his book a chance.

Unbidden, the thought occurred to her that maybe she just needed to give Max a chance.

Someone knocked at the door, and Drew stuffed the book back into the drawer, slamming it closed as if science fiction novels were a controlled substance.

"Come in."

The door opened, and in walked the absolute last person she'd expected to see. Drew rose to her feet, struck dumb.

"How are you, Drew?"

Drew stared at her former boyfriend, Professor James Barton, and distaste made her upper lip curl. James hadn't changed much in the year since they'd broken up, although his graying hair was getting rather sparse in the front, bearing an unattractive resemblance to tufts of weeds growing in a desert. In the back his hair was still hippie-long and pulled back in a ponytail, and he wore the same shabby old tweed coat over a black turtleneck. She was pretty sure the only shirts he owned were black turtlenecks. James had never been big on originality.

James was a professor in the history department, and the two of them rarely spoke these days. They were professionally civil at public functions, although Drew had once dumped a Coke in his lap and claimed it was an accident. But James hadn't sought her out in a year, and she much preferred it that way. She spoke in her coldest tone, which Tiffani referred to as her "iceberg voice."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

James hesitated, then offered her a smile that showed all his yellowing teeth. "I'm not dating Lydia anymore, Drew. I thought you'd want to know."

Damn. No one had told her. Even though James wasn't in her department, his breakup with his most recent girlfriend was the sort of thing she ordinarily would have heard about over the campus

grapevine. He'd been dating one of his former students, a skinny, redheaded bimbo, which was the sort of thing that lent itself to avid gossip. She guessed, though, that her colleagues had been wary of sharing this news with her, knowing her history with James.

But as far as she was concerned, Lydia had finally proven she had a brain in her head, which Drew had previously assumed was filled with air, or possibly, a vacuum. "Why on earth would I care? Frankly, James, I don't give a damn."

James's smarmy smile faded slightly. "Now, Drew," he said in a conciliatory voice, "I know we didn't part on the best of terms—"

"You called me a slut," Drew reminded him in a dangerous tone.

"Yes, well, you called me something worse."

"An asshole, if I recall correctly. But only after you accused me of—how did you so gracefully put it?—shagging the football team. The entire football team."

"Very well," James conceded, "we parted on extremely acrimonious terms. But now that Lydia and I are no longer seeing one another—"

"Don't say it," Drew said sharply. "Don't even think it, James. The absolute last thing I want is you back in my life."

"I understand you're still not dating anyone else."

Drew narrowed her eyes. "I don't think that's any of your business."

Oblivious to her dangerous expression, James went on, "We were good together, Drew. Damned good. Don't you remember?"

Drew gave him an incredulous stare. "Are you insane, James? What I remember is that you were jealous and possessive, and toward the end of our relationship you were downright emotionally abusive. We were not 'good together.' We were extremely bad for each other."

"It's just that I've come to realize how much I miss you, Drew."

Drew felt a burning desire to jump over the desk and begin pummeling him with her fists. She fiercely controlled the impulse. She wasn't going to let James get to her this time, wouldn't let him manipulate her emotions the way he had when they were dating. This time she wouldn't permit it. She simply wouldn't let him back in her life.

She spoke through gritted teeth. "Get out, James."

"But Drew—"

"Get out," she repeated coldly. "And let me assure you that I have about as much desire to date you again as I have to date an iguana. Don't approach me again."

Looking abashed, James slunk out. Shaking with fury, Drew closed the door behind him, sat back down at her desk, and drew out the Farthest Space book. She tried to read it, but found she was too disturbed by her encounter with a distinctly unpleasant aspect of her past. After half an hour she had only read five pages.

She was surprised to realize how angry James could still make her, after over a year had passed. At any rate, it was almost time for her next class. She put the novel away, carefully concealing it in the drawer beneath her purse, and left her office.

As she always did, she paused to check the envelope affixed to her door, where students could drop off papers, and found a white envelope addressed with the words Dr. Drew Cooper. Curious, she opened it

and found a short message. Chills ran down her spine as she read the anonymous typed words.

You'll be sorry for what you did to me. I'll make you sorry.

She stuffed the envelope back in her purse and cursed lividly. Whether she liked it or not, James was back in her life.

And so was trouble.

Chapter 5

Women from dozens of alien planets have thrown themselves at me.

I do my utmost not to complain.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

"I think you should call the police."

Drew shot her sister a rueful grin. "Don't be silly, Tiff. It's no big deal, really. James is just trying to scare me."

"I don't know why you assume James left that note," Tiffani objected.

"Because it seems like something he would do. He likes to control people. He tried to keep me on a leash the whole time we dated. And when I refused to let him get control of me this time, I imagine he was ticked off."

"Are you sure you shouldn't let the cops know about it?"

Drew waved her hand negligently. Truth be told, the anonymous note had sent a wave of anxiety through her. Being threatened by someone who didn't leave his name was definitely creepier than being threatened face to face. And it worried her that James had backed down in her office, only to leave a note later. That was entirely too much like being stalked.

But the last thing she wanted to do was upset her sister. "Don't worry about it, Tiff. I guess I shouldn't have mentioned it at all. It's not that big a deal."

"Well, okay," Tiffani said. She was obviously not completely reassured, but appeared willing to drop the matter if Drew was. "Help me with dinner, then."

"Dinner?" Drew repeated, puzzled. "But it's three o'clock in the afternoon."

Tiffani did not quite meet her eyes. "I, uh, sort of invited someone for dinner."

Drew frowned. Something about Tiffani's oddly diffident attitude rang alarm bells. "Who?"

A faint blush appeared on Tiffani's freckled cheeks. "Maxfield Sinclair."

"But I thought—" Drew hesitated. "You told me you asked him out at the barbecue."

"Well, I did. Sort of. I just thought it would be easier to have him over. You know, kind of make friends with him first."

"Okay," Drew said, a little puzzled as to exactly what was going on here. Tiffani tended to be a little nonlinear, conversationally speaking. "I'll help you make dinner, then I'll get out of your hair."

Tiffani grabbed her arm. "No! You have to stay!"

"What?" Now Drew was truly confused. "I'll just go out somewhere and take Alice with me so you and Max can have a nice quiet evening."

"No!" Tiffani said. "I don't want it to be like a date, don't you see, Drew?"

Drew looked at her sister thoughtfully. She knew Tiffani hadn't really dated anyone since Lucas had left her a year before. Tiffani had always had a hard time asking men out, usually manipulating Drew into doing it for her, and she'd been pretty busy with Alice the past year anyway. Babies had a way of

making you forget your social life. Even Tiffani, who thought collecting men was the purpose of her existence. "So you just want this to be a casual thing," she said.

Tiffani bit her lower lip, managing to look cute and perturbed at the same time. "I'm just not ready for a serious date," she said softly.

"Well..." Drew sighed. This had the potential to be a big mess, she thought, recalling that Tiffani didn't have a clue that Max had asked her out. She had thought she was being tactful by keeping that piece of information to herself. Now she wondered if she shouldn't have mentioned it to Tiffani after all.

She couldn't help but wonder exactly what Max expected tonight. Had Tiffani made it clear to him that she was the one who was interested in him?

She hated to bring up the subject of a possible rivalry, but she had to ask. "Are you sure he's, uh, not interested in me?"

Tiffani stared at her for a moment, then burst into giggles. "Like he would think about dating you, after the way you criticized his book!"

Drew cringed. Tiffani was right. Max should have wanted to avoid her like the plague.

But he'd asked her out anyway.

"Okay," she agreed, albeit reluctantly. "I'll stay for dinner. And I guess I'll help you cook it, though I don't know why I should, considering I'm not the one who invited him."

Tiffani jumped up and hugged her. "Thanks, Drew. You're the best sister in the whole world."

She ran off toward the kitchen. Drew went upstairs to get changed out of her suit, wondering what Max really expected. It should be an interesting evening.

She stepped into her bedroom and tossed her briefcase onto the lacy, snowy white comforter that adorned her antique cherry four-poster. As she changed into casual clothes, the phone rang. She slid her long legs into her jeans and reached toward the phone to pick it up, only to realize it had stopped ringing. It was, she thought, most likely for Tiffani. Probably Max Sinclair calling to say he'd be a few minutes late. Or it might be a wrong number. Lately they'd had quite a few calls from people who hung up the minute she picked up the phone.

She tossed on a T-shirt and gave brief thought to putting on more makeup, then scoffed at herself. Who was she trying to impress, anyway? Certainly not Max Sinclair. Irritated with herself, she went down the stairs, only to hesitate on the bottom step when she heard Tiffani's voice in the kitchen, saying her name.

"I have to go," Tiffani was saying in an intense, low voice. "Drew will be down here any minute."

Drew stood still, puzzled. Why would Tiff think she had to end the conversation just because her sister was coming downstairs? It sounded almost as if Tiffani was talking to a boyfriend and wanted privacy. Maybe, she thought, it was Max on the phone.

There was a pause, then Tiffani said in a voice barely above a whisper, "I know, but Drew isn't going to be happy about you calling here. You know how she feels about you."

An explosion of fireworks went off in Drew's brain. James, she thought with fury. Damn him to hell. As if it wasn't enough he was bothering her at work, threatening her, for God's sake, now he was calling here and trying to get Tiffani on his side. What was wrong with the man, anyway? Couldn't he take no for an answer?

She jumped off the last step, making sure her feet hit the charcoal gray tiled floor with enough force

that Tiffani would hear her. Sure enough, when she went into the kitchen, the phone was back on its cradle and Tiffani sat gazing innocently at the television.

"Who was that on the phone?" Drew asked.

Tiffani looked up as if she'd just noticed Drew. Unfortunately, she wasn't a very convincing actress, and she might as well have had a blinking guilt sign over her head. "Oh, nobody," she said with an over-bright smile. "Just a wrong number again."

Drew ground her teeth together. Tiffani was obviously trying to protect her, which wasn't really surprising, given what she'd told her sister about the typed note she'd received. Doubtless Tiffani thought it was best if she and James didn't have the chance to speak. She thought about forcing Tiffani to confess everything, and then decided against it. James wasn't worth the price of an argument with her sister. For that matter, James wasn't worth much of anything.

And who knew, maybe Tiff was right. She didn't feel much like dealing with a second confrontation with James today.

"Okay," she said. "Want me to make a salad?"

At precisely seven o'clock Max rang the doorbell. Tiffani answered it and brought him into the sparkling white kitchen, where Drew was putting the last touches to a lentil salad.

"Hi," Drew said politely.

"Hi," Max said. She was aware of his eyes on her. For that matter she was acutely aware of him, in a way she couldn't remember being aware of a man before. His golden brown hair was so neatly combed that it made her involuntarily imagine running her fingers through it, just to muss it up a bit. He was dressed in a pair of carefully pressed khaki slacks and a dark green polo shirt that clung to his wide shoulders. The shirt made his eyes appear more vividly green than ever. He looked incredibly sexy.

He was the best-looking man she'd ever laid eyes on. Small wonder Tiffani had such a big crush on him.

A jeering voice in her head suggested she had as much of a crush on him as Tiffani did, but she dismissed the suggestion instantly. She had merely been admiring a handsome, well-built male. Perfectly normal female behavior, she assured herself.

"I hope you like lentils," she said, trying for an offhand tone. She didn't want him to have the slightest idea of how much his presence affected her. And she sure as hell didn't want Tiffani to have any idea of it.

He looked at the bowl she was stirring. A bewildered expression crossed his face. "Lentils?"

"Well, Tiffani is grilling chicken, but I thought I'd make lentil salad. It's my specialty."

"No one makes a lentil salad quite like Drew," Tiffani interjected.

Max gave the salad a dubious look. "Yeah. Yeah, I can see that."

Evidently Maxfield Sinclair wasn't into low-fat cuisine, Drew thought with a touch of annoyance. Well, what had she expected? She reminded herself for the hundredth time that they had nothing, absolutely nothing, in common.

She realized that he was staring at her hands as she stirred the salad. Self-consciously, she stopped the motion, and his eyes flickered upward, to her face. Their gazes locked and held. She looked up into the electric green depths of his eyes and felt as if she were falling into them.

"Want a beer, Max?"

Max gave a start, as if he'd totally forgotten Tiffani's presence, and turned, a little guiltily, to accept a beer from her. "Sure. Thanks."

Tiffani looked a little wounded, and Drew realized she'd noticed Max's preoccupation. Hopefully, she thought, Tiffani hadn't noticed he was staring at her. Just then a wail sounded from the other room.

"Alice is awake," Tiffani said. "Excuse me."

"It's okay, Tiff," Drew said hastily. "I'll go pick her up."

She saw gratitude in her sister's eyes. Leaving the room, she went into the living room, where Alice had been snoozing contentedly in her playpen. Now she was standing up, peering plaintively over the top and howling as if she'd been abandoned there for days.

Drew scooped her up, and the child stopped wailing. By the time she'd changed Alice's diaper, washed her hands, and played with her niece for a few moments, she thought Tiffani and Max had had enough time to talk. For now. She went back into the kitchen, carrying Alice.

"Here she is," she announced, and put the toddler on the floor. Max knelt on the floor.

"Hi, Alice. Remember me?"

Confronted with a strange face at close range, Alice immediately made a beeline for her mother's leg and hid her face.

"She's a little shy with strangers," Tiffani explained.

"I don't blame her," Max said, standing up. "So am I. Where's her father?"

Sorrow flickered across Tiffani's face. "He left when I was nine months pregnant. I haven't seen him for a year. He hasn't tried to visit Alice or anything."

Watching Max closely, Drew saw the flash of surprise in his eyes, and she instantly recognized that he had been operating under the assumption that Tiffani was married. Evidently on Saturday he had assumed Tiffani's husband was somewhere in the crush of people at the barbecue. When he had asked after Alice's father, he had obviously expected to hear that he was upstairs, or in the backyard.

Which meant, she realized with dismay, that he hadn't guessed Tiffani was interested in him. He had probably assumed that Tiffani had intended to set him and Drew up, and was just now realizing his error. To his credit, he recovered quickly from his surprise.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "That was really lousy of him."

"Thanks," Tiffani said. She made a valiant effort at her happy grin, but it looked more like a grimace of pain. "I don't really think much about him any more."

"Doesn't sound like he was worth a lot of thought."

"He was a jerk," Tiffani agreed. She smiled, a little wanly. "So, how about dinner?"

The long mahogany table in Drew's dining room was topped with an elaborately embroidered white tablecloth that screamed "hand stitched antique" so loudly Max was terrified he was going to spill something on it, and the fragile, pink-flowered china looked like something a Victorian matron might have used a hundred years ago. For a guy who usually ate pizza off a Styrofoam plate while sprawled in front of the TV, it was a bit intimidating. It had been a long time since he'd had a civilized dinner. But he was surprised to discover he was actually enjoying it.

Despite the fact that the lentil salad looked like something that might come out of a can for Blue, Max discovered that it was actually pretty good. He'd never had lentils before, but the salad had tomatoes, green peppers, and onions to enliven it, and the flavor of the lentils was distinctively earthy and surprisingly tasty. The chicken, grilled with barbecue sauce, was good too.

All in all, dinner was almost good enough to let him forget his mortification.

It had been stupid, stupid, of him to assume, in this day and age, that Tiffani was married. Somehow, given the combination of the fact that her last name was different from Drew's and the fact that she had a child, it had never occurred to him that she might be divorced. He had just assumed Alice's father was somewhere in the crowd on Saturday.

A really dumb assumption.

Now he had not only offended his hostess by asking an unforgivably tactless question, but had gotten himself into a bit of a mess. He had come here under the impression that Tiffani wanted to set him up with Drew. He hadn't realized she might want him herself.

But given the way she'd been eyeing him, he thought that was pretty damned likely. He remembered what she'd said at the barbecue: It's lonely, being single.

She hadn't been talking about Drew. She'd been talking about herself.

I should have known, he chided himself. God knew Drew had made it clear enough on Saturday that she wasn't interested in him. He'd been dreaming, letting his overactive imagination go wild again, when he'd thought Tiffani might be setting him up with Drew.

He figured Drew didn't have the slightest clue he'd thought Tiffani was inviting him here because she wanted to set them up. Drew probably imagined he'd come because he wanted to go out with Tiffani. He didn't want to consider too closely what conclusions she'd draw from that assumption.

He was interested in Drew, but he had accepted a dinner invitation from her sister. Didn't that qualify him as world-class slime?

Maybe it just qualifies me as really, really dumb.

He decided he was probably overreacting. He didn't have any real reason to believe Tiffani wanted to go out with him, after all. No woman had wanted to go out with him for years—well, sure, he got e-mails from obsessed fans asking to have his baby all the time, but no real woman had wanted to go out with him for years. He couldn't see any reason why one would want to now. It actually made more sense that Tiffani and Drew had simply invited him over to thank him for getting Alice out of harm's way, now that he thought about it. Wasn't that what Tiffani had said? That she was inviting him over because she was grateful?

Yeah. That made perfect sense. Just a perfectly innocent, friendly dinner. He'd somehow conjured up romantic overtones that weren't there at all. Obviously his imagination had been working too hard lately.

"So, Max," Tiffani said diffidently. "Do you like action movies?"

Max shrugged. "Sure."

"Would you want to go see one this weekend?"

Max felt his heart sink. Tiffani went on doggedly, apparently oblivious to his expression. "There's a new one out— Sudden Death. Have you seen it?"

"Uh, no."

"So, want to go?"

Max mentally reviewed his options while pretending to chew his chicken. He could say no, and look like a major jerk to Tiffani. Or he could say yes, and look like a major jerk to Drew, who would naturally believe he was interested in anything that wore a skirt. The truth was, he didn't have the slightest romantic interest in Tiffani, and didn't particularly want to go out with her. But he hated to say so with her big, hopeful eyes pinned on him, he thought, swallowing the mouthful of chicken with as much difficulty as if it had suddenly become dirt.

He didn't want to hurt the feelings of such a sweet, defenseless young woman, especially after she'd been nice enough to ask him over for dinner. Besides, he reminded himself, she wasn't asking for a lifetime commitment. They could go out just once, in a casual, friendly way. After all, it wasn't as if going to see Sudden Death would be earth-shatteringly romantic anyway. What could it possibly hurt?

Besides, it occurred to him that if he said no, he'd never see Drew again. That would be bad.

Really, really bad.

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I'd like to go."

Tiffani relaxed and gave him her nose-crinkling smile. "Awesome."

He smiled back, carefully avoiding Drew's silver-dagger gaze. Dating one sister when I'm interested in the other, he thought grimly. Not nice. Not nice at all.

He definitely qualified as world-class slime.

Chapter 6

"Hello, Maxfield."

Max stood at his front door and stared in blank surprise at the iron-haired woman standing outside. She favored him with a regal smile.

"May I come in?"

"Uh—" Max stepped aside. "Sure, Mom. Come on in."

Virginia Sinclair brushed past him. Blue trotted up to her, waving his fringed tail, and stuck his long muzzle into the palm of her hand. She patted the dog affectionately. "How are you, Blue?"

Max shut the heavy mahogany door, inset with leaded glass, behind her. "Is there a reason you're being more polite to my dog than to me, Mother?"

His mother turned to face him, her eyes glinting dangerously. "Is there a reason you didn't call me and tell me you'd been hurt, Maxfield?"

Max scowled. Only his mother called him Maxfield. It always made him feel like he was ten years old again, in deep trouble for putting worms on her dinner plate. "It wasn't a big deal, Mother. I didn't want to worry you."

"You thought it would be less alarming for me to read about it in the newspaper, I presume?"

"Look," Max said impatiently, "I didn't realize it would get into the Florida papers. Otherwise I would have told you."

"You're becoming extremely well-known, Maxfield. And what you did was quite brave."

"What I did was stupid."

"Reckless, perhaps. But not stupid." She paused, as if giving it some thought. "Not entirely so, at any rate."

"Thanks. I think."

Virginia smiled at him and held out her arms, and he came across the room and dropped a kiss on her cheek. She beamed at him. "It's good to see you, Maxfield."

"You too, Mom." His mother was more fragile than she had been when he was a child, yet despite the iron-gray hair and the wrinkles radiating from the corners of her eyes she still managed to be as intimidating as ever. Some things never changed. Mom might get older, but she was still Mom.

"You can get my bags from the car."

He'd figured she was staying in a local hotel. "Your bags?"

"Yes. I've decided to visit you for a while."

The imperative note in her voice made it clear she would brook no argument. Not that Max would have argued anyway, as he was actually pretty fond of his mother.

He wondered exactly what her visit was about. He had a sneaking suspicion it wasn't just about his injury. It was unlike Mom to come all this way to see him without calling in advance. Something else was obviously going on, but he knew better than to press Mom for details. She'd tell him when she was good and ready, and not a minute before.

He yielded to the inevitable. "That's fine, Mom, but I have to tell you I have a date tonight."

"A date?"

"You don't have to sound so shocked," Max said, annoyed.

"But I am shocked, Maxfield. Astonished. Astounded, even. You haven't had a date for years."

"It hasn't been that long," Max muttered defensively.

She lifted a disbelieving eyebrow, and he shrugged. "Okay. It has been that long. But believe it or not, tonight I've got a date. You have lousy timing, Mom."

His mother looked at him hopefully. "May I meet her?"

"This is our first date, Mom. The last thing I need is you scaring her off."

"Why, Maxfield," Virginia said reproachfully. "I have never scared off one of your young ladies."

Max snorted. "What about that time I brought Linda McQueen home from college, and you told her I was too good for a slut like her?"

"I didn't say slut, Max."

"You implied it."

"Well, it was true," she said with lofty dignity.

"No one I ever dated was good enough for you, Mom."

"No one you ever dated was good enough for you, Maxfield. I certainly hope your taste in women has improved."

Max thought of Tiffani, her bubbly personality and her Valley Girl way of talking, and he sighed. Mom would definitely not approve of Tiffani. Drew, though—there was another story entirely. Drew was gorgeous, classy, and well-spoken, and more importantly, she had a vivid intelligence that shone through every word she uttered, to say nothing of a cocky self-confidence Mom would love.

But he wasn't dating Drew.

He wished to hell he was.

"Yeah, Mom," he said glumly. "I think you could say my taste in women has definitely improved."

Drew hadn't seen Tiffani this worked up about a guy in ages. Tiffani had spent almost an hour putting on makeup and doing her hair, and now Drew watched as her sister changed from jeans and a see-through blouse to nice slacks to a dress and back again. As the moments passed, her amusement slowly slid into annoyance.

"For God's sake, Tiff," she said at last, "it's just a movie."

"It's Maxfield Sinclair," Tiffani answered, her voice muffled as she pulled yet another blouse over her head.

"So? He's not the President of the United States or the Prince of Wales, for crying out loud. He's just a guy."

"A really, really nice-looking guy."

"He's okay," Drew said. Unbidden, a memory of Max's gold-streaked brown hair and green eyes, of the way the polo shirts he wore stretched across his chest and shoulders, flashed into her mind. Max was definitely more than okay, but she wasn't about to admit that to her little sister.

The doorbell rang. Tiffani's alarmed face peered out from beneath the filmy pink blouse she was

currently trying on. "Get that, will you, Drew?"

"It's probably Max. You answer it."

"I'm not ready yet. Look, just tell him I'll be down in a couple of minutes, okay?"

Drew huffed in annoyance. "Fine. I'll tell him you'll be down when you're finished preening." She stalked from the room, aware that she was being snotty to her sister for absolutely no good reason that she could think of.

There's a reason, all right. A damned good reason. I'm jealous.

She shoved the thought aside impatiently as she went down the staircase. There was no way, none at all, she was jealous. Max was a nice guy, but not her type at all. Good-looking, to be sure, but none too bright. Anyway, she reminded herself impatiently, she didn't need a guy right now. She had enough things to deal with. Tiffani was welcome to him.

She opened the door and promptly forgot how to breathe.

Max was standing there, dressed in jeans and a burgundy collared shirt. The denim clung to his thighs and made it abundantly clear there was serious muscle there, and the shirt stretched across what looked like several yards' worth of shoulders. Even in the late summer evening light his eyes blazed vividly, impossibly green. He was easily the sexiest man she'd ever seen in her life.

"Uh ..." she said. Beyond his broad shoulders she could just glimpse his car, a red Mustang with a tan convertible top, parked in her driveway. She figured he could probably afford any sports car he wanted, up to and including a Porsche or a Ferrari, but it didn't surprise her that he chose to drive something less flashy. His car reflected the kind of guy he seemed to be—sexy but unpretentious.

Max smiled at her, a little quizzically. "Can I come in?"

"Oh. Sure." Feeling dazed, she stepped aside and waved him in. As he passed her, she caught his scent. No cologne, just soap and water and the odor of a clean man. She somehow managed to keep herself from falling over.

"Tiffani's upstairs," she said in her coolest, most professorial voice, hoping it would cover her idiotic reaction to his presence. "She'll be downstairs in just a minute."

"Great. Thanks."

They stood looking at each other in the tile-floored entry until Drew recovered enough to remember her manners. "Uh, want to come in to the living room and sit down?"

"Sure." He followed her in and settled his massive bulk into a flowered Queen Anne chair, looking seriously out of place in her chintzy Laura Ashley living room. He was the kind of guy who would look good in a leather and cherry library, or on a Western saddle atop a big brawny horse. Or on top of a Harley.

Or, she thought wryly, on the cover of one of his own novels, half naked and brandishing a really big ... ray gun.

The moment they sat down, Alice, who had been playing quietly in her playpen, popped her head up like a groundhog from its hole and looked at them expectantly. Relieved to have something to do besides gape at Max like the idiot she was rapidly becoming, Drew picked the little girl up and cuddled her. Looking up, she saw Max's intense gaze on her.

"Do you have any kids, Drew?"

"No," Drew said, aware she sounded wistful. "How about you?"

He shook his head. "Never been married."

"I guess you like kids, though," she said, remembering the way he'd risked his life to rescue Alice.

"Yeah," he answered. "Especially little ones. I'm in no big hurry to have a teenager."

"Me neither. I took care of Tiffani after our mom died, when she was just sixteen, and she was a real handful. They're so nice when they're little."

"I've got a dog. That's enough for me for now."

"A dog? Really?" Another thing they didn't have in common, she thought. She didn't much care for dogs and couldn't imagine ever having one in the house. Slobbering, shedding, fawning creatures. Not too unlike a one-year-old child, she added mentally as Alice drooled happily onto her shirt.

"Yeah. A collie."

Naturally. Max would have a big manly dog like a collie. Somehow she couldn't see him with a French poodle, or one of those little fuzzy toilet brush dogs. She nodded. "A Lassie type dog."

"Yeah, except he's a blue merle."

"A what?"

"A blue merle. It's like a tricolor with some mottled gray mixed in."

"I see," she said vaguely. In fact she didn't see and couldn't imagine what sounded like a very odd combination of colors. It sounded like a funny-looking dog to her. Lassie with a bad dye job.

"He's really smart, though," Max went on, warming to his subject, and she realized he'd probably talk for hours about his dog with a little encouragement, just as Tiffani could chatter forever about how incredibly brilliant Alice was. This despite the fact that the most amazing mental feat Alice was really capable of was finding lint on the floor and eating it.

"I bet. Just like Lassie."

"Not quite," Max said. Amusement lit his eyes like green lanterns. "As I recall, Lassie understood just about anything anyone said to her. Blue doesn't understand many English words besides sit, stay, and get the hell out of my way. On the up side, he doesn't talk much, either. Just hangs out with me when I'm writing."

"I guess that's a good thing."

"Yeah. Writing can be kind of lonely."

"Don't you get fan letters?"

"Sure, all the time. But a lot of them are pretty strange. I had this one fan that sent me nude photos of herself for a year and kept begging me to sire her baby. She even had a website dedicated to me. It was kind of creepy." He chuckled wryly. "Anyway, getting e-mails from people you've never met isn't quite the same as having someone to talk to."

At the slightly plaintive note in his voice, Drew looked up. In his face she saw wistfulness. Max, she recognized for the first time, was lonely.

She couldn't imagine how a man who looked like Max could possibly be lonely. Surely a big macho guy like him had some male buddies to drink beer and go to sports bars with. Surely, despite his slightly awkward, diffident manner, he had women dripping off him. The man was, as Tiffani would have said, a babe magnet.

Surely he had someone else to spend time with besides his dog.

Or maybe not. She recalled his comment that she'd been the first person to visit him in the hospital, despite the fact that he'd been there a whole day. It seemed likely he didn't have many friends after all. Maybe he wasn't a smooth operator after all, but just a guy who'd wanted to go out with her.

Don't be stupid, she chided herself mentally. How badly could he have wanted to date her? Maybe he was lonely, but evidently he was willing to go out with just about any woman to ease his loneliness. After all, three days after he'd asked her out he'd agreed to go out with Tiffani.

As if on cue, Tiffani arrived, along with a cloud of Chanel Number Five that was so overpowering it practically hung visibly in the air around her. She had settled on the pink, filmy blouse and a very tight pair of hip hugger jeans that looked like they'd been painted on. Drew thought sourly that they'd probably split when she leaned over to get in Max's car.

For some reason the thought pleased her.

"Hi, Max," Tiffani said, beaming from ear to ear.

Max stood up politely. "Hello, Tiffani."

Tiffani looked at Drew. "Are you sure you and Alice will be okay tonight?"

"Of course," Drew said. "I do know how to change a diaper, Tiff. And it's practically her bedtime anyway. Don't worry about it. Just have a nice time."

"Thanks," Tiffani said. She bounded toward the door, Max following in her wake. Drew noticed his gaze didn't appear to be aimed at her rear end despite the blatant advertising of too-tight denim.

She might as well wear a blinking neon sign on her ass, Drew thought grimly as they disappeared through the door, and then could have kicked herself for the horrendous unsisterliness of that thought.

Why in the world was she so bitchy tonight?

It didn't have anything to do with the fact that her little sister was going out with a good-looking, sexy guy in a red Mustang convertible while she was home alone, babysitting. She was certain of that.

She couldn't possibly be that petty. Could she?

"Must be PMS," she said to Alice, despite the fact that she'd had her period less than two weeks ago.

"That has to be it."

"Da," Alice said.

His massive, powerful hands, though accustomed to wielding some of the deadliest weapons known to man, were incredibly gentle as they stroked through the smooth satin of her hair...

Drew dropped *Farthest Space: The Beginning* as if it had burned her fingers. Alice was asleep upstairs in her crib, and Drew had decided to take advantage of the unusual peace and quiet to finish reading Max's book. Now she was sorry she hadn't picked up something else. She hadn't realized his books were so, well, hot.

Captain McNeill, whom Drew had dubbed the Amazing Space Stud, was in love with his executive officer, but he was unable to act on his desires because they worked together. Apparently McNeill compensated for this by having randy sex with every alien woman he encountered.

The sex wasn't described explicitly, but somehow Max managed to get his point across anyway. McNeill evidently had a way with his ray gun, because he satisfied every woman he met...repeatedly. Evidently he wasn't just the galaxy's greatest warrior, but the galaxy's greatest lover as well.

And to her annoyance, somehow she didn't seem able to stop herself from envisioning Max as the hero of the novel.

She flipped the novel over and looked at the cover, showing the half-naked, ray gun-brandishing McNeill in an alien landscape of dark rocks and weirdly misshapen trees. Max was actually significantly more gorgeous than the guy on the cover, whose muscles bulged in all the wrong places. Evidently the artist didn't have a really good understanding of human anatomy. Either that, or the model had some kind of hormonal imbalance. Max's muscles, on the other hand, were perfect.

The trouble was, she admitted gloomily as she turned the book over and looked at the photo of Max on the back cover, it wasn't at all difficult to envision Max as the hero of a novel.

Or for that matter, as the galaxy's greatest lover.

She tossed the book onto the coffee table with annoyance and leaned her head back on the sofa cushions, staring at the ceiling. What in the world was wrong with her, mooning over the guy her sister was currently out on a date with?

She reminded herself that Tiffani and Max were watching Sudden Death—a movie she herself would doubtless have walked out on after ten minutes. After that they'd most likely stop at a fast food place and have a pair of big, greasy hamburgers with equally greasy fries. They were probably having a great time together.

She and Max would never have fun together. Max just wasn't her type.

The fact that he was sinfully gorgeous and outrageously sexy was irrelevant.

Stop being a dog in the manger, she told herself sternly. You're not interested in Maxfield Sinclair, not in the least. Let Tiff have him, for heaven's sake.

Sighing, she picked up the novel to go back to Captain McNeill and his jumbo-sized ray gun. Just then there was a scraping sound at the back door.

Drew's head jerked up. She'd left the blind on the patio door open. The neighbors couldn't see in because of all the trees in the backyard, but she couldn't see out, either. It was too dark. She stood up and walked purposefully toward the door. It would probably be stupid to open the door, she reflected, then flung it open anyway.

A gust of cool wind swirled into the house as she stared out into the pitch darkness of her backyard. No one was on the flagstones of the patio, but she saw something scuttle behind the azalea bushes that lined the back of her yard, and then into the next yard over. Moments later someone started to run. In the darkness she couldn't see the person's identity, but she had a damned good idea who it was.

James, she thought with annoyance. Damn him. As if it wasn't enough that he'd actually asked her out, after all the things he'd said to her a year ago, now he was spying on her. Stalking her, for God's sake.

Toward the end of their relationship she'd begun to suspect James had a screw loose. Now she knew she had been wrong. The man had quite a few screws loose.

"If you come back here again I'll call the damn cops!" she yelled at the retreating, shadowy figure, and stepped back inside the house. As she did so, something lying on the deck, a piece of paper of some kind, caught her eye.

She leaned down and picked it up, expecting to see another threatening note. Instead what she saw was a snapshot of herself and Tiffani, smiling at the camera. A chill ran down her spine, a chill that had nothing whatsoever to do with the cool night air.

Her face was blacked out of the picture.

Chapter 7

When a Va'raan dreadnought, bristling with weaponry,
is spotted on an intercept course,
the most prudent course of action is flight.
To put it more succinctly, run like hell.
—Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

A few minutes into his date with Tiffani, Max remembered why he'd given up dating a long time ago. First dates were hell.

Tiffani always seemed to be a chatterbox, but tonight her condition had apparently been worsened by a bad case of nerves, and her prattle was as overwhelming as the cloyingly sweet perfume she'd liberally dosed herself with. She hadn't shut up since she'd settled into the passenger seat of his Mustang. Which perhaps was just as well, as it left him absolutely no room for any comments whatsoever. He was pretty damned awkward on first dates himself. Still, after less than fifteen minutes in her company he had found himself ready to sell his soul in exchange for ten seconds of silence. He had actually contemplated turning up his Journey CD loud enough to drown her out, but thought better of it just in time.

He just hoped she'd be quieter in the movie theater, or they'd both get thrown out.

His CD started to play "Wheel in the Sky," and Tiffani glared at the radio with unveiled disgust. "What is this stuff?"

Max managed to stop himself from bristling. "Journey," he said mildly.

"Jeez, it sounds like it's a hundred years old. Isn't there anything else on the radio?" She started pushing buttons and found a station on the radio that was apparently more to her taste. It sounded to Max like the kind of music sung by tone-deaf fourteen-year-old girls who liked to flaunt their midriffs, but he had enough sense not to say so.

Now he knew who'd chosen the music for the barbecue. It figured Tiffani would like Top 40. He couldn't imagine Drew listening to this sort of stuff. Hell, he couldn't imagine having to listen to this sort of stuff for more than ten minutes at a time. If there was a soundtrack in hell, he was pretty sure it would be sung by Britney Spears.

Things didn't improve once they got to the theater and he discovered he'd gotten the time wrong. The movie had already started ten minutes ago. Not that he went to see things like Sudden Death for the plot, but he would have liked some slight clue as to what was going on. As they walked in, a car exploded on the screen, and two guys started shooting at each other. The shoebox of a theater was pretty packed, but Max managed to find two seats next to each other and settled down next to Tiffani.

Five minutes later, just as he was beginning to figure out what was going on and why the two guys were shooting at each other, she shook his arm, dragging his attention away from the movie.

"Wouldn't you like some popcorn, Max?"

"Popcorn?" he said vaguely, trying to look at her for courtesy's sake, but watching out of the corner of his eye as another car went over a cliff and burst into a spectacular fireball.

"Don't you like to eat popcorn at the movies?" she whispered.

Max managed to suppress his irritated sigh. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Sure. Absolutely."

He stood up to his full six feet, four inches, earning the annoyance of the people behind him, and stumbled out of the dark theater into the lobby. There was an enormous line of people at the concession stand, and he got behind each and every one of them.

It was thirty excruciating minutes later before he got back into the movie theater, and he wondered sourly just how many explosions he'd missed. He sat down next to Tiffani, thrust a Coke toward her curtly, and held out the enormous bucket of popcorn he'd gotten. "Thanks," she whispered, and took a huge handful.

Max took a few kernels himself, sipped his Coke, and settled down to enjoy what remained of the movie.

"Max," she whispered.

He pretended he couldn't hear her.

"Max," she repeated, more urgently.

He kept his eyes on the screen and answered reluctantly. "Yeah?"

"You forgot to get butter on the popcorn."

Max figured things had to get better. God knew they couldn't get any worse. As they got into the car, he suppressed his first impulse, which was to drive back to Drew's at ninety miles an hour, stop just long enough to toss Tiffani out the open top of his convertible, and then drive home and never, ever go on a date again as long as he lived. The saner part of his mind recognized that was extreme. It wasn't her fault things had gone badly.

It wasn't her fault she liked popcorn.

Evidently everyone in Swift Creek had gone to see Sudden Death, because there was a rather large line of cars waiting to get on the main road. Max politely waved a dark German sedan out ahead of him, even though his every instinct was screaming for a hasty escape.

Forcing himself to be polite, he spoke over the god-awful music thumping relentlessly out of his car's speakers. "Want to stop for some food?"

He couldn't imagine how she could actually be hungry, considering she had consumed most of a mega-sized barrel of popcorn, swimming in artificially flavored grease poorly disguised as butter, all by herself. But to his surprised despair she nodded, her Shirley Temple curls bobbing. "I'd like that."

"Great," he said, trying really hard to sound like he meant it, but suspecting he sounded more like a man condemned to the gallows. "What do you like?"

"How about Willy's?"

Max nodded. At least, he thought, they had the same taste in restaurants. Willy's was a casual place that offered huge platters of good, ordinary food. Not at all like the French restaurants he supposed Drew liked. He could just imagine Drew demanding to go to a place called something along the lines of Le Maison Poisson and forcing him to order in French. He'd probably wind up ordering snails by accident. Or squid.

Hell, was there even a word for hamburger in French?

"Sounds good," he said, wondering why his mind had slipped to thoughts of Drew again. He figured he knew the answer to that question, and he chided himself mentally. It wasn't good form to obsess on one sister while out on a date with the other one.

I'm not obsessed, he told himself firmly as he guided the Mustang into a parking place at the outer fringes of Willy's parking lot. Another car, a black German sedan just like the one he'd noticed at the movie theater, began to drive in frustrated circles, apparently unable to find a parking spot. Willy's was evidently packed, which meant he would be forced to listen to Tiffani's chatter for at least half an hour. Even so, that might be better than listening to his own mind ramble on and on about Drew.

God help him, he was obsessed.

Tiffani popped out before he could open her door. Whether she was a feminist, or just incapable of being still for ten seconds more than necessary, he wasn't sure. He went around her side of the car and they walked in together, where the hostess told them it would be forty-five minutes before a table was available.

"Cool," Tiffani said. "That's a pretty short wait on a Friday night."

Forty-five minutes might as well have been an eternity as far as Max was concerned, but he wisely kept his opinion to himself. They sat down next to each other on a bench. The place was crowded, which necessitated their sitting close together. Her heavy perfume assaulted him, drowning out the appetizing odors of well-prepared food, and her denim-encased thigh pressed up right against his. He really ought to feel some sort of reaction to that, he thought, considering how long it had been since he'd been near a woman.

Come to think of it, he did feel a reaction. He wanted to move his leg away.

Not that he didn't like Tiffani. He did. But it was more a friendly kind of feeling. She was a sweet young woman. Clueless, but sweet. He realized that she reminded him entirely too much of a teenager for him to be attracted to her. His days of dreaming of dating the prom queen were long over.

"This is great," Tiffani said. "It's terrific to be out of the house. Ever since Alice, I don't get out as much as I'd like."

"Yeah, I can imagine."

"Alice is a nice kid, though," Tiffani went on in her usual stream-of-consciousness style. "I mean, for a baby."

Max sensed he was expected to agree. "She seems sweet," he offered.

"She is. Really terrific to come home to. I hate that she has to be with a babysitter all day long, though. I'd love to be a stay-at-home mom. I mean, every kid should have a father, you know?"

Max had a feeling that this conversation was wading into some extremely dangerous waters. He did his best to turn it back into the shallows. "I'm sure you're a terrific mom," he said. "I think one terrific parent is better than two poor ones, don't you?"

Tiffani beamed at the compliment. "I guess so," she agreed. "But two terrific ones would be even better, don't you think?"

"Um," Max said vaguely.

"I think you'd make a great father."

Max decided he should have just gone ahead and taken Tiffani home. She was sweet. She was very sweet. She was also about as subtle as a baseball bat cracking against his skull. This was their first date,

for God's sake. Even if it had gone swimmingly, he wouldn't have been ready to start thinking about commitment, matrimony, or fatherhood. As it was, he was hardly ready to think about the commitment of splitting an appetizer.

He was saved the necessity of having to formulate some sort of intelligent reply because Tiffani forged right on without him. She was a one-woman conversation, he thought sourly. "Have you ever been married, Max?"

"Uh ..." he said, and thought of Paula. He suppressed the memories firmly. "No."

"How old are you, anyway?"

He was a little surprised she didn't know, considering she was a rabid Farthest Space fan. Virtually any fact about his life, no matter how small, could be found on one of the many fansites about his books. Fans didn't seem really concerned about his privacy. "Thirty-three."

"Wow. Really?"

Slightly wounded by her tone, which implied that thirty-three was only slightly less than a hundred, he nodded. "Yeah. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

Jesus. He really was robbing the cradle. No wonder Tiffani talked like a teenager—she practically was one. It had never occurred to him that a woman who'd had time to get married, divorced, and have a child could be so young. Evidently Tiffani had been an early bloomer, he thought. Despite his surprise, he did his best to go on with the conversation.

"So what do you do? Didn't you tell me you work for a bookstore?"

"Yeah, the big bookstore downtown. You know, The Tome Place."

"That's a nice store."

"It's a pretty good job," Tiffani said. "Drew's always after me to finish getting my college degree, but I like what I'm doing. It's not just selling books and stocking shelves. I do story time for the little kids every week. And now I'm working on starting up an adult literacy project, too."

"Really?" Max said, impressed despite himself. Adult literacy seemed like too much of a serious concern for Tiffani. He hadn't thought she had a concern more serious than what shade of lipstick to wear.

"Yeah. You wouldn't believe how many adults there are in this community who can't read. I'm going to make sure I raise my kids to like books. I'm sure you feel the same way, being a writer and all."

"Naturally."

She beamed at him. "See? I knew it. You will make a great father."

There they were, back on that topic again. Max was beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be safer just to make a break for it. Maybe he should claim he had a headache or something. Perhaps appendicitis would be more convincing.

He was saved the necessity of escape, however, when the hostess called his last name, a whole lot earlier than she had predicted. He jumped to his feet immediately, hoping Tiffani would attribute his haste to hunger, rather than a desperate desire to avoid the rest of this conversation. "Great," he said, a little more enthusiastically than necessary. "I'm starved."

The bored-looking waitress took them to their table, then started into her spiel about the evening's

specials. Between the mahi-mahi and the lemon grilled chicken she suddenly stopped droning and looked hard at Max. "Hey," she said with a little more animation, "haven't I seen you somewhere?"

"Uh, I don't think so," Max said. She didn't look familiar to him, even though he came here fairly frequently. Willy's had a pretty high turnover rate among their staff.

"Are you, like, an actor?"

"No," Max said.

"I know!" the waitress said. "I saw you on the news. Don't you write books or something?"

"Uh—" Max said. He was half tempted to lie, but Tiffani cut in and saved him the trouble.

"He writes Farthest Space novels," she said brightly. "The TV series is based on his books. He's one of the best authors in the country."

That was a blatant lie, although whether Tiffani realized it or not he had no idea. He was a pretty good writer, but no one was ever going to confuse the stuff he wrote with Great Expectations—something he was sure Drew would have been happy to point out, had she been here.

Drew again. He shook his head. Somehow he needed to stop thinking about the woman.

The waitress was appropriately impressed. "Yeah, I remember now. You saved a little girl or something, didn't you?"

"That little girl was my daughter," Tiffani said proudly.

"Wow," the waitress said. She winked at Tiffani. "You hold onto this one, honey."

Tiffani blushed, and Max turned red. The waitress grinned. "I'll go get your drinks. They're on me."

As the waitress walked away, Tiffani shot Max an admiring look. "I've never been out with a celebrity before."

Faced with her adoring expression, Max turned redder. He was beginning to realize that Tiffani was developing a full-blown case of hero-worship, and he wasn't sure he liked being the object of it, particularly considering she tended to annoy the hell out of him. The whole situation was starting to make him feel pretty damned uncomfortable.

When the waitress brought them drinks—an appallingly blue mixed drink for Tiffani that involved just about every liquor under the sun and an iced tea for him—he busied himself pouring sugar into his tea. In a vain attempt to avoid the earnest sincerity of her gaze, he kept tearing off the top of the little white packets and pouring in sugar, one after the other.

At last he stirred the tea and took a sip. And winced. Tiffani eyed him with amusement.

"Is it a little sweet?"

He looked down and counted ten emptied packets. Ten. In his eagerness to keep himself occupied, he'd gotten a bit carried away. His tea was a little sweet the way Antarctica was a little cold.

"No," he lied. "It's okay. Just the way I like it. How's yours?"

Tiffani reached for her glass, her eyes still trained on him. Her hand collided with the glass, which promptly fell over, dumping every last drop of its preternaturally blue contents on his lap, along with a large quantity of ice cubes. Max stifled a curse, and Tiffani clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry," she gasped.

"It's okay," Max reassured her hastily. "Really."

She took her hands away from her mouth, and he saw she was giggling. Easy for her, he thought with annoyance. He was willing to bet she wouldn't be laughing if she'd been the one with a very cold drink dumped on her crotch.

At least, he amended, not if she'd been male.

She didn't seem to notice his irritation. "Oh, Max," she said, "You are so sweet!"

Wryly he thought if she could read his mind she wouldn't think he was sweet in the least. Because his thoughts were about as far from sweet as they could get. In fact, his thoughts were not nice at all.

He just wanted this night to be over with.

Max had never been more relieved in his life than when he walked Tiffani up the brick steps that led to her and Drew's front door. At last, the ordeal was over. He promised himself he'd never go on another date as long as he lived. He'd rather take up bungee jumping.

Tiffani tilted her face up to him. "Good night, Max."

"Night," he replied uncomfortably, noticing the way she parted her lips expectantly. Maybe he didn't know a whole lot about women, but he had the distinct impression she was angling for a kiss, which he wanted rather desperately to avoid. Fortunately she was too short to be able to plant a kiss on his lips without his active participation. "Uh—I had fun. Thanks."

"Thank you," she replied. He saw her stand up on tiptoe and purse her lips, and in a sudden spurt of panic he hastily backed away.

And promptly fell backward, down the steps.

He struck the concrete walk hard, grunting as the wind was driven out of him. Fortunately, his head hit the grass beside the walk, rather than the walk itself. Otherwise, he thought sardonically, he would probably have cracked the concrete.

"Max!" Tiffani ran down the steps after him. "Omigod! Are you all right?"

Max sat up and winced slightly, feeling a minor pain in his already-injured shoulder, but not much of anything else. "I'm okay," he said, and offered a reassuring smile. "I think the only thing that's really bruised is my dignity."

"Omigod," Tiffani said again. "You could have been killed."

He was pretty sure falling down three steps was unlikely to result in his demise, but he decided not to argue the point. More conversation would just prolong the agony of this date. "I'm fine," he said, rising easily to his feet. "Really."

"But you fell pretty hard," she said. "Are you sure you're not hurt?" Her hand reached out and poked him in the ass, presumably to check for injuries. Startled, Max lurched away from her and stumbled over a large flowerpot full of yellow chrysanthemums, falling to his knees.

Christ. If he didn't get away from her soon she was actually going to manage to kill him.

"I had a nice time," he said, scrambling hastily to his feet and walking backward toward the car.

"Really. It was... nice."

She seemed to take the hint at last and didn't pursue him further. "Me too," she said, and disappeared into the house.

Reeling with gratitude—or perhaps just as a result of his Tiffani-related injuries—Max climbed into the

Mustang and turned the engine over. As he did so, he noticed a dark luxury car sitting across the street. He pulled out onto the street.

The dark car followed.

Max looked in his mirror and frowned as he drove along. He was probably being paranoid, but he was pretty sure he'd seen that same car a couple of other times tonight. At the movie theater. At Willy's.

That car looked pretty damned familiar by now. Which was crazy.

He reminded himself that if someone was actually following him, it wouldn't be the first time he'd been followed by a rabid fan. His life was crazy right now. Someone had shot at him, actually tried to kill him. Maybe a little paranoia was a healthy thing.

Then again, there was an awful lot of boring black luxury cars in the world. It might just be a coincidence.

He decided to find out.

Braking hard, he swerved abruptly into a supermarket parking lot. He saw the red flash of brake lights as the car sped past him, then it turned into the next entrance to the parking lot, squealing its tires as it made the turn too quickly. A chill went through him.

He wasn't being paranoid. He was actually being followed.

For a brief moment he considered speeding toward the other car in order to get its license plate number, but remembering that he'd been shot at a couple of weeks before, he thought better of it. Getting away was probably his best option. He spun the Mustang in a 180, floored the gas pedal, and shot out of the parking lot, merging with traffic. His car might not be able to beat a Lamborghini driven by Bobby Wallace, but no normal driver was going to beat him off a corner.

He made a hard left turn at the next corner, then turned into a small neighborhood that he sometimes used as a cut-through. When he reemerged onto the major road, he was happy to see the other car was nowhere in sight. He'd lost the guy.

At least for now.

The explosion sent McNeill crashing to the metal-plated deck. Next to him fell his executive officer. He raised himself up on one arm, painfully, and looked at her. She was as pale as the Va'raan moon, and purple blood oozed sluggishly from her temple.

"Vaish! Are you all right?"

She didn't respond. His heart in his throat, McNeill felt desperately for her pulse. She couldn't be dead. She just couldn't.

"Vaish," he whispered desperately. "Please—"

The sound of the front door closing brought Drew forcefully back into the present. Hastily she shoved Farthest Space: The Beginning under the sofa cushion, feeling the paperback cover crumple but not caring very much. A few creases couldn't help but improve the Amazing Space Stud's looks. At any rate, she didn't want Tiffani to catch her reading a science fiction novel.

Particularly not one of Max's novels.

Tiffani bounced into the living room. There was a happy glow on her face that Drew hadn't seen since Alice's birth. "Hi, Drew," she said brightly. "What's up?"

Drew waved at the pile of quizzes she'd carefully left spread out on the Queen Anne coffee table. "Just grading papers," she said with elaborate nonchalance. "So how did it go?"

Tiffani plopped her curvaceous denim-clad butt into one of the flowered chairs. "Great," she said cheerfully. "Terrific. Max Sinclair is a fabulous guy."

"Uh-huh," Drew said, careful to invest her voice with dry sarcasm. "I bet."

"We saw an awesome movie," Tiffani went on, "and then we had burgers at Willy's. It was great." She giggled. "He got really nervous when I tried to kiss him goodnight, though. He is so cute."

Drew felt a sharp, hot, and totally unreasonable stab of jealousy, which she struggled to conceal under a layer of cool derision. "Sounds like a very classy date," she said with as much disdain as she could muster.

Tiffani looked irritated by her tone. "Classy, hell. It was fun. Something you know absolutely nothing about."

"I know how to have fun," Drew retorted, stung.

"Crap. Your idea of light entertainment is going to see 'La Traviata' in an English translation instead of the original Italian."

Drew bristled. "Just because I don't like stupid, violent movies—"

"You don't like any movie that doesn't have subtitles," Tiffani snapped. "But I don't know where you get off criticizing Max Sinclair for liking normal movies. He's a nice, average guy, not a snob. If you have a problem with that—"

Drew held out her hands in a gesture of truce. "It's okay, Tiff," she said hastily, a little surprised at her sister's vehemence. Tiffani must really be impressed with Max to jump to his defense so quickly. Inexplicably, the knowledge saddened her.

"I guess you really like him, huh?" she said more gently.

At the cessation of hostilities, Tiffani leaned back in her chair. A dreamy look crossed her face, and her eyes drifted closed. "Yeah," she said softly. "I had a good time. A really good time." She opened her eyes and looked at Drew. "It was absolutely the best date I have ever been on."

"It was absolutely the worst date I have ever been on."

Seated cross-legged on his beige Berber carpet, Max stared moodily into the depths of his beer. He wanted to avoid his mother's searching gaze. Her hazel eyes had always seen way too much, an ability that had gotten him in trouble more than once. When he was a teenager, she'd had an unerring ability to instantly see where in his room he'd hidden his copy of Playboy. Back then he'd found her terrifying.

"That bad?"

"Even worse. It was the pits." He took a long sip of his beer and heaved a sigh. He didn't particularly want to discuss his date, but the alternative was telling Mom about the car that had followed him everywhere he'd gone, and that he wouldn't do. He didn't want her to worry. "It was probably mostly my fault. I guess I'm out of practice. I haven't been out with anyone in way too long."

His mother sat down on his ugly, battered plaid sofa—the only available seating in his living room, not counting the floor. Blue, Max noted with a touch of annoyance, had shifted his allegiance and promptly flopped down next to her feet, placing his long, slim muzzle on her shoe in an attitude of canine devotion. "You haven't been out with anyone since Paula, have you?"

There it was. The look that went straight to his soul and saw everything there was to see. There was no point in denying her assertion. "No," he admitted.

"Good lord, Maxfield, that's been eight years."

Max looked up from his beer, decidedly irritated, and decided to carry the battle to her for once. "How recently have you been out on a date, Mother?"

His mother was entirely unperturbed. "Last week," she said. "A perfectly charming widower."

Max's eyebrows shot up in spite of himself. His father had been dead for almost fifteen years, yet he'd never really imagined his mother dating. "You're kidding."

"I never joke about such things," she said primly.

"No. No, I guess not." He stared at her for a moment, and then looked back down into the amber depths of the beer glass again. "Well, that's just fabulous," he growled. "My mother has a more active love life than I do."

"It hasn't been easy for me," his mother admitted. "Even though it's been so long since your father died, there are times when it seems like yesterday. As though I could look up and he'd be there."

Max nodded. "I know what you mean."

"No," his mother said sharply. "You don't. What you and Paula had was nothing like what William and I had. What Paula did to you proved that."

Max sighed. "That doesn't make it any easier, Mom."

His mother leaned forward, her gaze meeting his with her customary intensity. "I imagine it makes it worse," she acknowledged. "You loved her very much, and in the end you discovered she didn't love you at all."

"I wouldn't go that far," Max said, stung.

"I would. She was selfish and cruel when you needed her most. That's not love, or even a poor imitation of love." His mother drew a deep breath. "Maxfield," she said, "I find it difficult to date other men because I loved your father so. But you find it difficult to have a normal social life because Paula hurt you so badly. The two situations are nothing alike."

Max stretched his long legs out. He found this conversation unsettling. "I think it's time for bed, Mom."

"You're afraid of being hurt again, aren't you?"

"I don't think that's really a problem right now, Mom. Tiffani—" He thought of her hopeful eyes as she talked about a father for Alice. "I think she's nice, but she's not for me. She's way too young. I don't think she really wants me, anyway. She just wants someone."

"But there's a woman you like, isn't there?"

"Have you been practicing your telepathic abilities, Mom?"

His mother smiled unrepentantly. "I've been supplementing my income working for a psychic hotline, Maxfield. A woman on a fixed income needs all the money she can get." Her amused expression faded, and she studied him thoughtfully. "You're avoiding the subject."

"Yeah, and I plan on continuing to avoid it. Tell me about your charming widower."

He was pleased to see his mother's face light up. "Oh, he's a true gentleman. You'd like him."

"I'm sure I would, if you like him." It felt a little weird to think of someone dating his mother, but after all, Dad had been gone for a very long time. He supposed his mom had as much right to a social life as he did. Not that he had one, he amended honestly.

After the debacle with Paula, he hadn't made a conscious decision to stop dating. But he'd always been shy, and getting out into the world again, making a real effort to meet women, didn't come easily to him. His career didn't require him to get out of the house much either. Somehow it had just been easier to forget his dreams of getting married and having children, or at least to put them on hold indefinitely.

When he'd noticed he was getting lonely, he'd gone out and bought a fuzzy gray puppy. And Blue had been pretty good company over the years. But canine company, he had to admit, wasn't an adequate substitute for human companionship. In fact, substituting a dog for a wife and kids was actually kind of pitiful, now that he came to think about it.

For the first time in eight years he began to long for something more.

Chapter 8

"Can I borrow your car?"

In the middle of knotting her long, unruly mane of hair into a civilized-looking French braid, Drew looked up from the mirror and saw her sister standing behind her. Tiffani was dressed for work in black slacks and a white collared shirt, her curly hair confined in a very short ponytail. She looked cutely chagrined.

"What's wrong with yours this time?" Drew asked.

"I'm not sure. It won't start."

Tiffani's car, a powder blue 1971 Pinto with large primer-gray spots, got sick more often than a hypochondriac in flu season. Drew sighed. She loved her sister dearly, but there were times when Tiffani seemed to regard her as a rental car agency, a dating service, and a housekeeper all rolled into one. "I have to get to work too, Tiff."

"Yeah, but you can walk to the university. It's not that far."

"It feels a whole lot farther in high heels. What if I drop you off?"

"I'm only working half a day today," Tiffani argued. "I don't want to wait around for you all afternoon. Besides, there's no point in paying for a whole day of daycare for Alice if I don't have to."

As she always did, Drew gave in. "Oh, all right. I'll just walk over to the campus in my jogging shoes and change once I get there."

Tiffani grinned at her in the mirror. "Thanks, Drew. You're the best." She grabbed Drew's keys off the dresser and headed for the door.

"Just make sure you take good care of my car!" Drew said to her sister's retreating image.

Tiffani looked back over her shoulder and wrinkled her nose. "Not a scratch, Drew. I promise."

Elonai leapt to her feet and lunged forward, knocking the saber from Jarala's hand. Stunned from the blow he had taken, McNeill lifted his head and saw her standing over him, facing Jarala fearlessly. "I won't let you hurt him!" she cried.

Max stopped typing and looked at the blinking cursor moodily. There it was. His deep-seated fantasy that always worked its way into all his books eventually. The heroine who was willing to risk death to protect her man, the heroine who was willing to go to any lengths to love and support the man she loved. The heroine whose love was unswerving, loyal, and true.

The heroine who was nothing in the least like Paula.

The irony was that particular quality in his heroines made his books as popular with women as they were with men. McNeill was the hero of every book, secretly in love with his tough-as-nails, kick-ass executive officer but unable to act on his desires because of his professional ethics. As a consequence, McNeill had a different love interest in each book, and each one was genuinely heroic. Women loved to imagine they were like them. But the reality was he'd never known a woman like that.

Certainly Paula didn't qualify as a heroine. She had been an arrant coward, fearful of genuine commitment, unable to protect and support him when he needed it most.

Surprised at the bitterness of his thoughts, he forced himself to abandon that line of thought. It had been a long time since he'd thought of Paula.

It had been a long time since he'd let himself think of Paula.

But his mother's words last night had brought it all back to him with unpleasant force. He blew his breath out in a long sigh. Blue sat up and nudged his arm sympathetically, and Max absentmindedly rubbed the silken head for a moment. Then, determined to bury the dead past, he turned back to his computer.

At that moment the phone rang, so close to him that he jumped. He glanced at the desk and saw he'd forgotten to put the cordless phone back on its base in his bedroom. He had a bad habit of forgetting to put the phone back when he was done with it, and as a consequence, he lost it on a regular basis. Fortunately he didn't get that many calls anyway.

He kept his number unlisted to cut down on the number of female fans calling to ask him to sire their babies, and the unfortunate truth was he didn't have a lot of friends. On those rare occasions when the phone rang at all, he usually ignored it when he was working, but this morning he'd called the police department to report that he'd been followed last night. Since he didn't have the other car's license number, the bored-sounding receptionist had told him the local cops wouldn't be able to do much, but maybe a detective was calling him back anyway.

Or the caller might be his mother's boyfriend. Horrified by the limited contents of his refrigerator—beer, bread, and week-old ravioli—Mom had gone to the grocery store to pick up something that might more nearly resemble nourishment. He'd hate for her to miss a call from her "charming widower," just because she couldn't live as simply as he could. Reaching over the desk, across the litter of crumpled pages and haphazardly stacked science books, he picked up the phone and hit the "talk" button.

"Hello?"

"Max?"

He recognized the voice at once, despite the breathless shock in her voice, and sat up straight abruptly. "Drew?"

"Oh, God, Max—"

Drew, the unshakable, cool college professor, sounded as if she'd just run a marathon with all the hounds of hell on her heels. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

He heard a broken sob from her end. "Calm down," he ordered, "and tell me what the hell is going on."

There were a couple of seconds of ragged breathing, as if she were struggling to gain control of herself. In a moment she said, more calmly, "Tiffani is in the hospital, Max."

"What?"

"She went to work this morning, and her car—I mean my car—she drove off—" Her artificial calm dissolved and her voice broke off in a strangled sob.

Max jumped to his feet. "Hang on, Drew. I'll be there as fast as I can." He slammed the phone down, went downstairs three steps at a time, scrawled a hasty note to his mother and posted it on the fridge, and ran out the door.

It didn't occur to him to wonder if Drew had called him because Tiffani needed him, or because she needed him.

Drew was waiting in the ICU waiting area when he got there, wearing a conservatively cut, dark gray suit, her hair pulled back so tightly it looked painful. Obviously she'd been on her way to work. She

was staring at a magazine, but plainly not reading it. Her fingers were gripping it hard enough to permanently crease the pages. She looked up and dropped the magazine, and he noted absently that it was Time. Naturally. Even in the most desperate circumstances, he was pretty sure Drew wouldn't be caught dead reading something frothy like People or Glamour.

"Max!"

She flew at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to fling her arms around his neck. At the last second she checked herself. "I'm glad you came," she said, her voice harsh with the effort of self-control.

"What the hell happened? Was Tiffani in a wreck?"

Drew nodded. "She drove off the side of the road. You know Harris Road? That winding road with the ditches? She just went right into one of the ditches. They think she fell asleep at the wheel."

"Is she okay?"

"I—I'm not sure," Drew said in a near-whisper. "They won't tell me anything. All they would say was that she wasn't conscious. But they have her in intensive care, Max."

"What about Alice? Is she all right?"

"She wasn't with Tiffani. She'd already been dropped off at the sitter's."

"Thank God for that," Max said with heartfelt sincerity.

He looked down at Drew, saw her red-rimmed eyes and the telltale quiver of her lips, and without volition or conscious thought he put his arms around her waist and drew her against him. He felt her face press into his shoulder, felt her arms go around his neck, felt her shoulders shaking. And wondered why on earth she'd called him, of all people.

Regardless of the reason, though, he was damned glad she had.

After a moment she seemed to come to herself. She straightened up and stepped back. He let her go, but only with reluctance.

"I'm sorry," she said, doing her best to adopt her usual cool manner. "I didn't mean to—to fall apart like that."

"Perfectly understandable," Max said. He did his best to match her manner, but it wasn't easy, with the memory of her perfect, lush body pressed against his, and the faint odor of peaches that clung to her lingering in his nostrils. He forced those thoughts out of his head, reminding himself that her sister was injured, perhaps seriously. Lust was entirely inappropriate right now.

"I hope you don't mind that I called you," she said. She looked uncertain and defenseless, not at all like her usual chilly and distant self. "I—I thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you."

She looked up at him through her lashes, a fleeting, sideways look of vulnerability. "I didn't mean to make you come all the way down here, though."

Max met her eyes, saw the pain and fragility there, and sympathy flooded through him. Sympathy and something else, something that felt oddly like affection. "I wouldn't be anywhere else," he said firmly.

"I'm sure—I'm sure you have other things you need to be doing."

"No," he said, and knew it was the simple truth. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

They sat together in the waiting room. Drew did her best to struggle through an article on the current situation in the Middle East, but at the end she realized she didn't know any more than when she had started. Not that anything ever changed in the Middle East anyway. She held the magazine and kept pretending to read, while glancing sideways at Max.

He must care more than I realized to come rushing down here, she thought. After the hospital had called her, she'd stood in the kitchen clutching her cordless phone, frozen with shock, knowing she should call some of her and Tiffani's friends but unable to decide who to call first. When she'd spotted Max's phone number, posted on the fridge by Tiffani a week before, she'd called him on impulse, simply because she'd thought he ought to know what had happened.

No, she admitted, she'd called him because she'd wanted to talk to him, because there was something infinitely reassuring about his deep baritone voice. But she hadn't expected him to come give her support.

She reminded herself forcibly that Max was here for Tiffani, not for her. The thought saddened her more than she cared to admit to herself.

Max appeared entirely unaware of her scrutiny. He looked absorbed in one of those ghastly celebrity magazines; full of gushing gossip about famous people she'd never heard of. Full of conflicting emotions, she stared at his sharply cut profile a moment. She was incredibly grateful he was here, unhappily certain his concern was for Tiffani, and annoyed with herself because, even in this time of crisis, it mattered to her.

At that moment he glanced up, and she was embarrassed to realize he'd caught her staring. She covered her embarrassment with an acerbic comment.

"Is that magazine fascinating?"

At her sarcastic tone, he lifted an eyebrow. "Probably not for someone of your superior intellect," he responded. "But it's okay for me."

She realized she'd been rude to him, which was awful, considering he'd come down to offer support the moment she'd called him. The knowledge didn't make her any more comfortable, and as usual, discomfort made her bitchy. She fired a contemptuous look at the celebrity wedding gracing the cover of his magazine. "I guess you read stuff like that all the time."

He gave her a lopsided grin, apparently not offended. "Nah. I prefer Sports Illustrated." His grin got wider. "Particularly the swimsuit issue."

She realized he was trying to annoy her. Which was no less than she deserved. She opened her mouth to make a sharp retort, finding arguing with him better than sitting quietly and looking at articles she couldn't seem to make sense of. At that moment a doctor emerged. "Ms. Cooper?"

Drew jumped to her feet, not bothering to correct the honorific. She didn't usually go by "Dr. Cooper" off campus anyway. Certainly not in a hospital, where the title usually meant an M.D. "Yes?"

The doctor looked at her with sympathy. She was a small, slender woman who radiated professional competence despite the fact that she barely came up to Drew's shoulder. "I wanted to give you an update on your sister."

"Is she—" Drew swallowed audibly.

"She's alive, yes. She has suffered a fairly serious blow to the head, however, and she is currently unconscious."

"Will she be all right?"

The doctor met her eyes unflinchingly. "I can't say for certain, Ms. Cooper. Head trauma can be unpredictable. Her CT scan looked good, however, and we think she will awaken eventually."

"Thank God," Drew whispered. Behind her she was aware of Max's reassuring presence. He had risen to his feet when the doctor entered the room and stood just behind her, so close she could feel the warmth of his body. He dropped his hand on her shoulder, and she lifted her hand to his without conscious thought, grateful for his support.

"May I see her?"

"Yes," the doctor said. She shot a quick glance at Max. "Only family members may be admitted to ICU, however."

"That's fine," Max said. "I'll wait here, Drew."

She turned and looked up into his eyes. "You really don't have to wait, if you don't want to, Max."

"I told you before," he said. "I want to."

Tiffani's head was swathed in bandages, and there were dark bruises under both her eyes. Drew wasn't sure she would have known her had the doctor not pointed her out. In the hospital bed she looked very small and very vulnerable, much like the teenager Drew had taken custody of six years before.

Drew sat down next to the bed and took her hand. Even the bones of her hand felt frail, as if Tiffani had somehow been rendered impossibly fragile by the accident. "Tiffani," she whispered. "It's okay, Tiff. I'm here."

She thought she saw a flicker of Tiffani's golden eyelashes. But after a moment, nothing else happened, and she decided she had been engaging in wishful thinking. She started talking, telling Tiffani that Alice was waiting for her at the sitter's house, telling her what she planned to have for dinner tonight, talking about anything she could think of. She kept her tone level and even, taking care that she sounded calm and confident. Just in case Tiffani could hear her.

At last the doctor asked her to leave. She squeezed her sister's hand, said, "See you later, Tiff," and walked back out to the waiting area.

Max was still there, waiting for her. He took one look at her face, then stood up and put his arms around her as she pressed her face against his shoulder.

And cried.

Max sighed as he looked through a dog-eared copy of *Car and Driver* for about the eighteenth time. Drew had disappeared momentarily down the hall in the direction of the ladies' restroom. He looked up as someone walked into the waiting room. It wasn't Drew.

He recognized the short-cropped, dark hair, the competent, almost cocky attitude, and the distinctive face beneath it. But even if he hadn't recognized the face, he would have recognized the nails. Long and red, they looked more like daggers than fingernails.

Charity Rogers was back.

As she met his eyes, her eyebrows lifted in apparent surprise. Oddly enough, though, he'd have sworn the surprise was feigned. He was pretty sure Charity wasn't genuinely surprised to see him. She smiled brightly. "Well. Good afternoon, Maxfield."

He inclined his head to her, very slightly, and didn't bother to ask her to call him Max. "Charity."

"There's a young lady here whose car ran off the road. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Max shrugged.

"Because I was interested in interviewing the family. I was told her sister—" She broke off as Drew returned. "Oh, hello. Miss Cooper, isn't it?"

Drew met the woman's inquisitive stare with an icy one of her own and said nothing. Undaunted, Charity went on. "I understand your sister was in a serious wreck on Harris Road. I wondered if you'd be willing to do an interview."

"Go to hell, you vulture," Drew said.

Max realized that Drew was too ragged emotionally to be able to cope with Charity. He felt a need to protect her from the world, to keep her from further harm. "Charity," he said, standing up. "Let's discuss this outside."

"But I—"

Max took her, none too gently, by the arm and steered her toward the door. Charity had little choice but to come along. Once they were outside, he looked down on Charity from what most people considered his intimidating height. Unfortunately, Charity did not seem in the least intimidated.

"Look, Charity," he said, "This isn't important news. It was a one-car accident."

"Actually, we don't know that for sure yet. The police haven't yet finished their forensic analysis of Ms. Walters' car. Based on what I know of that section of Harris Road, I'd lay odds another driver was involved. Most likely a hit-and-run."

"Some drunk teenager, probably. It still isn't really a major story. So why are you here? Slow news day?"

Charity flashed a charming and practiced smile. "To be honest, I'm doing a story on how dangerous Harris Road is. This is the third wreck there this month. It's a deadly road, and something needs to be done about it. If you could convince Miss Cooper—"

"Dr. Cooper. And I don't think this is really the time. Right now we don't know anything about her sister's condition. She's under a lot of stress, which is why she lost control of herself that way."

"Believe me, I've been called worse." Charity's voice sounded brittle. "What about you? Are you here because you're a friend of the family?"

"Sort of."

"Miss Cooper—sorry, Dr. Cooper— was in your hospital room the last time I saw you," Charity persisted. "Are you dating her, or maybe her sister?"

"Tiffani and I have gone out once or twice," Max admitted.

"Then maybe you—"

"No," Max said firmly. "I'm sorry, Charity, but this just isn't the time. Maybe after Tiffani wakes up, okay?"

Charity sighed, accepting defeat. "Fine." She walked toward the door, then hesitated, turned around, and shot him a thoughtful look. "But tell me this, Maxfield. Why is it every time I do a story nowadays, you're mixed up in it?"

"Coincidence, I guess."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," Max said irritably.

Charity looked at him pensively. "Come to think of it, your girlfriend's been mixed up in it both times, hasn't she?"

He didn't bother to repeat that Tiffani wasn't his girlfriend. "These were just random occurrences, Charity. Okay?"

"If you say so. But as an investigative reporter, I've noticed things that look like coincidence are sometimes more connected than you think."

Max felt a cold chill snake down his spine. He'd been the target at the convention—hadn't he? Tiffani hadn't been nearby, and so she couldn't have been the target. But come to think of it, the gunman had been shooting in Alice's general direction. Otherwise he himself wouldn't have gotten shot. Could someone want to hurt Tiffani badly enough to try to hurt Alice?

For the first time he let himself think about the car that had followed them all over town last night. He'd assumed the other driver was following him. But what if Tiffani had been the guy's target? What if the guy had deliberately driven Tiffani off the road this morning?

He scoffed at himself. Tiffani had probably just fallen asleep at the wheel and run off the road. It happened all the time, to drivers older and more experienced than she was. Anyway, Tiffani was too sweet and too young to have enemies. He, on the other hand, had absolutely no shortage of wacked-out fans.

"Look," he said impatiently, "you said yourself this was the third accident on Harris this month. It's just coincidence, Charity. That's all."

"If you say so."

"Whatever you do, don't mention a crazy idea like that to Drew, okay? She's got enough on her mind."

Charity nodded. "All right. But listen, will you try to get me an interview with Ms. Walters when she wakes up? This is really important. The public needs to know how dangerous that road can be."

"I'll see what I can do."

"That's all I can ask." She smiled at him and walked down the hall, to his relief. He didn't want her to go back into the waiting room and upset Drew with the wild notion that the convention shooting and Tiffani's accident were somehow related. Drew was already upset enough.

The last thing she needed was Charity putting ridiculous ideas into her head.

The afternoon stretched out interminably. Drew continued to stare at Newsweek, but Max could tell she wasn't really reading it. He'd read every Car and Driver and Popular Mechanics in the place, and paged through People looking for Farthest Space news as well. Eventually he grew bored enough to pick up a women's magazine and glance through it. He figured one of them ought to.

He passed over an article promising the secret to losing five pounds in a week, figuring that was easy enough. He'd never been able to figure out why women made such a big deal out of losing weight when it was so simple—all he had to do was skip dinner one day, and he'd lose at least five pounds. Maybe ten.

Another article promised a makeover would change his life for the better. Since the makeover involved cutting off the woman's hair and applying eyeshadow, he didn't see its relevance to his own situation, although he had to admit wearing eyeshadow would probably alter his life. He wasn't certain it would be a change for the better, though. In fact he was pretty sure it wouldn't be.

He flipped the pages and paused, arrested by large letters promising TEN EASY WAYS TO DRIVE YOUR LOVER CRAZY IN BED.

That was definitely more interesting than eyeshadow. He hadn't realized women's magazines functioned as a sort of advanced sex education class. He read through the first tip and lifted his eyebrows.

"Now I know why women read these things," he muttered.

Drew, staring blankly at some opaque article on White House policy, lifted her head and looked at him. "What?"

He pointed to the magazine he held. "I see why women read these magazines," he said again. "Very educational."

Drew snorted. "Educational, my ass. If you want to be well-informed there's no substitute for Time."

"I guess it depends on what you want to be educated in."

Drew frowned, obviously puzzled by his comment, and leaned over to look at the article he was reading. Abruptly she giggled. "'Wear frilly lingerie,'" she quoted, "'or nothing at all.'" She looked at him with irreverent amusement, the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes crinkling. "Do you wear your frilly boxers when you're trying to impress a woman, Max?"

He was glad to have lightened her mood, if only for a moment. "Okay, so that's not too educational," he admitted. "Not for me, anyway. In fact, some of these are pretty boring. But check out number five."

Drew read it. Her eyebrows drew together. "They have got to be kidding," she said in her primmest voice.

He was glad she'd echoed his own thought. The activity described wasn't one he was familiar with, in any personal sense, although he'd obliquely suggested that Captain McNeill had indulged in it once or twice. But McNeill, who'd bedded women from scores of different worlds, had a lot more sexual sophistication than he did. Which, now that he thought of it, was actually pretty depressing.

"I don't know," he said. "I'd think that would definitely spice up a relationship."

Drew sniffed. "A relationship ought to be based on common interests rather than mere sex, anyway."

Mere sex. Now there was a phrase that ought to send any sensible man running in the other direction. Unfortunately, he didn't feel like running. He was arrested by the mere thought of engaging in Number Five with her. He looked at her, and their eyes locked and held.

They sat for a moment, inches apart, staring into each other's eyes. And then Drew leaped to her feet.

"Excuse me," she muttered, and all but ran from the waiting area.

Max straightened up in his chair and stared after her, remorse curling in the pit of his stomach. Hell. All he'd been trying to do was lighten her mood. Instead the atmosphere had somehow, inexplicably, gotten charged as if a thunderstorm was about to break over both their heads.

He really was a jerk, he thought bitterly. Drew was worried half to death about her sister, and instead of offering her companionship he'd found himself staring at her like a lion sizing up a gazelle. And judging from her reaction his thoughts must have been written on his face like newsprint. What the hell

was wrong with him, anyway?

He really needed to get his imagination under control.

Drew stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes had a slightly glazed look.

It was crazy, but for a brief minute all she'd been able to think about was her and Max. Doing something so intimate her cheeks flushed redder just thinking about it.

Damn it, she thought. All she had to do was look into Max's eyes and she got all hot and flustered.

That was bizarre, she decided, splashing her cheeks with water to cool them. Max was being really decent, much more so than she'd expected, and somehow her perceptions had gotten colored by that. If it wasn't for his solid presence she wasn't sure how she would have gotten through this afternoon. She remembered the way he'd held her while she cried and decided she must just be having some sort of weird reaction. Gratitude-induced lust, that was it. Or maybe just sheer insanity.

She had to remember Max wasn't here for her sake. He was here for Tiffani.

At eight o'clock Max went down to the cafeteria and brought Drew back a hamburger. She ate it without a lot of enthusiasm and suggested he go home, but he flatly refused. Around three o'clock in the morning she stretched out on a bench and fell into a restless sleep. Once or twice she woke up, vaguely aware of his hands stroking her hair as if she were a child.

In the morning, just after six o'clock, the doctor approached them. "Ms. Cooper?" she asked.

Drew sat up with a jerk. "Yes?"

The doctor smiled broadly. "Your sister's awake," she said.

Chapter 9

There is nothing more boring than an asexual species.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, *Farthest Space*

Tiffani was going to be all right.

The relief that suffused Drew, along with her complete mental and physical exhaustion, combined to make her more lightheaded than she'd ever felt in her life. She'd never been so dizzy in her life, even when, as a teenager, she'd swiped her parents' vodka and downed three heavily spiked Cokes in the space of an hour and a half.

The doctor had told her to go home and get some sleep. Since Tiffani's car wasn't running, and her own car was now a pitiful pile of scrap metal, she'd taken a cab to the hospital. She was perfectly capable of calling another cab, but Max flatly refused to let her. He had to be pretty tired himself, but if he was, it didn't show. He insisted on driving her home himself. He had a nice car, she thought absently as she settled into a leather bucket seat, remembering her annoyed thoughts about Tiffani and Max together in a red Mustang convertible. That seemed so petty, in the light of yesterday's events.

Even so, she had to admit it was a very cool car.

Max had put the top down, and the late September wind ruffled her hair as he pulled out of the hospital parking lot. She watched his big, capable hands adeptly maneuver the steering wheel, then reach down to manipulate the gearshift. For some reason, a sentence from his book swirled through her mind. His massive, powerful hands, though accustomed to wielding some of the deadliest weapons known to man, were incredibly gentle...

Exhaustion and sheer giddiness combined to make her giggle like a sixteen-year-old. Max took his gaze off the road for a microsecond and shot her a puzzled glance. "What's so funny?"

"Um ..." She couldn't bring herself to tell him she'd been thinking about a scene in his novel, no matter how lightheaded she was. She particularly couldn't admit she'd been thinking about a love scene, of all things. "I was just thinking about your date with Tiffani."

"Our date?" he said cautiously.

"Yeah. I bet she was thrilled to go out with a guy in a car like this. She always used to go for the guys with sports cars in high school."

Max managed to look slightly offended. "So you think she asked me to go out with her because she liked my car?"

"No," she said, and giggled again. She knew she sounded like a cheerleader, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. "She went out with you because you're incredibly gorgeous."

"Me?"

He sounded so surprised she turned to stare at him. "Oh, come on, Max. You know you're a great-looking guy."

"Uh ..." He hesitated a long minute, deftly maneuvering the steering wheel as he changed lanes.

"Thanks. When I was in high school I would have given a lot to hear that."

"What, weren't you gorgeous in high school?"

Max uttered a short, humorless laugh. "When I was in high school I was the textbook definition of a nerd. I had so many pimples my face looked like a pizza, I had a mouthful of braces, and I was really tall and really skinny. And my favorite leisure activity was writing stories about space travel. Girls didn't so much as look at me, let alone speak to me. If I'd asked one to go out with me, she probably would have rolled on the floor laughing."

"You might be surprised."

"I doubt it."

Drew had never experienced high school first hand, but she recalled how heartless Tiffani had been at that age, and nodded. He was probably right. Tiffani and her classmates had reminded her all too keenly of something out of *Lord of the Flies*. Tiffani had been one of the most popular girls in school, and wouldn't have considered dating anything less than the star quarterback of the football team. She certainly wouldn't have spared a glance for a gawky, pimpled geek.

And then in college she'd married one. It just went to show that people grew up. Even Tiffani.

"You're probably right," she admitted. "But you're not a nerd any more."

"Huh," he snorted. She heard the note of disbelief in his voice.

"You're not," she insisted. "You're good-looking and you drive a cool car. Come on, admit it. Isn't that what you wanted most in high school?"

"No," he said bleakly. He downshifted smoothly as they went around a corner, and his voice dropped so low she could barely hear it over the growl of the engine. "What I wanted most was friends."

Something in his tone made her certain that was what he still wanted, and thought he didn't have. An odd shiver of sympathy ran through her. Giddy or no, she was still capable of feeling sympathy for Max Sinclair. Sympathy ... and tenderness. Without pausing to think, she reached over and lightly touched the hand that gripped the gearshift.

"You have friends now," she said softly.

Max glanced at her again, his eyes wide with surprise, as if he couldn't believe she'd actually touched him. A second later the Mustang turned into her gravel driveway. Max brought the car to a smooth stop and turned to face her. He had concealed the surprised expression beneath a mask of cool courtesy, and his tone was equally nonchalant.

"You'd better get some sleep."

"I'm not sleepy," Drew said. It was true. She was bone-weary, exhausted, but too worked up to sleep right now. She realized she didn't want to see him go yet. "You want to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"You're going to have coffee? You think that'll help you sleep?"

"No, but I can't live without coffee."

"They had some in the waiting room at the hospital. Didn't you see it?"

Drew curled her lip. "That wasn't coffee. It was axle grease. I tried it, and it was revolting. A sip was all I could stand. I've spent the past twenty-four hours with no caffeine, and I'm not spending another second without it."

"Ah," he said. "Caffeine is your only vice, huh?"

She looked at him slouched in the driver's seat, rumpled, unshaven, and uncombed, and thought that he was the most amazingly attractive man she'd ever seen in her life.

"No," she said softly. "No, it's not my only vice. I have others."

And she reached out to touch his cheek.

Max jerked with surprise as her fingers gently brushed against his rough day's worth of stubble. She ran her finger down his cheek, along his jawbone, and he closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Drew," he muttered hoarsely. "Drew, what are you doing?"

Exhaustion made her more brutally honest with herself than usual. "What I've wanted to do since I met you," she whispered. Her hand smoothed his disheveled hair, and he groaned softly.

Her hand slipped to the back of his neck, and she drew his face down and brushed her lips against his in the barest whisper of a kiss.

He drew away slightly, his lips a scant inch from hers. "Drew—"

"Don't tell me to stop."

"I wasn't going to tell you to stop." He slid his lips across hers again. "God, no. Don't stop."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered what on earth she could be thinking. She wasn't too worried about the neighbors seeing them, since her lot had tall, dense hedges on both sides, and a lot of big old trees in the front yard. More of a concern was the fact that she hadn't been within hailing distance of a shower or a toothbrush, let alone deodorant or makeup, for twenty-four hours. She was wearing a wrinkled gray suit that badly needed ironing, her legs were bare because she had taken off her sagging stockings and stuffed them into her purse, and strands of her hair had long since come out of the neat French braid and straggled lankly around her face and shoulders.

Ordinarily she would no more think of attempting seduction under these circumstances than she would think of walking naked down Main Street. But Max didn't seem to mind her unkempt state.

His hot, sweet mouth met hers eagerly, with a passion that left her breathless. Her lips parted in surprise at his ardor, and his tongue delved deeply into her mouth, thrusting powerfully against hers. She experienced another moment of self-consciousness, remembering she hadn't brushed her teeth recently, but then remembered Max hadn't either, and he tasted just fine. In fact, he tasted better than anything she'd ever imagined.

She tilted her head back, moaning, as his lips trailed down her throat, as his arms went around her waist and held her as if he'd never let go. He felt so warm and solid that she moved closer to him, pressing her breasts against the rock-hard wall of his chest. Her hand slid down, across his abdomen, and traced the muscular length of his thigh, then stroked delicately along the hard ridge of his erection.

Heat ignited in his eyes, although beneath the heat she thought he looked a trifle shocked, and a soft growl of pleasure reverberated in his chest. Shuddering, he leaned onto her side of the car, pushing her back against the door, trying without much success to press his body against hers. He grunted with pain as his knee hit the gearshift.

"Damned bucket seats," he muttered.

Drew wasn't inclined to let a little thing like bucket seats get in her way. She reached out and unbuckled his belt, then began to unbutton his jeans. Max glanced down at her hands, his lips curving slightly.

"You get right to the heart of things, don't you?"

She didn't reply, since conversation wasn't high on her list of priorities right now. She had other things on her mind. Unzipping his jeans, she pushed down his plain white briefs slightly, and his erection sprang free. It was incredibly thick, incredibly long. Slowly, she reached out and slid her index finger

over the velvety tip, feeling a drop of moisture beneath her questing finger. She heard his intense intake of breath as his shaft jerked sharply.

"Jesus," he muttered thickly, and she knew from the stunned tone of his voice that she'd been right.

There was no doubt about it. She'd shocked him.

"You're gorgeous," she whispered, stroking the delicate tip a second time, wrenching a soft moan from him. Looking up, she saw his eyes screwed shut, his jaw clenched, his head tilted back. She could see the tendons standing out in his neck, could see the pulse leaping in his throat.

"Do you like that?" she said softly.

He didn't open his eyes, but the slightest smile touched his beautiful mouth. "What do you think, Drew?"

Slowly she wrapped her fingers around his thick, heavy length, feeling him pulsate against her palm, feeling the heat of him like a flame in her hand. Looking down, she saw his erection pulsing with the steady, urgent rhythm of a racing heart. He moved his hips slightly, sliding smoothly against her palm, and she cradled him carefully, delicately, as if he were something incredibly rare and valuable.

He groaned aloud, and she felt his hands slide up from her waist and cup her breasts, brushing them gently. Then his thumbs sought and found her nipples, creating unbelievable sensations even through layers of fabric, gently teasing them into rigid, sensitive buds.

His mouth sought hers again, as one of his hands moved to her bare thigh, caressing the tender flesh, moving upward to the junction of her thighs, where she was certain he would be able to feel her moist heat through the thin material of her panties. Eagerly, hungrily, she parted her legs, and he slipped his hand between them, stroking her gently, then sliding his hand beneath the waistband of her panties and tugging them down urgently.

His long, powerful fingers parted her curls and touched her intimately, drawing a liquid warmth from her, a consuming pleasure she had never imagined could exist outside of heaven. She gasped against his mouth, her body arching desperately, feeling him pulsating beneath her questing fingers as though he, too, was on the verge of climax.

An agonizing tension filled her, a taut, aching knot that wound tighter with every caress of his fingers. Vaguely she was aware that she was sobbing against his mouth, begging, pleading. She lifted her hands, tangling them in his hair. And then he raised his head, and his fingers stilled.

"Drew," he whispered. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes. Her eyelids were as heavy as if she had been drugged. She stared into his face, seeing the molten lust in his gaze. "Don't stop," she whispered.

"I want to see your eyes," he said softly. "I want to watch you."

Arrested by the stark desire in his eyes, she couldn't have looked away if she'd tried. His fingers touched her again, with agonizing slowness at first, and he watched her face as she moaned.

And then convulsions shook her, a raw, burning ecstasy greater than any she had known before. Wave after wave of heat scorched through her body, racking her with shuddering pleasure.

She heard herself crying out, sobbing as her body writhed, clutching his hair as ripple after ripple of shimmering pleasure quaked through her. She had never in her life experienced such an overwhelming sensation, not even in far more romantic circumstances than these, not even with a man buried deep inside her.

Making out with Max in a car was more intense than sex with any other man.

At last the spasms of ecstasy faded, leaving her with a quiet calm. Max put both arms around her and held her as close as the gearshift would permit. Her face was pressed against his shoulder, and she could feel the harsh rasps of his breathing near her ear. Through the peaceful, almost meditative state that had overtaken her, she was vaguely aware she should invite him in, and finish what she had started.

Max had given her the most incredibly erotic experience of her life, the most sheerly sexual ecstasy she had ever experienced, and she wanted to gift him with the same sort of pleasure. She wanted to kiss him, to touch him, to love him with hands, mouth, and body until he sobbed with release as she had.

But for the life of her she couldn't seem to move.

The exhaustion she had battled all night overwhelmed her, and she fell asleep against his shoulder.

When Drew woke up, she was surprised and a little baffled to find herself in her own bed. The mid-afternoon sunlight poured in the window, illuminating her cozy bedroom, filled with cherry Williamsburg-style furniture, and slicing across the large, comfortable wing chair that stood next to a small bookshelf laden with her favorite books, from Alice Walker to John Donne. She realized she was still wearing her rumpled gray suit, although her glasses were on her nightstand. Sitting up, she blinked against the bright light and tried to figure out exactly how she'd gotten here.

Struggling to clear the cobwebs from her brain, she did her best to remember the events of the past day. Tiffani was in the hospital. She had been unconscious most of the day and night, but she was going to be okay. The doctor had told her to get some sleep, so she'd ridden back here with Max—

Oh, God. Max.

With a sudden, horrible clarity she remembered how she'd behaved. She had thrown herself at Max, he had responded the way any man might be expected to, and then—

Heat scalded her cheeks. She flung herself back to the bed and pulled the covers over her face.

In retrospect, she found it hard to believe she'd even been so— so horny. Even in her adolescence, she'd never made out with a guy she barely knew in a car. Never before had she frantically panted for a man's touch, begged for an orgasm, or put her hands all over a man, no matter how long they'd been dating.

Max must think she was a world-class slut.

And she had to admit she'd behaved like one, which just wasn't the way she usually acted. She wasn't frigid, but she didn't let herself lose control easily, either. She prided herself on staying cool, calm, and collected, even in bed. At least, she'd always stayed that way until now.

Her cheeks flushed even hotter as she remembered that she had been making out with him in his car, in broad daylight. With the top down. She had cried out so loud half the neighborhood had probably heard her. So much for her professional reputation.

Where on earth had her self-control gone?

She knew the answer to that. She'd lost it the minute she touched Max.

But that was ridiculous. She didn't even find Max that attractive. Well, okay, she acknowledged, she found him attractive, in a purely aesthetic way. There was no denying he was a really good-looking guy. But he wasn't her type, and anyway, he was dating Tiffani.

She sat up again and forced herself to think calmly and rationally about what had happened. She had spent a day frantically worrying about Tiffani, and when she'd found out her sister was going to be okay, she'd been incredibly relieved. Not to mention really, really tired. The combination of relief and exhaustion must have been what made her behave in such an atrocious fashion.

She'd simply used Max to relieve her stress. Not nice behavior, but certainly understandable.

Her behavior had nothing whatsoever to do with her feelings for Max. For that matter, she didn't have any feelings for Max. Well, she amended fairly, just friendship. He had spent a day with her in the hospital, trying to keep her spirits up. For that she was grateful. But gratitude was as far as it went. She very definitely had no romantic interest in Max.

Absolutely none.

Max sat at his computer and stared glumly at the blank Word document—the mortal enemy of a writer. After carrying Drew upstairs and tucking her under the covers in her startlingly feminine, frilly bedroom, he'd come back to his house and chatted with his mom for a while, telling her more details about what had happened to Tiffani but carefully omitting any mention of Drew. He'd taken a nap, but hadn't slept well despite being tired. He'd had too much on his mind.

He'd had Drew on his mind.

The memory of what he'd done in the Mustang made him want to sink through the floor in mortification. He had to admit Drew had been the aggressor, which wasn't surprising, since it had been an extremely long time since he'd had any... well, hands-on experience. He'd simply intended to kiss her—okay, he admitted ruefully, he'd intended to kiss her quite a lot. Still, the way she'd touched him had shocked the hell out of him.

Mind you, it hadn't shocked him enough to make him want her to stop.

But even if it had been to some degree Drew's idea, he was at least partly to blame. She'd gone through a terrible twenty-four hours, and he'd taken advantage of her raw, fragile emotions and pawed her in his car like a randy teenager. He'd behaved like a total jerk.

And even worse, she'd found him so boring she'd gone to sleep.

He wasn't so sexually inept that he didn't realize she'd enjoyed herself. Just the memory of how she'd shuddered and cried out and clutched his hair was enough to send a warm rush of heat to his groin. But that memory did very little to make him feel better. He knew he was being oversensitive, that she'd been exhausted, but he couldn't shake the feeling that by falling asleep immediately afterward, she'd displayed all the consideration and depth of emotion she might show for a vibrator.

Not, he acknowledged sourly, that he didn't deserve to be treated like an inanimate object. He'd used her when she was at her most vulnerable, and if she hadn't fallen asleep, if he had gone on to have sex with her, he would have hated himself forever.

Even so, a small part of him was very, very sorry she'd fallen asleep. At least the memory of making love to Drew would have been something to remember her by. Because he knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that after the events of this morning Drew would never want to see him again.

Which was just as well, since he was certain he would never be able to look her in the eye again.

Chapter 10

It isn't easy to choose between a black hole and a supernova.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

"So what happened?"

Tiffani lay in the hospital bed, her head still in bandages. Despite the awful way she looked she managed to grin apologetically. "I screwed up."

"What'd you do, fall asleep at the wheel?"

"Of course not. You know me better than that. No, I guess it really wasn't all my fault. This car passed me and cut in too close in front of me. I should have just hit my brakes. Instead I swerved. Bad move."

Drew nodded. Swerving was indeed a bad idea on Harris Road, a narrow, two-lane road with ditches only a few inches from the asphalt. There were also no passing zones. "How come someone tried to pass you on Harris Road?"

"Beats the hell out of me. I was going the speed limit. Probably some stupid teenager trying to get to school on time."

There were a lot of rich kids who lived down Harris Road and drove it as if they owned it. "They don't have any witnesses," Drew said, "so they probably won't be able to find the driver unless you happened to see the license plate."

"I didn't. I didn't even notice the make of the car. Everything happened too fast. This car just kind of appeared out of nowhere. It pulled out of one of the driveways, I guess. I think it was dark blue, but it might have been black. I'm really not sure."

"That's too bad," Drew said. She could well understand why Tiffani had failed to notice, though. When you were trying to stop your car from flipping over you tended not to notice details.

"I'm sorry about your car, Drew."

"That's okay," Drew said. "I've been thinking about getting something a little more exciting, anyhow." Like a red Mustang convertible, she added mentally. God knew Max's Mustang had added a whole lot of excitement to her life yesterday.

"That's a good idea. Your old sedan was so boring I was embarrassed to be seen in it."

"It wasn't that bad," Drew said. "It was okay for me."

"It was boring."

"So maybe I'm boring."

There was a knock at the door. Drew and Tiffani looked up at once. Drew felt the air go out of her lungs as if someone had struck her in the stomach.

Standing in the doorway was Max.

He looked straight at Tiffani, as if Drew wasn't in the room at all. "Hey," he said. "Mind if I come in?"

Tiffani made her best effort at her nose-crinkling grin. "Sure."

He walked across the room without so much as looking at Drew. With a spasm of pain, she

remembered that he was dating Tiffani, not her. He was interested in Tiffani, not her.

What had happened yesterday in his car had just been an aberration.

Max pulled up one of the chairs, upholstered in truly hideous pink vinyl, and sat next to Tiffani's bed. His green eyes focused intently on her, as if she were the only other person in the room. "So how are you feeling?"

"Like crap."

Max grinned. "You look like crap, too."

"Just what every woman wants to hear." She grinned back, and Drew felt her stomach clench at the easy camaraderie between them. "Hey, I heard you were here the whole day after I came in."

Max nodded. His eyes flickered to Drew, very briefly, then he looked away quickly. She thought she saw a faint blush on his high cheekbones.

"That was nice of you. I know Drew was glad to have company. She always stresses out in hospitals, ever since our mother died."

"That has nothing to do with it," Drew said sharply.

"Sure it does." Tiffani turned her gaze back to Max. "See, our mom died of breast cancer about six years ago. She spent the last week of her life in the hospital, and Drew was with her the whole time. Since then she's hated hospitals. So I know she was glad you were here."

Drew realized that Tiffani was telling her, none too subtly, that she ought to thank Max herself. Unfortunately, her jumbled emotions were a snarled mess right now, and she didn't feel like speaking to Max, let alone conveying her gratitude for his support. She took refuge in bitchiness.

"Yeah," she said acidly, "we had some real intellectual conversations."

Max looked coolly amused. "I don't recall that, Drew. If you had an intellectual conversation with me, I must have slept through it."

Tiffani snickered. "That's what most people do."

Drew stood up abruptly, annoyed by Max's rejoinder, despite her awareness that she had deserved it. She wouldn't stay here and be laughed at, damn it.

More to the point, she realized, she couldn't bear to stay and watch the friendly rapport that seemed to have sprung up between Max and Tiffani.

"I think I'll leave you two alone for a while," she said shortly. "I'm sure you have a whole lot to talk about." She stalked to the door and marched out without another word.

Max caught up with her as she strode through the waiting room. "Hey," he said sharply, catching her by the elbow and spinning her around to face him. "What's the matter?"

She wrenched her arm free. "Nothing's the matter," she snapped.

"Bull," Max said succinctly. "Something is obviously bothering you. Maybe we should talk."

She felt her spine stiffen. She had an idea she knew what it was he wanted to discuss, and the absolute last thing she wanted to do was talk about it. It was too damned embarrassing. Right now she wished Maxfield Sinclair would simply disappear off the face of the planet.

"I don't think we have anything to discuss," she said, more icily than she had intended.

"Yeah, well, I think we do."

Drew looked around the waiting room. In one corner sat a young mother reading Green Eggs and Ham to a five-year-old, and across the room an older man sat staring blankly at the endless news on the television that hung in one corner. "Look, Max," she said, "I don't think this is the time or place."

"Fine. We can go out into the hall."

It was all she could do not to fling her handbag at him. She settled for stalking past him, her heels clicking a sharp, angry staccato on the vinyl flooring. He followed her out into the relative privacy of the white, sterile hallway, and she whirled to face him.

"What the hell do you want?"

Max hesitated a long moment.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry, Drew."

That drew her up short. "Sorry?" she repeated. "Sorry for what?"

"What happened yesterday in my car," he clarified. "I'm really sorry I acted like a jerk, Drew. I don't know what came over me. I don't usually act that way, I swear."

"I don't think you have anything to be sorry for, Max."

"Yeah, I do. I—" He paused, as if searching for words. "I took advantage of you in a weak moment, Drew. You were upset, and I should have kept my hands to myself. I'm sorry."

Unbidden, a memory unfurled in her mind, the memory of his lips and the rough texture of his unshaven cheek brushing across her throat, followed almost instantly by the recollection of how he'd tasted. How he'd thrust his warm, slick tongue into her mouth, gentle and at the same time demanding. Resolutely, she forced her mind blank.

"You don't have anything to apologize for," she repeated briskly. "I'm a big girl, Max. I'm responsible for my own actions."

He stared at her incredulously. "Are you saying you wanted to do what we did?"

"Hardly," she said hastily, alarmed that she'd given him the wrong impression. "At least, not with you."

"Ouch. Are you trying to destroy my ego?"

"It's been my observation that most men's egos are at least three times too big."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Just trying to cut me down to size, is that it?"

She recalled how he'd felt beneath her questing fingers. His ego wasn't the only part of him that was three times too large, but she wasn't about to say that to him. It would only cause his ego to inflate further. "Look," she said, "I was really tired. I got a little carried away. That was all. It didn't mean anything."

Max looked at her for a long moment. "It didn't mean anything," he repeated.

"Right. I didn't even enjoy it that much. You're just not my type, Max."

At her dismissive tone, something lit in his gaze, something that looked a great deal like anger. His eyes glittered like emeralds as he glared at her. "Maybe what happened didn't mean anything," he said between his teeth, "but don't try to convince me you didn't enjoy it. I know better."

"Well—" Drew stumbled to a halt in embarrassment, recalling the way she'd tangled her fingers in his hair and hung on for dear life as she sobbed and cried out with ecstasy. Pretending she hadn't had the most astounding orgasm of her life seemed pointless. Even worse, it seemed kind of pitiful. "Okay. I guess I sort of enjoyed it, in a purely physical kind of way."

"My ego is shrinking very rapidly here."

His tone was light, but his eyes were still glittering with annoyance. Typical guy, she thought. Wants to believe he's the world's greatest lover.

Which in this instance might actually be the case.

"I don't mean to be insulting," she said, lying through her teeth. "I just don't want to give you the wrong impression. I'm sure you realize nothing like this can happen again."

"I see," he said in a neutral tone. "Any particular reason why not?"

"We don't have anything in common," she explained. "There is no chance of a meaningful relationship between us, and I don't care to indulge in physical relations under those circumstances."

"In other words, you're not that kind of a girl."

She heard the patent disbelief in his tone and recalled herself drawing his head down for a passionate kiss. Remembered the way she'd slipped her tongue between his lips, the way she'd run her fingers across the rippled muscles of his abdomen. And lower. She could hardly blame him for sounding skeptical. "Not usually, no."

He stepped toward her. Drew took an automatic step backward and discovered her back was against a wall. Max put an arm on either side of her, effectively pinning her to the wall, and leaned forward. His low voice rumbled in her ear.

"Are you sure?"

Of course I'm sure, she started to say, but the words died in her mouth at the brush of his hot breath against her earlobe. Suddenly she wasn't sure at all.

His warm lips whispered across the sensitive skin of her neck, just below her ear, and she shivered. Without conscious thought, she slipped her arms around him, noticing as she did so that he had incredibly broad, solid shoulders. The tough, sinewy muscles of his back flexed beneath her fingers as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him.

He kissed her cheek, lightly, several times, moving his mouth inexorably toward hers. The slight roughness of his jaw brushed against her skin, a peculiarly pleasurable sensation. She swayed toward him, her body instinctively molding itself to the power, the strength of his solid frame. Her soft breasts pressed against his muscular chest, and he groaned deep in his throat.

"You feel so good," he said in a harsh voice. "So right."

His lips touched hers tentatively, almost timidly, sending odd tingles through her body. One big hand slid upward, brushing lightly over the tops of her breasts. An involuntary moan was torn from her throat, and her knees gave way.

"I'm going to fall," she said in a breathless gasp.

"Don't worry, Drew. I've got you."

His arms tightened around her waist in a protective gesture that sent an inexplicable warmth through her. She rubbed harder against the wall of his chest, feeling her nipples jut out at the contact. She heard him suck in his breath and knew that he felt it too. His hands tangled in her tightly bound hair, and his breathing grew ragged and harsh.

He pulled her hips against his, and she felt his erection sliding against her lower belly. Mindlessly she pressed against it, and a low moan of animal need rumbled in his throat.

He brushed his lips over hers, lightly, in a seductive caress that was more compelling than the most passionate kiss. Eagerly, she ran her tongue along his lips, and he parted them. When his tongue met hers she thought she'd die of the pleasure. She was shocked by the strength of her own reactions, the way warmth seemed to pool in the center of her body, the way lightning shot through her with each gentle touch of his lips.

"Uh—excuse me."

Max jerked his head away from her. Startled, Drew jumped away from him, spun around, and saw the doctor standing just behind them. Evidently neither of them had heard the door open. She glanced back at Max and saw he'd gone crimson. She'd never known a man who blushed so easily, and she might have found it amusing but for the fact she suspected she'd turned just as red as he had.

Straightening up, Drew gave the doctor her best severe look, although she imagined the effect was ruined by rumpled clothing and seriously mussed hair. "Did you need something?"

"Your sister sent me out here," the doctor said. "She wanted Mr. Sinclair to come back into her room now." Her eyes twinkled. "Of course, if you'd like me to tell her you're occupied—"

"Not necessary," Drew interrupted hastily. "Max will go in." She turned to Max. "Won't you?"

"Uh, sure," Max said. He ran a hand through his hair. "Do I, uh, look all right?"

"You need to tuck in your shirttail."

Max tucked in his T-shirt hastily, with a sidelong glance at the doctor. She discreetly walked away, but Drew was certain she heard a low chuckle as the doctor disappeared around the corner. She drew a deep breath. "I've already missed too much work. I guess I'd better get over to my office." She smoothed her hair down with her hands. "Do I look okay?"

Max gazed at her a long minute. "You look better than okay," he said at last in a low, husky voice.

She decided to ignore his comment, and the lingering heat in his eyes. They weren't going to go there again. She wasn't sure what had come over her, but she was certain of one thing. She should never trust herself to be alone with Max again. Ever.

She looked him over again and noticed a pink smear near the corner of his mouth. "Maybe you'd better go look in the mirror before you go back to visit Tiff," she suggested.

Max wrinkled his forehead. "How come?"

Drew grinned. "I don't think that shade of lipstick suits you."

She watched with amusement as he turned crimson again and fled into the men's bathroom.

"I figured I better rescue you from Drew," Tiffani said. She smiled at Max, who automatically lifted his hand to his mouth, where moments ago he'd wiped away an incriminating smudge of pink lipstick.

"That's why I sent the doctor out to get you."

Tiffani didn't have a clue how much rescuing he needed. Where Drew was concerned, he was weak. Very, very weak. He thought of Captain McNeill's catchphrase, the four most famous words he'd ever written: Never lower your shields.

Good advice, but for the life of him he couldn't seem to follow it. His shields seemed to go down automatically whenever Drew was around.

"I just wanted to talk to her for a minute," he said, forcing a bland expression onto his face.

"Yeah, I know. She was being a real bitch, wasn't she?"

Max shrugged. "I guess I asked for it."

"I don't think so," Tiffani said. "She just doesn't like you for some reason. I guess you're not intellectual enough for her, or something. She always complains about the guys I date. They're never good enough."

Max dropped his eyes and stared very hard at his shoes. He didn't exactly think of himself as "dating" Tiffani. They'd had one date, and it had gone extremely badly. As far as he was concerned, dating Tiffani had been a horrific mistake on his part.

"I'm not sure that's the problem," he said at last, lamely.

"Yeah, it is. Believe me, she's been like this ever since my mom died. She's always trying to run my life. You wouldn't believe the awful things she said about Lucas."

"Lucas?"

"My ex-husband. She said he was a loser the first time she met him. Can you believe that?"

Max could believe it very well. Since the guy had left Tiffani when she was nine months pregnant, he had to admit Drew was probably right in this case. Then again, given Drew's mindset, pretty much anyone who didn't live up to her lofty standards was a loser. She obviously considered Max to be a loser. Even more depressing was the fact she was probably right.

"Uh-huh, I can believe it," he said, giving Tiffani a conspiratorial grin. "You wouldn't believe some of the things my mom said about my dates when I was in college. Talk about protective."

Tiffani grinned back. "Just one more thing we have in common, Max."

It didn't make him happy to realize he had a lot in common with a neurotic, self-destructive twenty-two-year-old. In fact it was a distinctly disturbing thought. He stood up so hastily he knocked over his chair.

"Look," he said, covering his chagrin by making an elaborate show of picking up the chair, "I really need to get going."

"Will you come by tomorrow?"

Max righted his chair and looked at her. Her bruised face was so hopeful that he stifled his first irritated reaction. "Yeah, sure," he said, hoping she couldn't hear the resignation in his voice. "I'll come visit you tomorrow."

"Cool," she said in her perkier tone. "I'll be looking forward to it."

As he walked out of her room, Max wished sincerely he could say the same thing. But the truth was he wasn't looking forward to it. Not in the least.

Drew drove over to the university, her mind still full of Max. She'd jiggled some wires under the hood of Tiffani's little rattletrap, managing to get it started, and borrowed it. Despite the fact that she was pretty sure the four-cylinder engine was running on two cylinders, the tiny engine was so loud she could barely hear the baroque music coming from the crappy stereo system. The music did little to lighten her mood anyway. Somehow Bach didn't suit her today. Something dissonant, like Bartok or Schnittke, would have been more appropriate.

She pulled the rust-mottled Pinto into a parking place marked FACULTY and got out of the car. As she

strode toward the building, her mind occupied with the problem of Max, there was the sound of feet behind her. She turned to see Ken Harshaw running up.

"Dr. Cooper, do you have a minute?"

She stifled her irritated response. She was pretty sure she knew what he wanted to talk about, and given the stress of the last couple of days she didn't want to engage in any sort of argument right now. She was just too tired. Too confused. Too generally mixed-up. But she swallowed back her irritation.

"Certainly, Mr. Harshaw. Come into my office."

Closing the door of her office behind her, she sat down in her leather chair and swiveled to face him. Ken settled into the smaller chair across the desk from her, looking much too big for it. In fact he seemed to take up most of the available space in her office.

"How can I help you?"

Ken swallowed and looked miserable. At last he said, "Dr. Cooper, I'm going to get kicked off the football team."

Drew met his unhappy gaze steadily. "Because of the failing grade I gave you on your last paper?"

Ken nodded. "Coach Brenner is real strict about grades, Dr. Cooper. I—I guess you know I'm not really the academic type. But Coach won't let us play if we don't keep our grades up."

This was unsurprising, as the university prided itself on academics first and sports second. Perhaps they might put more emphasis on sports if we had a decent football team, Drew thought. She guessed they had admitted Ken mostly to shore up the football team, and now he was about to be cast adrift. She looked at him with sympathy.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Harshaw, but I simply could not give your paper a passing grade. It frankly was not college level work."

"I know that," Ken said humbly. "But I did my best."

She believed him. He had spent four pages saying absolutely nothing and coming to no conclusion whatsoever, and his paper had been riddled with misspellings and grammatical errors. She guessed his writing to be no higher than sixth grade level, and his reading abilities were probably no better. Evidently he was one of the kids who somehow got passed through the system, going from grade to grade without ever learning anything. Probably he'd made it through middle school and high school solely on the strength of his athletic abilities.

"Did you call the tutor I suggested?"

"He came over and worked with me one night. He wouldn't come back, though."

"Why not?"

Ken looked miserable. "He said I was too stupid to bother with."

Drew's heart ached for the kid, even while her head told her there was nothing she could do for him. It's too late for him. Something should have been done years ago.

"I'm sorry, Ken," she said gently. "But I can't give you a passing grade for work that doesn't measure up. It simply isn't fair to the rest of the class."

"But I'll get kicked off the team!" Ken wailed. His face crumpled, and despite his broad shoulders and his barrel chest, he looked about ten years old.

"I'm sorry," Drew repeated with finality.

Ken lifted his head. She saw the panic fade from his eyes, to be replaced by a new resolution. He stared at her for a long moment. "I'll think of something, Dr. Cooper. Uh ... thanks for your time."

"You're welcome, Ken," she said, wishing she could do more for him. She loved literature, and it genuinely pained her to see a young person so handicapped by a poor education that he could never grasp anything more complex than a comic book. She watched with sorrow as Ken rose to his feet, straightened his wide shoulders, and walked out of her office.

"Why do you always have to be so bitchy to Max?"

"I don't know what you mean," Drew said sullenly.

"Oh, you know perfectly well what I mean," Tiffani retorted. She had been released from the hospital, and, to Drew's annoyance, Max had driven her home in his Mustang. Tiffani had naturally invited him in, and Drew had spent most of his visit in the kitchen, trying hard to ignore the fact that he and Tiff were chatting like old friends in the living room. "Most of the time you ignore him. When you're not ignoring him, you're deliberately rude to him. I mean, what did he ever do to you?"

You have no idea, Drew thought. "I guess he's just not my type."

"So what? I'm just asking you to put up with him, not marry him."

"What about you? Are you planning on marrying him?"

The question jumped out of her mouth before she even realized she'd said it. She realized she didn't want to know the answer to that question, but Tiffani answered it anyway.

"Uh... I like him a lot," she said, blushing.

"So you're in love with him?"

The vehemence in her tone obviously startled Tiffani. "Why, Drew? Don't you believe in love at first sight?"

"No," Drew said firmly.

"You used to. Didn't you tell me you fell in love with that guy in school right after you met him?"

"Do you mean Johnny Kane?"

"Yeah, that's the one. You fell for him the first day you met him. I remember you talking about it once."

Johnny Kane, a junior high heartthrob, had been her first crush, and Drew had fallen for him the very first day of classes. At fourteen, however, she'd been rather gangly and undeveloped. When she'd tried to start up a conversation with Johnny, he'd called her "four eyes." So much for love at first sight.

"That was a long time ago, Tiffani. I was a teenager, for heaven's sake."

"After what happened with James, I bet you don't believe in love at all any more."

"That's not true. James simply wasn't the right man for me. But just because our relationship didn't work out doesn't mean I don't have any romantic impulses."

"Oh, come on, Drew. You're about as romantic as a tree frog. But if you still believe in love, why don't you believe in love at first sight?"

Drew hesitated. "I just don't," she said at last, firmly.

Lust at first sight, maybe. But not love.

Whatever she felt for Maxfield Sinclair wasn't love. Just because her heart raced whenever she saw him, just because he could reduce her to a puddle of goo with a touch of his lips, just because she felt wildly jealous whenever he spent time with Tiffani—that didn't mean she was in love.

Tiffani, on the other hand, obviously was.

"Well, I do. I think Max is fabulous. I really think he's the one."

"That's nice," Drew said. She noticed she didn't sound really enthusiastic, which was hardly surprising, considering she felt like she was dying inside. She tried again. "Really. That's terrific."

"So you're going to have to learn how to get along with Max, okay? Because sooner or later he's going to be a permanent addition to the family."

Great. So she could spend the rest of her life looking at Max and thinking about the ten incredible minutes they'd spent in his Mustang, remembering the kisses they'd stolen in the unromantic ambience of a sterile hospital hallway. So she could spend the rest of her life wondering if she'd made a mistake in being so certain she and Max didn't have anything in common. So she could spend the rest of her life hating her sister.

That thought brought her up short. That was definitely something she couldn't live with. She wasn't sure how she felt about Max, but she was absolutely certain of how she felt about her sister. She loved Tiffani and couldn't bear to lose her. If Tiff and Max were really in love with each other she'd just have to learn to somehow deal with it.

After Max's reaction to her, though, she just couldn't believe Max was in love with Tiffani. For that matter, she really couldn't believe Tiffani meant much to him at all. Maybe Max was a dog who'd try to make it with any available woman, but remembering the utter shock in his eyes when she'd touched him intimately, she doubted it. He was too awkward, too outright shy, around women. She was pretty sure he was exactly what he appeared to be— a nice, uncomplicated, forthright guy.

Which might mean he wanted her instead.

She stifled the rush of heat that thought produced. She didn't want Max, after all. He wasn't her type. And yet the complicated knot of emotions inside her wouldn't go away so easily.

She couldn't go on like this. She just couldn't.

She realized that she needed to have another talk with Max.

Chapter 11

The last thing Max expected was to hear Drew's voice on the phone again. "Hello, Max."

This time she sounded cool and composed, but even so his heart jumped into his throat. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She hesitated, and for the first time he heard a hint of uncertainty enter her voice. "I just thought we needed to talk."

He didn't have much doubt of that. Their last attempt to clear the air between them had simply made things even more of a mess. His admission that it had been wrong of him to try to take advantage of her fragile emotional state had been awkward, but she had accepted his apology readily enough. And moments later she'd responded to his kiss as if she wasn't in the least sorry for what had happened.

He hadn't meant to kiss her at all, and their encounter had left him very, very confused. He imagined she felt as bewildered as he did, although he was frankly surprised that Drew was willing to have a discussion about it. He had thought she was the type just to try to sweep an elephant under the rug and pretend it wasn't there, even if she tripped over it fifteen times a day.

He'd figured she would be too embarrassed about what had happened between them to talk to him. God knew, though, that he'd spent the past few days aching to talk to her.

He fought to keep the eagerness out of his voice. "Okay," he said. "You want to meet somewhere?"

"How about Cafe Cantata?"

Cafe Cantata was a trendy coffee place on the edge of campus, and exactly the kind of place he would have expected her to suggest. She probably drank one of those weird, foamy kinds of coffee, instead of plain old black java. Just another difference between them, he supposed.

"Sure. When?"

"Are you free now?"

He wanted to say that for her, he'd put his whole life on hold, but he didn't. It wasn't like he really had a life anyway. All he'd had planned for the day was to write a chapter or two, spend some time chatting with his mom, and take a run with his dog. It wasn't real difficult to pencil Drew in.

"Yeah, I think I've reached a good stopping point," he said, thinking a blank document constituted a "good stopping point" if ever there was one. "I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

It wasn't until he hung up that it occurred to him to wonder exactly what he was going to say to her. He grabbed his car keys and headed for the door, thinking. Somehow he had to convince her to give him a chance. Somehow he had to make her see him as potential boyfriend material. It was obvious to him that, no matter how she kept trying to rationalize her desire away, she wanted him.

But was it obvious to her?

Max took the main road through the campus, lined with two-story, Georgian-style red brick buildings. One or two of the buildings were authentic, dating from the colonial era, but most of them had been built in the last twenty years as the university expanded. He pulled into the parking lot of Cafe Cantata, a small, one-story brick building designed to resemble a colonial home, right down to the large but utterly nonfunctional brick chimneys.

When he walked inside, Drew was already seated at one of the dainty little tables, sipping something frothy that looked more like whipped cream than coffee. He paused and stared at her for a minute, taking advantage of the fact that she hadn't spotted him yet. She was dressed in faded jeans that fit her like a second skin, and a dark green and gold university sweatshirt. Her platinum hair was knotted up casually at the back of her head, and she didn't appear to be wearing the slightest speck of makeup.

He'd never seen her look more gorgeous.

As he walked toward her, she looked up and gave him a smile. Not a friendly, welcoming smile, or a flirtatious smile, but a distant, cool smile that didn't touch the laugh lines around her eyes. Perhaps a Thank-You-For-Coming-On-Such-Short-Notice smile. He wasn't really surprised. An attempt to create distance between them was precisely what he had expected from her.

"Hi," he said, pulling a fragile-looking wrought iron chair out from under the table and sitting. It looked like it might break under him, but fortunately for his dignity, it didn't.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

"No problem," he said, and shot her his best sexy grin. He was pleased when she actually turned pink. He saw her lift her cup and sip from it to cover her blush.

"Do you want to order something?"

Max looked at the various coffees listed up over the counter. "I never come to places like this," he confessed. "All those weird coffees with strange names—like what is that thing you're drinking called? Crappuccino?"

He heard her give a decidedly unladylike snort of laughter and wondered if she'd gotten coffee up her nose. He glanced back at her apologetically. "Maybe I should just order black."

"Maybe you should."

The waitress came by at that moment, and he ordered plain black coffee, feeling it was safest. Drew was still regarding him with amusement. He turned back to her and met her gaze.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Uh...." Drew, usually so articulate, seemed hesitant. Which was okay. If she just wanted to sit at a table and allow him to admire the view, that was just fine with him. Especially if she happened to stare back.

Unfortunately, she didn't. "I wanted to talk about Tiffani."

"Tiffani?"

"Yeah." Drew glanced down, studying her drink as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world. "I think we need to talk about her."

What the hell did Tiffani have to do with anything? he wondered. The waitress brought his coffee, and he took a sip. It was made from freshly ground Colombian beans, freshly brewed, and didn't bear the slightest resemblance to the instant dreck he usually made himself. He decided he liked instant better.

"Sure," he agreed. "What about her?"

Drew looked uncomfortable. "She really likes you, Max."

Max shrugged. "I like her too. She's a nice kid."

"No, you don't understand. She really likes you. A lot."

It all became clear to him. Drew was worried because of what had happened between them. She was

afraid Tiffani's feelings were going to be hurt if she found out about it. And maybe she was reluctant to go out with him for fear of upsetting Tiffani. That made a lot of sense, now that he thought about it.

"I don't think she's that impressed by me," he said honestly. "Our date actually went pretty badly, to tell you the truth."

"She said it was the best date she'd ever been on."

Max felt his eyebrows shoot up despite himself. "If that was the best date she's ever been on, she's been on some horrendous ones."

"The truth is, Tiffani's had a pretty hard time with guys. She was married before she was twenty, and the guy turned out to be a jerk. I think you're the first decent guy she's dated."

"I'm not sure I'm that decent," he said. He took a deep breath and braced himself for The Discussion. "Considering what happened between you and me—"

She held up a hand. "Don't."

"What?"

"I don't want to discuss that."

He felt like the rug had been jerked out from under his feet. "Why not?"

"Look ..." Drew studied her cup thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Tiffani's right about one thing. I don't like hospitals."

"I can understand that," Max said, remembering what Tiffani had told him. He was uncertain, however, exactly what it had to do with what had happened between them. "Your mom died in one a few years ago, didn't she?"

"Six years ago now, although it doesn't seem that long ago. But Mom—" Drew paused, looking acutely uncomfortable. "She died in a lot of pain."

"I understand."

"You can't really understand unless you've known someone with cancer," Drew said. "Or is that what your father died of?"

Max shook his head. "He died in his sleep. Heart attack."

"Well, then, you can't imagine what it's like to see someone you love suffering from cancer. It's not a quick, easy way to die. It's wrenching, physically and emotionally." She sighed. "I spent a lot of time with her while she was dying. I spent that whole last week with her, even after she lapsed into a coma. It was awful, Max. Really awful."

"I understand," he said again. The truth was he understood a lot more than she gave him credit for, but he wasn't going to go into that right now. "So when Tiffani was in the hospital you were pretty upset."

Drew nodded. "When you and I were, um, in your car, I was completely exhausted. Really wiped out emotionally. And concerning what happened the next day—well, it's been a year since I broke up with my last boyfriend. I haven't, uh, done a lot of dating lately, if you know what I mean. So I guess I just let myself get carried away, physically. It didn't mean anything."

"It didn't mean anything," Max repeated carefully. He didn't trust himself to utter any thoughts of his own. God only knew what he might say.

"Right. It was an aberration."

An aberration. He felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. Which was really ridiculous. What had he

expected her to say?

He envisioned her as an alien woman in one of his novels and imagined what she'd say.

Our stolen moments together meant everything to me. It was the most glorious time of my life. I adore you, McNeill.

But she wasn't a woman in a novel. She was a real woman, with real motivations, and just as he'd realized that day, she'd used him.

She'd been having a bad day, and she'd used him to brighten her mood.

"I see," he said, careful to keep his tone neutral. "An aberration."

"Exactly," she said. "I'm not interested in you. You're not interested in me. That was all it was. An aberration."

The words jumped out of his mouth before he could stop them. He wasn't sure he would have stopped them if he could have. He wanted Drew to know how he felt, wanted it with an aching hunger he hadn't felt for a long time. He couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"You're wrong, Drew. I am interested in you."

Drew frowned. "No, you're not. You're interested in Tiffani."

"No," he said. "Tiffani is..." A vision of her freckled face and ready smile came to mind. Tiffani was awfully sweet, but she was just too young. "Tiffani is nice, but I don't want a relationship with her." He met her gaze across the table and said what he'd been yearning to say for days.

"You're the one I want, Drew."

Chapter 12

Max had evidently lost his mind, Drew decided. Either that, or she had. Because Max was sitting across the table from her, uttering words that sounded for all the world like they'd come out of a novel. She wondered numbly if he was working on writing a scene and practicing it on her. Sure. That had to be it.

"I don't understand," she said at last, taking refuge in obtuseness.

"Maybe you didn't want to kiss me," Max said, "but I wanted to kiss you."

I did want to kiss you. God help me, I did.

"Ridiculous," she said tartly. "We have nothing in common."

"Who the hell cares?"

She hesitated. The simplicity of that thought had a certain charm to it. As the possessor of a Ph.D. in literature, she was used to analyzing, dissecting, and scrutinizing everything, from Emily Dickinson poems to relationships. And yet, where had her tendency to analyze everything gotten her, as far as relationships were concerned?

A boring, middle-aged, possessive professor had been the pinnacle of her love life.

God knew that was a pitiful thought.

She shook off her momentary introspection. "People who have nothing in common shouldn't date," she said. "That's an accepted fact."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"Uh ... no."

"How do you know it doesn't work if you haven't tried it?"

"Just think about it. What would we do on a date? What could we do, together?"

Humor flashed wickedly in his green eyes. "What we did in the car the other day worked pretty well for me."

"Sex should not be the main point of a relationship," she said, uncomfortably aware of how prim she sounded.

"Why not?"

For some reason his ridiculous question sounded perfectly reasonable to her. She struggled to apply some sort of logic to the situation and failed miserably. "Are you suggesting," she said with as much disapproval as she could muster, "that we have some sort of tawdry, meaningless affair?"

He leaned forward and gazed at her with intensity. She looked back, into the green depths of his eyes, and felt herself falling under his spell.

"Absolutely," he said.

She knew she should be offended by the notion that all he wanted from her was sex. She should curtly refuse, get up from the table, and stalk away. She should tell him to go to hell. But she didn't. She couldn't.

Into her mind there slipped the memory of what it felt like to be held in his arms. She all too vividly remembered the way he'd kissed her, his hot mouth devouring her, the velvety sensation of his tongue against hers. The way his hands had touched her with gentle intimacy, just brushing the sides of her

breasts, then growing bolder and more forthright. She remembered how good his body had felt beneath her hands, what his powerful chest and back felt like, the feel of his wide shoulders as his muscles flexed beneath her fingers, the softness of his hair. His masculine, musky smell. The way his eyes had drifted closed when she'd touched him. The deep growls of pleasure he'd made in his chest.

"I'll have to think about it," she said. She heard the words come out of her own mouth with shock and took refuge behind what she had come to say. "But first you have to break it off with Tiffani."

Max looked surprised. "Break it off? What do you mean?"

"You know. Tell her you don't want to pursue your relationship with her."

"What relationship? Come on, Drew. We only had one date."

"You came over to our house for dinner one night, too."

"I think calling that a date would be seriously stretching the definition. But okay, at the most we had two dates, and one was a serious disaster. I wouldn't call that a relationship."

"Tiffani thinks she's in love with you," Drew blurted.

Max looked at her a long moment. At last he said, "I don't think Tiffani is in love with me. I don't even think she likes me all that much. I think what she really loves is the idea of being with someone."

Drew was startled by his insight. It was, she recognized, perfectly true. Tiffani had never been able to see herself as complete without a guy, even in high school. It was, she thought, the reason Tiffani had married a loser like Lucas. And it was most likely the reason she was so fixated on Max now.

"You're probably right," she admitted. "But the thing is, she's kind of focused on you right now."

"Focused?"

"She has a serious crush on you, Max."

"Yeah. I noticed."

"Well, then, you can see that you and I can't possibly—" She floundered for a moment. "Enter any sort of, uh, arrangement until you make it clear to her that you're not interested. Even then, she's going to be furious. She's going to be convinced I'm stealing her boyfriend from her." She sighed. "I really hate this. I don't want Tiffani mad at me. I really don't."

"It's my fault, Drew. I'm sorry I put you in this situation."

Drew shook her head. "It's not your fault, Max. I understand why you wanted to go out with her. You and she have a lot in common."

"That's not why I agreed to go out with her."

"Oh? Then why did you?"

Max hesitated for a long moment. At last he said, softly, "I was afraid if I didn't, I'd never see you again."

She sensed the effort it took him to say such a thing, to make himself so vulnerable to her, and she felt her heart softening. It would be easy, all too easy, to let this man under her skin, to let him mean far too much to her.

She reminded herself fiercely that he had suggested a brief, meaningless affair, not a relationship. And that was all they could possibly have, given how different they were. Sure, Max was a sweet man, but it took a lot more than that to forge a real relationship.

All that could ever be between them was sex.

Remembering the kisses they'd shared, she thought that just might be enough.

George Harnencourt's translation of Beowulf rings with a majesty all its own. Harnencourt's translation of the Old English is flawless, yet it somehow retains something of the poet's own voice... Grendel personifies the ancient fears of humanity, yet one cannot help but feel the pathos of the monster's mother as she struggles to avenge her slain child...

Drew's mind was still whirling with thoughts of Max's incredible proposal when she settled down to read her English 203 papers. As a consequence, it took her three readings of Ken Harshaw's neatly typed paper to see the obvious.

Ken could not possibly have written the words.

The thoughts were clear and organized, the vocabulary extensive and correctly used, and the paper actually started with a thesis and ended with a reasonable conclusion. Based on his earlier work, Ken could no more have written this paper than a kindergartner could have written the Encyclopedia Britannica.

She sighed and put down the paper on her desk. This was bad. Very bad. Turning to the computer, she accessed the Internet and typed in a few key phrases.

Three minutes later, she had her answer.

"This is a serious violation of the honor code, Mr. Harshaw."

Sitting across from her in her office, late that afternoon, Ken was obviously struggling to look innocent, with rather limited success. "I don't know what you're talking about, Dr. Cooper."

"I'm talking about this," she said impatiently, tossing his paper down in front of him. "And this." She tossed five sheets of paper she'd stapled together in front of him.

Ken looked at the papers and began to stammer. His ears turned red. "I—I don't understand, Dr. Cooper."

"Of course you do," Drew snapped. "Your paper on Beowulf came straight off the Internet, Mr. Harshaw. You didn't even have the good sense to try to alter it a bit."

Ken looked at the paper. She saw his lower lip tremble. "I couldn't help it, Dr. Cooper."

"Of course you could help it. Simply because you couldn't write the paper—"

Ken jumped to his feet and looked down on her. For the first time since she'd known him, he looked dangerous. There was an angry light in his eyes. "I couldn't read the book, Dr. Cooper. I tried, but it was just too hard. It was just too damned hard."

"I understand, Mr. Harshaw. Really, I do. But—"

"No, you don't," he snapped. "You have a doctorate in this stuff. I bet you've never had trouble reading something like a newspaper, let alone poetry."

She realized with a pang that his assertion was true enough. Her mother had had to hide the newspapers from her by the time she was four in order to prevent her from reading headlines like LOCAL HOUSE BURNS TO GROUND and being alarmed by them. And she'd started reading Robert Frost, and reveling in it, by the time she was seven or so.

The truth was, she didn't have the slightest idea of what Ken was going through.

"You're right, Mr. Harshaw," she said in a gentler tone. "I probably don't really understand the difficulties you face. But the fact remains that you have deliberately plagiarized a paper and presented it to me as your own work. That is a clear honor code violation, and will probably result in your expulsion from the school."

She saw his lip quiver again. He remained standing and said staunchly, "I don't care."

She would have wagered anything that he did care, a great deal. Otherwise he wouldn't have bothered to plagiarize the paper. And he certainly wouldn't be standing here in her office, on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry, Ken," she said gently. "But I'll have to notify the school."

His face crumpled, and she saw a tear slide down his round cheek. Once again he looked ten years old as he sat back down and spoke in a rush. "I just didn't know what else to do, Dr. Cooper. My dad's a really smart guy, and he's always wanted me to get into a good college. I always had a hard time keeping up in class, but he used to go into school and hassle the teachers until they gave me passing grades. A couple of times he went to the principal and tried to get the teachers fired. I know he's going to kill me if I get kicked out of college. I don't know what to do."

"Ken—" Drew hesitated. "What about community college? You might be able to take some remedial courses, catch up a little, then transfer those credits to a better college later."

Ken looked at her for a long moment, then his eyes dropped. "I don't think so, Dr. Cooper," he said softly. "I'm really dumb. I can't even read a magazine. Textbooks are way too hard. Even in middle school they were too hard. I had to get my friends to tell me what they said, and even then I usually got D's."

Poor kid, Drew thought. His father had done his best to protect Ken from reality, and in the end all he'd succeeded in doing was totally screwing the kid over. She wished she could think of a solution to the problem.

One of his sentences replayed in her head. I can't even read a magazine.

"Ken," she said, softly, "my sister just started an adult literacy group that meets at The Tome Place on Wednesday nights. Would you be embarrassed to join something like that?"

"A literacy group?"

"A group of adults who've never learned to read. Several of them are completely illiterate, but some of them simply read at a low level. Volunteers help them learn how to read. My sister is one of the volunteers."

Ken stared at her. She saw the astonishment on his face. "You mean there are other people who don't know how to read good?"

"Unfortunately, yes. You're not the only one to be failed by the system."

"Would they let me join?"

"I'm sure Tiffani—that's my sister—could make room for you."

Ken hesitated for a long moment. She saw his lips quiver. "I don't know how that could help keep me in college, Dr. Cooper."

Drew spoke as kindly as she could. "I don't think you can reasonably expect to succeed in college at your current level of reading ability, Ken."

Ken blinked hard. "Time to drop back fifteen and punt, huh?"

Although she preferred basketball to football, she got the gist of the metaphor. "I'm afraid so."

"I guess I'll be leaving anyway when you report me," he said.

"Ken—" She sighed. "I wish I had a choice. I don't."

He dropped his gaze and stared at the floor, and his voice fell almost to a whisper. "What if I quit school?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

He swallowed hard and lifted his chin, meeting her eyes squarely. "I just meant you don't have to report me, Dr. Cooper. I'll drop out."

"That would be very..." She hesitated for a long moment. "Very honorable of you, Ken."

"Okay." She heard his voice break, but his steady gaze didn't waver. "I'll let the dean's office know right away."

"Thank you, Ken," she said gently. "You need to understand, however, that I will check on your status in a couple of days. If you haven't withdrawn by then..."

"I understand," he said. "Don't worry, I'll drop out. You have my word on it."

She believed him. "I'm sorry, Ken. Really."

"It's not your fault. It's mine." He stood and hefted his backpack onto his broad shoulder. "Uh, thanks, Dr. Cooper."

She saw another tear slip down his cheek as he turned and strode out of her office.

Chapter 13

The doorbell rang again, more insistently this time, and managed to break into Max's consciousness this time. His concentration, which was absolute when he was actually left alone to write, broke, and he stood up, cursing. If Blue had been in the house, he would have been barking the walls down by now. But Blue had gone for a walk with Mom, wagging his tail and dancing eagerly. His obvious joy in spending time with Virginia had grated on Max's nerves a bit. Traitorous dog.

He flung the mahogany door open and found an older man standing there, wearing a hat and a flowered Hawaiian shirt. Beneath his Bermuda shorts stuck out long, skinny legs that looked like they belonged on a hairy heron. He looked pretty chilly in the October afternoon, and distinctly nervous. Max, who'd never seen the man before in his life, stared at him with puzzlement.

"Can I help you?"

"I—I think so." The older man took the hat off his head and fingered it nervously. "I was looking for Virginia. Virginia Sinclair."

This was a friend of his mom's, then. Probably her "charming widower," he guessed, looking at the man's abashed expression. But why on earth had the guy followed her all the way here from Florida?

He was beginning to get the distinct impression Mom hadn't told him everything there was to know about her love life.

"She's not in right now," he said. "She's out walking my dog."

"Oh," said the man. He looked at Max. "You must be Maxfield."

Max stuck his hand out. "Yeah, I'm Max."

The man shook his hand. He had a good, solid grip despite the arthritis that had begun to gnarl his knuckles. "I'm Pete. Peter Kirk."

"Want to come in and wait for Mom?"

Pete hesitated. "I don't want to get in your way."

"No problem. I wasn't doing anything, anyway." Besides writing a novel I'll be lucky to make deadline on, he added mentally. "Come on in. She'll be back pretty soon."

Pete sat down on his faded, frayed living room couch and looked around. His eyes widened slightly, and Max realized all over again just how bare his walls were. The room looked even more empty than it really was because his house was so huge. Besides, he had to admit his blue-and-yellow plaid couch wasn't exactly the height of fashion. In fact, it was pretty damned ugly.

He really ought to hire an interior decorator, he realized. Hell, he was a simple guy, but maybe a castoff sofa, a lamp, and a TV just weren't enough anymore. He was a wealthy man in his thirties, after all, not a broke college kid.

"So do you live in Florida, too?"

Pete nodded. "Your mother and I live in the same retirement village. We, uh—" He hesitated. "We play bridge together quite a bit."

Bridge. Even that was more exciting than Max's social life, he thought with a touch of bitter amusement. Besides that, he was willing to bet Mom and Pete did quite a bit more than play bridge together. The guy surely hadn't come all this way just to find a bridge partner.

Just then the door opened. Blue bounded in and happily flung himself at Max. He might have temporarily shifted his allegiance to Virginia, but he hadn't forgotten who fed him every night. Max rubbed the collie's ears as the dog tried to wiggle most of his seventy-pound bulk into his lap. He looked up in time to see his mother's shocked face.

"Pete! What are you doing here?"

Pete stood up and faced her. He looked uncomfortable. "Just came to see if I could convince you to come back home, Virginia."

Max's mother looked at Pete with the relentless stubbornness he knew too well. He watched, fascinated. "I think I'll be staying here for a while, Pete."

"Aw, Ginny, don't be like that."

Max's eyebrows shot up despite himself. He'd never heard anyone call Mom Ginny before. His mother bristled. "Go away, Pete."

"Now, Ginny—"

Pete held out an imploring hand, but Virginia gave him a look that could have sliced through iron. "I told you I'd give you an answer when I'd made up my mind," she said icily.

Pete grinned hopefully, showing a couple of gold teeth. "I just thought I'd help you make up your mind, Ginny." He gave her an imploring look. "I came all the way from Florida, honey. That ought to give you an idea how serious I am."

For a moment, Mom looked as if she might soften. Then she lifted her chin and looked unflinchingly at Pete. "I won't be rushed into this, Peter."

Pete returned her look for a moment, then shrugged. "I'll be at the Weekend Hotel if you change your mind," he said.

"I imagine you're wondering what that was all about."

Max was sprawled on the carpet, listening to the soaring vocals of Crosby, Stills and Nash on "Wooden Ships." At the sound of his mother's voice he opened an eye and saw her standing at the entrance to the living room, looking uncomfortable.

"I did kind of wonder, yeah."

"Turn down that ghastly racket and we'll talk."

"It's not racket," Max objected as he turned off his amplifier. He had always thought his mother should be grateful he didn't care for the music most of his generation had liked, like Flock of Seagulls and Men at Work. But she hadn't particularly appreciated his enthusiasm for rock from the sixties and seventies, either.

If it wasn't Frank Sinatra, it was racket to her.

"So," he said, rolling over to face her. "What's going on with Pete?"

His mother settled herself on the couch. She looked distinctly uncomfortable. "He and I, uh—"

"Play bridge together."

"Yes, sometimes. The truth of it is, Maxfield, that we've been spending quite a bit of time together."

"So he's your charming widower, huh?"

"I won't deny that he's charming. It's just that..." His mother hesitated a long moment. "He asked me to marry him, Maxfield."

There was a silence. At last Max said, "So you told him you needed to think about it?"

"At first I told him no."

Max stood up. The memories of Paula came thundering back with stunning force, but he forced them back. His mother's love life had nothing to do with his, after all.

"I see," he said. "How come?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready for marriage, Maxfield."

I'm just not ready for marriage, Max.

He heard Paula's sweet, tremulous voice echoing in his head and did his best to subdue the echoes. The two situations weren't even vaguely similar. His mother was a widow. She still had feelings for her dead husband. Naturally she was having difficulty committing to another man.

Paula had simply not loved him enough to stick with him through the tough times.

"I understand," he said, sitting next to her on the couch. "I wish you'd told me more about him, though. I mean, you could have mentioned the guy proposed to you."

"I was afraid you'd be upset," she confessed.

"Why? Because you thought I didn't want you to get married again?"

"Maybe. At any rate, I was afraid it would bring up bad memories for you."

"Don't be silly, Mom."

"I'm serious," she persisted. "After what Paula did to you—"

"Come on, Mom. That was years ago. And it has absolutely nothing to do with your relationship with Pete." He smiled at her and put an arm around her shoulders. "I just want you to be happy. So tell me, how do you feel about old Pete?"

"I love him. I think."

"Well," Max said, "when you're sure, you should marry him."

"I'm not sure. That's the problem. I'm not sure if I'll ever be certain."

"Maybe no one ever is," Max suggested.

"I was sure with your father," Virginia said. "From the moment I met him, I knew."

"Yeah," Max said. He thought of Drew, of the way she'd criticized his books at the convention. He'd been hopelessly enamored of her since that moment. "Believe me, I know what you mean."

Drew sat down on the couch and drew her copy of *Farthest Space: The Beginning* out from under the cushions. It was starting to look dog-eared from the disrespectful treatment, or perhaps from the fact that she thumbed through it all the time.

It was ironic, she thought, that her copy of Max's science fiction novel was beginning to look more used than the myriad books of literature and poetry lining her bookcases.

"I hope no one ever finds out about this," she muttered grimly, "or my reputation will be in shreds."

Since Tiffani was working on her new adult literacy project at the bookstore, Drew was alone tonight, although Alice was upstairs sleeping. Tonight was the first class for Tiffani's group. Despite the fact that she still had two spectacularly black eyes, Tiffani had insisted on starting tonight. During her enforced rest in the past week, she had spent a lot of time finding appropriate books, and had finally settled on *The Cat in the Hat*, which, she explained, used many of the most common words in the English language repeatedly, and was humorous besides. Drew had taken her word on it. She couldn't remember ever reading *The Cat in the Hat*. She couldn't even remember learning to read.

She had been reading serious books, like Dickens and Twain, by the time she was ten or so. That had led to her early entrance to college, at fifteen, at which time she had decided to major in English and had become immersed in literature. She'd never started reading popular books, like romances or science fiction, and she'd always figured those genres were for the uneducated masses.

She realized now she'd been missing something.

Not that Max's novel was great literature, because it wasn't. But it was surprisingly enjoyable to read a book that so clearly pitted good against evil. McNeill and his crew were the noble guardians of civilization, and the alien monsters they battled were unremittingly malevolent and vile. Most modern literature had a much more ambivalent attitude toward morals. Furthermore, most modern literature had a tragic view of the world and was simply depressing.

Max's novel was just plain fun.

She flipped at random to a page and started reading.

A'cana lay in her father's garden, staring at the stars, and wondered why McNeill had such an effect on her senses. Being near him was like being outside in a thunderstorm—thrilling, yet at the same time terrifying. The dark depths of his soul intrigued her, but she was afraid to plumb them too deeply, lest she discover something that might destroy them both forever.

Drew stopped reading for a moment and thought of Max. If he had any hidden depths, she hadn't seen a hint of them yet. There was nothing in his soul that gnawed at him, nothing dark and ominous that made him frightening, nothing Byronic in his past. He seemed like a nice, uncomplicated, down-to-earth guy.

The men she'd dated in the past had always been deep, complex, intellectual types. But lately the attraction of deep men, along with deep books, seemed to be wearing a little thin. She was tired of analyzing relationships, tired of meaningful discussions about profound subjects. Maybe Max was right. All she really wanted was to have fun.

She did her best to ignore the little voice deep inside her.

A little voice whispering that what she really wanted was a happy ending.

Chapter 14

"Get the hell out of my office."

Drew sat behind her desk and glared at James, who didn't appear to notice her fury. Sitting down in a chair across from her, he gave her a smarmy smile. "I just wanted to talk, Drew."

"Look," Drew said with barely contained fury, "I have been polite to you in public, but I'm under no obligation to be nice to you in private. Get out. Or I'll throw you out."

"Don't be so hostile, Drew. I just wanted to know how your sister was."

"My sister?"

"I saw her on the news last night, being interviewed by that Charity Rogers woman. I understand she was in an accident."

"She's fine," Drew said shortly.

"Good, good. Happy to hear it." James hesitated. "I just wanted you to know that I'm always here, if you need a shoulder to support you."

She glanced at his narrow, bent shoulders and snorted. "I seriously doubt they could."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. Look, James, I don't need a shoulder to cry on, okay?"

"Of course you do, Drew." James stood up and walked around the desk. He bent over and met her gaze. His eyes were a watery, washed-out gray, and he was so close she could smell the reek of his breath. It smelled as though he'd had cabbage for lunch.

"You're a passionate woman, Drew," he said. "I know you need a man in your life. Someone who understands you. Someone with whom you have a great deal in common."

"I don't need a man in my life," Drew said shortly.

"You've got one," James said. "But you and he don't have anything in common, can't you see that?"

A chill went through her. James knew about Max.

James had been watching her.

"You've been spying on me," she accused.

He shook his head, looking sorrowful. "Not spying, Drew. Everyone on campus is talking about you. Didn't you realize that? I want to protect you, watch over you, make sure you don't get involved with someone who's bad for you. I wouldn't want anyone to take advantage of your passionate nature. Maxfield Sinclair isn't the right man for you. Don't you understand that? He's just a writer of trash, an uneducated fool. You deserve so much more."

Drew stood up slowly, and faced him. "I decide who I'm going to date, James," she said forcefully.

"You have nothing to do with it."

"I'm just concerned your judgment has been clouded by your passionate nature," James said.

Her fists clenched. She didn't like the way he kept emphasizing her passionate nature. God knew she'd never demonstrated much passion for him. She remembered his assertion that everyone on campus was talking about her love life and wondered with a hot flush if someone had seen her and Max in the Mustang. She hoped to God it hadn't been James.

That was an awful thought—one of the most intimate moments of her life being witnessed by this creep.

She remembered how she'd heard someone at her back door that night, someone who had run away when she went outside. James must be the one who was watching her. That was the only conclusion she could draw that made any sense.

"Listen to me, James," she said at last, impressed by how cold and steady her voice was. "I have absolutely no interest in you any longer. It's none of your business who I date. I won't permit you to dictate to me. And if you've been calling me, watching me, leaving notes for me, I want you to stop it right now. There's a name for that. It's called stalking. It's illegal. And if I catch you doing it, I'll damn well go to the police."

James shook his head, looking sorrowful. "I'm not stalking you, Drew. I just can't let anything happen to you. I have to protect you. You're too important to me."

When, she wondered, had James slid over the edge, slipping from mistrust and suspicion right into obsessive paranoia? She had a feeling it had happened about the time he'd accused her of sleeping with the entire football team. She'd just been too furious with him to notice at the time.

"Get out of my office," she snarled, "and don't come near me again. Do you hear me? Don't."

She used the hard, cold voice that had intimidated him in the past. But it didn't seem to intimidate him now. To her horror, he stepped closer and placed his hand on her cheek. She smelled the oppressive reek of cabbage.

"Don't be like that, Drew," he whispered. "You know you want me."

Drew took a step backward and discovered she was against the wall. She was an inch or two taller than he was, but probably not as strong. She could yell for help, but she didn't want to call attention to her plight if she could possibly avoid it. She had a certain dignity to maintain.

James put an arm on either side of her, trapping her against the wall, and rubbed his body against her. She felt his erection pressing against her. He seemed oblivious to her struggles as she pushed with all her strength against his chest. James was stronger than he looked.

She did the only thing she could think of. She slammed her knee into his crotch.

James doubled over and fell to the floor, cursing and gasping for breath. At that moment a knock sounded on the door. Drew stepped over James, walked to the door, and opened it. She was stunned to see Max.

He looked past her, at James, who was on his knees on the floor, gulping desperate mouthfuls of air. Max's chestnut eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Do you need some help?"

Drew glanced over her shoulder, then looked back at Max and smiled wanly. "No," she said. "I took care of it."

Max had gone to Drew's office to ask her to go out for a cup of coffee on a whim. He was surprised when she said yes, although he suspected her eagerness to leave had something to do with the middle-aged professor kneeling on her carpet, gasping in pain.

"So who was that guy?" he asked her as they walked through the narrow hallway.

"James Barton," she said. "He's a professor in the history department. He's also a former boyfriend."

"Any particular reason you left him sobbing on your carpet?"

"He was—" She hesitated. "He seems to know an awful lot about us, Max. Apparently someone was watching us when we—when you and I—" She stumbled to a halt. "I just hope it wasn't him."

A violent shock of an unfamiliar sensation unfurled in his chest. It took him a moment to realize it was fear. Fear for her.

"Do you think he's been spying on you?" he said tightly.

"I hope not. But he's a lot more interested in my personal life than he has any right to be."

He recalled Charity Rogers' words. Maybe it wasn't just coincidence. Could it be that he wasn't the one who'd been targeted? The more he thought about it, the more confusing the situation became.

Tiffani's life had been endangered, he'd been followed when he'd taken Tiffani out on a date, and now it seemed Drew had a wacko for an ex-boyfriend. Could James Barton be trying to get back at Drew through her sister?

"So what happened just now?" he said, controlling his voice rigidly. He was pleased to note it didn't shake in the least.

"He was—" She hesitated. "Making a pass at me."

"Come on, Drew, don't lie to me. If he was coming on to you with the door closed, and scared you so much you hit him, it was more than a pass. In the least, it's sexual harassment. At most he was trying to rape you. Which was it?"

She paused again. "I don't think he was going to rape me. Really. But I wasn't sure. So I hit him with my knee."

"Good for you," Max said. "Now what are you going to do?"

They reached Cafe Cantata. He held the door, and she went inside. "I'm not sure," she said.

"Sexual harassment's illegal, Drew. You don't have to put up with it."

"True enough. But without witnesses, it's my word against his. I can complain to the university, but he's been here longer." Drew ordered a cup of frappuccino and sat at a table.

Max followed her, a cup of black coffee in his hand. "What about his interest in your personal life? If there's any chance he's been stalking you, don't you think you should call the cops?"

"I don't have anything specific to complain about," she said in her most reasonable tones. "He said everyone is talking about us. I imagine he's exaggerating, but he probably heard about our relationship through campus gossip. I suppose I'm overreacting a bit."

"I think you're rationalizing," he said gently.

"Maybe." She took a sip of her coffee, and then put it down hard on the table. "I just don't know, Max. He sounded almost like he had gone over the edge. He always used to be a little suspicious, maybe even a little paranoid, but now—He just sounds crazy."

"Not a good quality in a former boyfriend."

"But this is the first time he's approached me in several weeks," she went on. "And unless he threatens me, I can't really justify calling the police. Can I?"

Max met her gaze. "Tell me, Drew. What, exactly, was he doing to you just now?"

Her eyes flickered away. "He was just trying to kiss me, Max. That's all."

He would have bet his life there was more to it than that. Drew was a cool, levelheaded woman. She

didn't overreact easily. It would take more than a man kissing her for her to do something as violent as kicking him in the balls. A simple kiss wouldn't have warranted more than a slap.

James Barton had obviously done something to scare the living daylights out of her.

"Okay," he said gently. "But I want you to avoid him from now on. And be careful."

"Fine," she said, a little testily. "Can we drop this subject now?"

"Sure," he agreed. "That's why I asked you to come out for coffee, anyway. So we could talk. About us."

"There is no us, Max."

"I thought we decided we were going to have a torrid affair."

He had suggested the idea almost on a whim. What he really wanted was to take her out on a real date, complete with a dozen long-stemmed roses. But he was pretty certain she'd never agree to go out with him. Last time he'd suggested it she'd refused all too quickly. So he'd hit upon the idea of casual sex. Once they made love a few times, he hoped she'd be more amenable to thoughts of a real relationship.

Because his feelings for Drew weren't casual in the least.

Drew looked uncomfortable. "I haven't decided—I mean, I'm not sure—well, I don't think—"

He was pleased to have reduced her to such inarticulate stammering. It was a big step up from what he had half expected - a cool stare and the forthright statement, I don't want any kind of relationship with you. Period. By comparison, her spluttering awkwardness sounded pretty promising.

"It'll be fun," he said cheerfully.

"Fun," Drew repeated. Her tone made it sound like a four-letter word. "I'm not used to relationships that are just fun."

"Neither am I."

She gave a small, wry smile. "I thought maybe you made a habit out of having torrid affairs."

"No," he admitted. "In fact, I haven't had a relationship of any kind in a long time."

"Really? The way you look, I assumed you had women dripping off you."

He was unaccountably pleased she thought he was nice-looking. What had she called him in the Mustang? Gorgeous, that was it. He was pretty sure no one had ever called him gorgeous before. Drew was beginning to do wonders for his ego.

"Not for years." Not ever, he amended mentally.

Drew took a sip of her coffee and looked at him. "When was your last major relationship, Max?"

Paula.

He couldn't talk about her, even after all these years, without feeling a stab of agonizing pain for the way she'd just walked out on him. He'd been in a hospital bed, in severe physical and emotional pain, terrified of what was going to happen to him, and she'd just left and never came back. The memory still struck him in the heart like a dagger, every time he let himself think of it.

"Eight years ago," he said, forcing himself to sound casual about it. Eight years was a hell of a long time, after all. The memory shouldn't still be as sharp as a sword edge.

"Eight years? How old were you?"

"Twenty-five, I guess." He knew it for a fact. It had been his twenty-fifth birthday. Not a birthday he was likely to forget.

"She must have meant a lot to you."

Behind the glasses, her silver-blue eyes saw a hell of a lot more than he wanted them to. He had an uncomfortable feeling she could see him writhing in pain and embarrassment internally as he remembered it. He wondered if she could ever understand the pain wasn't so much because he'd loved Paula so, but because of the sheer awfulness of her betrayal.

"We were engaged," he admitted at last.

"And did she leave you?"

"Yeah," he said roughly. Something hot ran over his fingers, and he looked down, seeing he'd squeezed the foam cup hard enough to crack it. Black coffee streamed out over his hand. Fortunately it had cooled off quite a bit. He grabbed a handful of napkins from the metal dispenser and made quite a production of mopping the table. At last he looked up, hoping she would have entirely forgotten the conversation. Instead she was looking at him with sympathy.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He deliberately misunderstood. "That's okay. It wasn't all that hot. It didn't burn me."

"Not the coffee," she persisted. "Your fiancée. I'm so sorry she left you."

"It was a long time ago."

"I'm not sure people ever forget things like that. I know I wouldn't."

"Yeah, well, maybe it was partly my fault."

Drew gazed at him for a long moment. "Maybe I shouldn't ask this, but why did she leave you?"

I'm just not ready for marriage, Max.

He couldn't forget Paula's voice, quavering and sweet, as she took off the engagement ring he'd picked out for her and dropped it on the table next to him as he lay in a hospital bed. He couldn't forget the words she'd uttered, hurting him worse than the long incision in his abdomen. He'd thought she was just panicking. With all his heart, he'd believed she would come back.

She never had.

"She had her reasons," he said curtly.

Drew nodded. "None of my business. I know. I'm sorry, Max. I didn't mean to bring up a painful subject."

He shook off the bad memories. "Look," he said, shooting her a crooked grin, "that's exactly what I'm saying. Relationships shouldn't have to be painful. They can be fun, you know?"

Drew toyed with her empty cup. "Maybe you're right," she said at last.

"Of course I'm right. So what do you think?"

Drew looked up and met his gaze. She smiled, slowly, and the seductive force of that smile tied knots in his stomach. He wanted her so badly he would have given up almost anything for her.

"I think it sounds terrific," she said.

Max grinned back. He'd gotten what he wanted. A hot affair with a wonderful, beautiful, intelligent woman. And after that he'd somehow convince her that she wanted more than an affair. Somehow he

had to talk her into giving him a chance. He knew that a night or two of sex with her was not going to be enough for him.

He wasn't sure he'd ever get enough of her.

Suddenly Drew stiffened. "Oh, God," she whispered.

Max happened to be facing away from the door. He immediately guessed James Barton had walked into the coffee shop. He twisted his head over his shoulder to check.

He saw Tiffani.

She saw them, too, but she didn't look horrified at the sight of them together. On the contrary, her still-bruised face lit up with pleasure. "Hi!" she said, and bounced happily across the floor.

Max looked quickly back at Drew and saw the shocked guilt etched in her features. "Uh—hi, Tiffani," he said, trying to divert her attention away from Drew, who looked like she'd been caught committing a murder, or at least armed robbery. Drew's poker face needed serious work. "Want to sit down?"

"Sure." Tiffani scraped a chair across the floor, sat, and grinned at her sister. "I'm glad to see you're taking my advice."

"Your... advice?"

"I told you you'd like Max, once you got to know him. I'm glad you're trying to make friends with him."

Drew shot Max a look of appalled guilt. Max couldn't blame her. He felt pretty damn low himself. Tiffani thought they were trying to become friends because of her.

She didn't have the slightest clue they had just agreed to sleep together.

He had all but forgotten Tiffani and her crush on him. He realized he was going to have to talk to her about this, before things got entirely out of hand. Or before Drew backed out on him. To judge from her shocked expression, she was already having second thoughts. He had to be honest with Tiffani, or he really was going to qualify as world-class slime.

"Listen, Tiffani," he said, "can we talk?"

Tiffani beamed as if he'd suggested they get married. "Right now I'm on my way to work. How about later? Want to come by the house about eight?"

"Sure," Max said, figuring there was no point in putting it off any later than necessary. He stood up. "I guess I better get going." He smiled half-heartedly at Tiffani. "See you later."

Tiffani couldn't possibly have any real feelings for him, he figured as he walked out into the cold October air. After all, they'd only gone out once. He'd just explain, calmly and rationally, that he'd discovered he had feelings for someone else, and it wouldn't upset her in the least.

There wasn't anything for him to be nervous about.

Chapter 15

It never occurred to Max that Tiffani would regard their "talk" as a date until he got to the house she shared with Drew. Maybe if he'd been with more women in his life, he might have expected it, but he didn't. As a consequence, he was shocked when Tiffani met him at the door, wearing a little black dress—a very little black dress—that should have been registered as a lethal weapon. Its top covered, at most, an inch or two more flesh than a stripper's pasties would have. Max hastily averted his eyes.

"Uh, hi, Tiffani."

"Hi," she purred. "I got Drew to take Alice out, so we're all alone."

Great, he thought. Just fabulous. He imagined Drew had figured he and Tiffani needed space in order to discuss the situation privately. Unfortunately it looked like Tiffani had a whole different agenda.

The embarrassing situation did nothing to improve his natural awkwardness, and he found himself stammering even more than usual. "Uh, look, Tiffani, we need to, uh, talk."

She slid her arms slowly around his neck and pressed her perky little breasts against his chest. A suffocating cloud of perfume enveloped him. "Who wants to talk, Max?"

It figured that her approach to seduction would be as completely unsubtle as her approach to just about everything else was. He reached up, disentangled her arms from around his neck, and shoved her far enough away to reestablish his personal space. "Hey," he said, slightly more sharply. "I just want to talk."

Tiffani took a step back, just enough to be able to see his face, and stared up at him, looking wounded. "I'm sorry," she said. Her lower lip actually stuck out like a chastised child's, he noticed. "I just thought—"

"Yeah, I figured out what you thought," he said, more curtly than he had intended. The hurt expression on her face cut into him, and he spoke a little more gently. "Look, Tiffani, don't take this the wrong way—I mean, you're a nice person and all, but—I really think—"

She took another step back and stared at him with wide blue eyes. Her lower lip began to quiver. "You're breaking up with me," she accused.

"I'm not sure you could call it breaking up, Tiffani. We only went out once. One date doesn't constitute a relationship."

"But I thought—" She hesitated a long moment. Max was appalled to see a tear trickle down her freckled cheek. "I thought you really liked me."

He felt like the lowest form of life on the planet. "I do like you, Tiffani. I just don't like you in quite that way."

"But I like you!" she wailed. "I think I'm in love with you, Max!"

He couldn't let her turn this into some sort of romantic tragedy. He refused to be cast in her personal production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Yes, he'd admit he'd screwed up, but she was still expecting way too much from a man she barely knew. Stepping forward, he caught her by the wrists.

"Tiffani," he said forcefully. "Listen to me. You are not in love with me, damn it. You hardly know me."

"I know you well enough," she whispered. Her eyes, tragic and wet, stared plaintively into his.

"No. You don't."

"You saved my baby. You saved her."

"Yeah, and based on that you've decided I'm some sort of a hero. I'm not a hero, Tiffani. I'm just a guy. And I don't feel that way about you. I'm sorry, but I just don't."

She stared into his eyes another moment, then her breath caught raggedly. She yanked her arms from his grasp and turned away, her shoulders slumping. "Go away," she whispered harshly.

"Tiffani—" he said. He was fully aware this mess was his fault, and he wished he could go back in time and undo the damage he'd caused her. But one date, one simple dinner and a movie, shouldn't have mattered that much to her. If only she weren't so damned needy. "Look, you don't need me. You want someone, anyone, and I just happen to be the one you met. Don't you see that? It's not me you want, Tiffani, it's—"

"Just go away!" she wailed. "Leave me alone!"

Max hesitated, then turned and left.

He heard something shatter against the door as he closed it behind him.

When Drew came in with Alice, she found Tiffani sprawled on the couch, eating the last remnants of what had been a full half-gallon container of fudge ripple ice cream and watching *The Brady Bunch*. She was wearing a wrinkled sweatsuit, and her eyes were suspiciously red-rimmed.

"Hey," Drew said softly as she handed over Alice. "How did it go?"

Tiffani put her arms around the little body of her daughter and buried her face in the child's mop of blonde curls for a moment. "He dumped me," she said bitterly.

"I'm sorry," Drew said, and meant it.

Tiffani put Alice on the floor and started spooning ice cream into her mouth again. "I'm sorry I asked you to make friends with the guy," she mumbled around the ice cream. "You were right. He's a jerk. A real asshole."

"Tiff—" Drew hesitated. She didn't want Tiffani to hate Max for the rest of eternity, but what was she supposed to say? Max dumped you so he and I could have an affair? That probably wouldn't be a lot of consolation. She decided to keep that bit of news to herself for now, and tried the reasonable approach instead. "You know, you guys only went out once."

"Yeah, but he was so terrific, Drew. I really thought he was the one."

You always think that, Drew thought. She kept the thought to herself. "I don't think Max meant to hurt you, Tiff. He just—"

"Do me a favor," Tiffani said tartly. "Never mention his name again. Okay? I never want to hear the name Maxfield Sinclair again as long as I live."

That was going to be pretty difficult, Drew reflected, considering she was planning on having an affair with the man herself.

She began to realize this situation was going to be a whole lot more complicated than she had thought.

"Don't call me at home."

Listening to Drew's conspiratorial whisper on the other end of the phone line, Max felt like an underworld spy on a secret mission. Sinclair. Max Sinclair. He sighed. "Haven't you told Tiffani what's going on yet?"

"No," Drew said in an intense whisper, "and I'm not going to. Her heart is already broken."

Max seriously doubted that, but he forbore to say so. "She's going to find out sooner or later," he pointed out.

"There's no reason she has to know, Max. It's not as if we're really dating. She won't see us together."

Max stifled an irritated sigh. His suggestion that they have an affair had seemed to be an inspired move, a way of getting her warmed up to the idea of a real relationship. But he was beginning to regret it already. Drew seemed to be planning on treating him like a gigolo, someone she might have sex with but whom she wouldn't be seen with in public. Sort of like a vibrator. He wasn't sure he liked that role.

"Look," he said, letting some of his irritation show in his voice, "I just called you to find out where you want to meet, and when. Is tonight good for you?"

Drew hesitated. "I really have a lot of papers to go over, Max."

He got the distinct impression she was trying to weasel out of their agreement. "So let's get together after you've gone over your papers. How about nine?"

"At your house?"

"Uh—no." Hell. He'd completely forgotten. "My mom is visiting me right now."

"Well, we certainly can't use my house," she said primly.

"No," he agreed. "I don't think we'd keep our relationship a secret very long if Tiffani came home and found us..."

"You're right," she interrupted. "That would be a really bad idea. So what should we do?"

Max scowled. It was, he thought, like being a sixteen-year-old trying to get laid for the first time. Well, there was always the Mustang. Yeah, that'd be a great way to start off their relationship and really impress the lady. Sex in the back seat of a car. Just like two teenagers.

He figured he was getting too old for that kind of thing, anyway. He'd probably throw his back out if he tried it.

"I think I can get rid of my mom for the evening," he said.

Drew hesitated. "All right," she said at last.

He gave her his address and hung up. As he left his study and walked out to the cavernously empty living room, carrying the cordless phone with him, he sighed. Maybe he should have stuck with the back seat of his car. Drew was not going to be impressed by his taste in decorating, he thought glumly, looking at the completely unadorned, twelve-foot high walls. It was like being in a really big hospital room.

He squinted and tried to imagine the room in the dark, lit only by the golden flicker of candle flames. That might help. Who knew, a little candlelight might do wonders.

At any rate, if Drew wanted him as much as he wanted her, maybe she wouldn't give a damn about the surroundings. He hoped so, at any rate.

He noticed the cordless phone was still in his hand and frowned. Then he pressed the "talk" button and called the Weekend Hotel. Moments later he was chatting with Peter Kirk.

"Pete called me today," his mother informed him that evening as she applied a discreet layer of makeup in the guest bathroom. She was wearing what, for her, constituted a gala outfit—a two-piece violet dress, dark stockings, and stubby-toed black shoes with one-inch heels.

Standing behind her, he did his best to look innocent, although it wasn't a look he did too well. "No kidding?"

"You can forget about looking surprised. Pete told me you called him and suggested that he take me out."

"I told him not to do that," Max grumbled.

"It's all right, dear." His mother patted his hand. "I appreciate the fact that you're trying to fix my love life. Although I must admit, I'd appreciate it more if I didn't suspect you were trying to get me out of the way because you have a date."

Max stared at her reflection in the mirror. To his mind there leaped the memory of her finding his secret stash of Playboys with unerring, and unnerving, accuracy. "Jesus, Mom. Maybe you are psychic after all."

"Don't swear, Maxfield. I brought you up better than that."

"Maybe you brought me up better than that, but I'm afraid the upbringing didn't stick." Max gave her a crooked grin in the mirror. "So are you mad at me?"

"No. Although you could have easily gotten me out of your way, just by asking me to go to a movie."

"Yeah, well, to be honest, I kind of felt sorry for poor old Pete. I figured he should have a second chance, after he followed you all the way up here."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Have fun, Mom."

"I will, dear. And I'll stay out of your way until midnight. Is that late enough?"

"I think so."

"Perhaps you'll let me meet your young lady some other night."

"Actually," Max said, "this is a different young lady."

"Really?" Virginia looked at him in the mirror as she applied a ladylike shade of pink lipstick, and then smiled. "This is the one you really care for, I see."

Max blinked, stunned by her ability to see his deepest thoughts and feelings with one casual glance.

"Mom," he said suspiciously. "Are you really psychic?"

His mother smiled serenely. "I'll never tell, dear."

Chapter 16

Drew arrived at precisely nine o'clock. Max opened the door in response to her light rap and found her standing on the porch, looking as rigidly nervous as a deer in oncoming headlights. She gave him a hesitant smile. "Mind if I come in?"

He knew he was staring, but he couldn't seem to help himself. She was dressed in jeans and a university sweatshirt again, but she'd let her hair fall in a silvery cascade down her back. He'd never seen her hair down before, and hadn't realized how incredibly long it was. It fell, straight, thick, and silky, almost to her waist.

For some reason the thought of running his hands through it filled him with a longing almost too sharp to bear.

At last he forced himself to close his gaping mouth. "Sure," he said, moving aside to let her in. Her body brushed against his lightly as she passed, setting off little fireworks inside him. He all but groaned.

She stepped inside, paused, and looked at the two-story foyer, uncluttered by such frivolities as tables, carpets, or pictures on the wall. "This is a beautiful house," she said. "Did you just move in?"

"No. I've been here eight years."

He saw her eyebrows lift as she glanced to the right, where large ionic columns magnificently framed what was supposed to be a dining room, and to the left, where an arching doorway framed his hypothetical formal living room. Since both rooms were completely devoid of anything but a whole lot of air, he doubted she could tell the difference between them.

"Nice floors," she said at last.

Max let out a sharp crack of laughter. "Thanks."

He escorted her into the so-called family room, where candles along the mantel lit the room with a subtle glow. He'd made a quick trip to the mall today and bought a bunch of fancy silver-plated candleholders and long tapers to go in them, and he thought it looked pretty good.

Yeah, sure, he thought. The way the candlelight reflected off the TV was definitely real romantic. Who was he kidding here, anyway?

She turned in a circle and looked at his old blue-and-mustard plaid couch, a friend's castoff he'd acquired when he got out of college, and the orange-painted end table, gleaned from Mom's attic, that he used mostly to hold up the only lamp in the room. Against another wall stood his television, perched on a TV cart with wheels—something he was pretty sure Laura Ashley wouldn't approve of.

"You have a decidedly minimalist style," she said at last.

That was one way of putting it. "Uh-huh," he said. "I pattern my life after Thoreau. You know—'simplify, simplify, simplify.'"

"Yes, I can see that," she agreed gravely. "You have an interesting color sense, too. I don't think I ever would have thought to combine these particular colors, but it's certainly striking."

"You mean ugly."

The corners of her mouth twitched. "You said it. I didn't."

At that moment there was a demanding woof at the back door. "Excuse me," Max said. He walked over

and let Blue in. The dog trotted in, stared at Drew for a moment with his ears up, then crossed to her. She put out a hand, which he sniffed, then licked appreciatively.

"He likes you," Max said.

"More likely he likes the chicken I had for dinner." She rubbed the dog's ears. "He really is pretty. I couldn't imagine what he'd look like, from your description, but he's really beautiful."

"Thanks." At least she approved of one thing in his house. But then, Blue was easily the most decorative thing in it.

"I see why you call him Blue. His eyes are blue."

Max nodded. "He's also a blue merle. That's what you call a gray collie. But actually I named him after a Joni Mitchell song."

"Who?"

Max stared at her. "Don't you know who Joni Mitchell is?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

That was another thing they didn't have in common, then. She was as totally ignorant about classic rock as he was about Beethoven and Mozart. "A singer from the early seventies. Beautiful voice." He didn't add that the name had suited his bleak mood at the time he'd bought the collie all too well. It didn't seem too smart to bring up his wrecked relationship with another woman just now.

"I see," she said.

An uncomfortable silence fell. With the small talk out of the way, Max didn't have a clue what to do next. "Uh—" He gestured at the couch, awkwardly. "Want to sit down?"

She sat. He sat next to her, about a foot away—just too far away to put his arm around her easily. He realized he wasn't sure what the proper procedure for a torrid affair was. Were they supposed to talk first, or just start kissing? What did she expect from him, anyway?

Nerds shouldn't try to have affairs, he decided. He felt as hopelessly out of his depth with her as he'd felt with girls in high school. His pimples might be gone, but his awkwardness sure as hell wasn't.

Drew didn't seem any more at ease than he did. She looked away from him and continued patting Blue. "So where's your mother?"

"I talked her into going out on a date. She'll be out at least till midnight."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. You think I want my mom walking in on us while we're—" He broke off uncomfortably.

Drew laughed softly. "That would be kind of weird, wouldn't it?"

"Weird doesn't begin to describe it. It'd be like being in high school again." He hesitated. "Then again, this whole thing is so awkward, it feels kind of like being in high school again. Don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know."

"What?"

"I never went to high school."

"Let me guess. Early entrance to college."

She nodded. "When I was fifteen."

That explained some things about her personality, he thought. She was obviously extraordinarily intelligent, but she hadn't had quite the typical American social experience. That probably explained why she sometimes seemed so impatient with less intellectual types. She'd spent the better part of her life on a college campus. "Believe me, you didn't miss much."

"I know. I got to live it vicariously through Tiffani, for her last two years of high school. It didn't look like a lot of fun."

"I bet you were overprotective, too. Just like my mom."

"I had to be. Tiffani was bound and determined to destroy herself. She was boy-crazy."

"Pretty normal, I'd think. Weren't you boy-crazy when you were that age?"

"I couldn't be. I was too busy with college classes to have time for a social life. I didn't really start dating until after I got my Ph.D."

"Hmm," said Max. He had started dating in college, not counting a horrifically awkward prom date in high school he'd rather forget entirely, but he'd really only seriously dated one person—Paula. Frankly, he didn't have a lot of relevant experience on his resume.

It occurred to him to wonder just how much sexual sophistication Drew was expecting from him. He hoped she wasn't going to judge him based on her previous lovers. The thought made his stomach clench into knots.

Suppose he wasn't good enough in bed for her?

"So what do you want to do?" he blurted out.

Drew looked at him. A slight smile lifted one corner of her mouth. "I thought we agreed on that yesterday," she said softly.

He wondered how to begin. Sweep her off her feet, like Rhett Butler with Scarlett O'Hara, and carry her up the stairs? Dumb idea, he thought. He wasn't even sure he could carry her up a flight of stairs. After all, she was only three inches shorter than he was. He'd probably wind up in traction.

So should he kiss her, or just bluntly suggest they go up to his bedroom?

Some of the nervous hesitation he felt must have shown in his face, because she laid a hand against his cheek and gazed into his eyes. "Max," she said softly, "I've never done anything like this, either."

"I don't know where to start," he admitted sheepishly.

"I think," she whispered, "we should start at the beginning." She slipped her hand around the back of his neck, pulled his head down, and brushed her lips across his.

Instantly a flood of heat surged through him, and all his confusion and hesitancy vanished. This was what he wanted, what he'd wanted for weeks. Since the moment he'd seen her at the convention. He put his arms around her waist, pulled her closer, and let his tongue slide into her mouth. She sighed and tangled her hands in his hair, falling against him, so that her soft breasts pressed against his chest.

He felt something warm and wet caress his cheek. Something that smelled inexplicably like dog breath.

Max lifted his head and looked right into a pair of gorgeous, soulful blue eyes.

His dog's eyes.

Blue had his front paws propped on the couch and was studying them with alert interest, his tail waving back and forth. He'd never seen his master behave in such a manner and was obviously curious as to

precisely what was going on.

"Blue," Max said sharply. "Go away."

Blue waved his tail harder, delighted to be noticed, and licked Max's cheek again.

Drew chuckled. "Unless you're interested in a ménage à trois, I think we should go upstairs."

"Good idea," he agreed, impressed by her ability to find humor in what he felt was a highly irritating situation. He stood up, his arm still around her waist, and they headed for the staircase. Blue trotted at their heels.

"No, Blue. Go away."

Accustomed to sleeping at the foot of Max's bed, Blue ignored his words and followed them up the staircase. He looked offended when Max shut the door to his bedroom right on his mottled nose.

As Max turned the light on, Drew paused just inside the door and looked at the room. "Well. At least you have a bed. I wondered."

Not only did he have a bed, but he had a really big bed. He figured it might come in handy later. But not now. "Yeah, I have a bed, but we aren't going to bother with it right now." He gestured toward the master bath. "I have a huge whirlpool tub. I've always wanted to use it."

"That sounds nice," she said softly, and reached up to press her lips against his. He kissed her back, letting his fingers run through her glorious hair, marveling at the softness of it, inhaling the sweet scent of peach that imbued it. The curious intimacy of exploring a woman's hair, strand by strand, sent a shudder of longing through him. He wanted to explore every inch of her, as thoroughly as her hair.

The world began to slip away. At last he pulled away from her, grinning ruefully.

"I had kind of planned on putting water in it before we used it, Drew."

He went into the bathroom and started running hot water. Over the noise of splashing water, he heard an indignant yelping sound. "Damn that dog," he said under his breath.

"You can hardly blame him. He's not used to sharing you."

In the hall, Blue began to bark. "Blue!" Max shouted. "Shut up!"

There was a pause, then Blue began howling.

"Great," Max groaned. "Just great. Romantic music, provided by my dog."

"Maybe if you put him outside again?"

"Sure. Then he can bark and wake up all the neighbors."

Whining, Blue began to scratch furiously at the bedroom door. Max cursed and opened it. Blue stalked in, his ears flat against his head and indignation in every line of his furry body, managing to clearly convey his opinion that Max had behaved very rudely indeed.

Max was unimpressed by the dog's acting abilities. "Go lie down," he snapped.

Hearing the word "down," Blue lay down obediently at his customary spot at the foot of Max's bed. "Stay," Max ordered, and went back to the bathroom to take a look at the tub. It was taking a hell of a long time to fill.

Damn it, he was in a hurry here. Maybe he should have stuck with the bed. But he was trying to impress Drew.

And so far he was doing a fabulous job, he thought irritably. A house without furniture, a dog with

voyeuristic tendencies, and a bathtub that was taking a quarter of an hour to fill. He'd be lucky if she ever came back.

He lit the dozen votive candles he'd arrayed around the edge of the tub earlier, turned off the lights, and stepped back to admire the effect. Not bad. Not bad at all. Just like one of those ads on TV, the kind that ran at two in the morning, advertising CDs featuring twenty bad love songs from the eighties.

He wondered if she'd think the effect was romantic, or just silly.

"That looks nice," her voice said behind him. Max turned around and felt the breath rush out of his lungs.

While he'd been filling the tub, Drew had turned off the bedroom light, taken off her glasses, and stripped off her sweatshirt, jeans, and shoes. Now she stood in front of him, lit only by the golden light of the candles, wearing nothing more than two scraps of white lace. The lacy bra she wore did very little to conceal the generous curve of her breasts, and the tiny panties didn't obscure anything, not even the curly golden hair that grew at the junction of her thighs.

The fierceness of the yearning that struck him took him by surprise. Until this moment, he hadn't realized just how desperately he had longed for her. He stared a long moment, feeling the slow heat building in his body, feeling the tense longing well up within him like water bubbling up from a spring. The tension in his body coiled tighter and tighter, until he ached with it.

He'd never been one for flowery compliments. He said the first thing that occurred to him. "Wow."

"That's the nicest thing you could have said to me, Max." She took a step closer to him. "Is the water ready?"

He wasn't sure if the water was ready or not, but he sure as hell was. He wasn't sure he could bear the agonizing tautness of his body a moment longer. Unwilling to take his eyes off her for more than a nanosecond, he stole a hasty glance over his shoulder, seeing that the tub was pretty full. Much fuller and they'd slosh water all over the floor. Not that he cared. He groped behind him, his eyes still trained on her, and turned off the faucet.

"Yeah, it's ready."

"Then why don't you take your clothes off, too?"

It hadn't really occurred to him until that moment that he'd have to strip naked in front of her, while she watched. He couldn't think of the last time he'd been totally naked in front of a woman. For some reason the thought of being that exposed, that vulnerable, scared the hell out of him.

Self-consciousness immobilized him. He felt heat scald his cheeks.

Even in the subdued lighting, she saw the blush and seemed to recognize and understand his shyness. "I guess you're not the exhibitionist I am, huh?" she said with a gentle smile.

"Uh—" he said. He felt like a complete moron. Had he really thought he was going to climb into a tub with her while wearing clothes? The truth was, he'd fantasized endlessly about this evening, but all he'd really thought about was her. Maybe he just hadn't wanted to think about how vulnerable this whole situation was going to make him feel. It had been, after all, a hell of a long time since he'd been with a woman.

He stood frozen, unable to bring himself to casually strip off his clothes.

"It's okay, Max. Really." Her voice was soft and reassuring. Reaching up, she drew his lips down to hers. A jolt of electricity shimmered through him, and he wrapped his fingers in her peach-scented hair again, imagining it floating in the tub all around him as they made love. The image was downright

inspirational.

She slipped her hands up under the tail of his shirt and caressed his ribcage, sliding through the light furring on his chest, and touching his nipples lightly. Shocks of pleasure followed in the wake of her fingers, and he began to feel that it wouldn't be such a bad thing to be naked, after all. In fact it was beginning to seem like an eminently logical thing to do.

He didn't object when he felt her fingers adroitly unbuckling his belt, then unzipping his pants, and felt them fall around his ankles. He stepped out of them, aware of his erection, which was more than visible through his briefs, but no longer caring very much. He yanked his shirt over his head, then fumbled awkwardly at her back. It had been most of a decade since he'd unfastened a woman's bra, and he was badly out of practice, but at last he managed it. It fell to the floor and he paused to stare at her breasts.

Wow was still the only word that came to mind.

Evidently he wasn't much of a writer after all, because describing the pale perfection of her round, full breasts would have been impossible for him. Words simply couldn't do justice to them. They were easily the most gorgeous breasts he'd ever seen in his life, and that included the airbrushed ones he'd admired in Playboy as a teenager. He bent slowly, reverently, and kissed the top of one.

He felt her shudder.

"Beautiful," he whispered harshly, and kissed the other.

He wanted her with a violence he could not have imagined before this moment. He pulled her to him, feeling the small, hard buds of her nipples jutting eagerly against his chest. She pressed her hips against his, and he felt her tiny scrap of lace, moist and hot, rub against his incredibly sensitive flesh.

Slowly she moved her hand downward, across the rigidly defined muscles of his abdomen, until she found the shape of him, hard and hot, outlined clearly against his briefs, and caressed him. He felt himself throb against her hand, felt the gentle strength of her fingers stroking him, and he heard his breath coming in short, hard gasps.

"Stop," he groaned at last. "Please, stop."

Her hand stilled against him.

The cessation of the delightful sensations was an agony in itself. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, struggling to regain control of himself.

Bending his head, he ran his tongue slowly across her taut nipple, heard her soft intake of breath, felt her fingers spasmodically tighten in his hair. He turned his attention to her other breast, licking and then tugging her nipple into his mouth. She whimpered deep in her throat.

Groaning, he captured her mouth again, kissing her greedily. He pushed off her panties as she shoved off his briefs, then yanked her against him again, conscious of little besides his desperate need for her. The sensation of the curly golden hair at the top of her thighs brushing against him was indescribably exciting.

He couldn't wait. He couldn't have waited if his life depended upon it. He lifted her hips slightly, bent his knees, and slipped her onto the thick, throbbing shaft of his erection.

She wrapped one of her incredibly long legs around him, letting him fill her completely, and he saw her head fall back, heard her sobbing with pleasure. More than anything, he wanted to make it good for her. Summoning every iota of his fractured self-control, he pressed his face against her throat and froze, every muscle in his straining body screaming in protest.

But she wouldn't let him stop, or even slow down. Her body moved against his in an urgent rhythm,

and he felt the electricity that had been swirling around them coalesce inside him. He withdrew, then thrust into her again, even more deeply than before. He felt her body clenching rhythmically, heard her crying out, and it was too much for him. He was overcome by the violent hunger that racked him.

Burying his face in her hair, he moaned as spasm after spasm of hot, wrenching pleasure shook him to the depths of his soul.

She clung to him, shaking, and as he slowly came back to himself he saw Blue sitting at the doorway, watching them with an expression of puzzled curiosity. Damned dog, he thought sourly, and decided he really should have put the dog outside, even if he'd howled. He probably should do it now, but he realized his knees were weak. In fact, he felt weak all over.

Still holding her tightly by the waist, he tried to take a step and stumbled slightly. The back of his legs encountered the edge of the tub.

Drew shrieked with surprise as they tottered, then fell into the water with a resounding splash.

Chapter 17

Max's head disappeared under the water momentarily, and Drew fell on top of him. A second later he reemerged, cursing lividly. Drew felt a giggle bubbling up from deep within her, but one look at Max's face made her realize he was not amused. He was obviously humiliated. Her amusement faded, replaced by the desire to reassure him.

"Max," she said, laying a hand on the warm, slick skin of his bicep, "it's okay."

Max sat up and looked at her ruefully. His hair was sopping wet, plastered to his head, and there were glistening droplets of water dripping from the end of his nose.

"Damn it," he said. "I wanted this to be perfect."

"It was perfect."

"Perfect, hell. I meant to make love to you in the tub, and then I got carried away and totally forgot about it. And then—"

Drew couldn't help it. She giggled. Max looked annoyed.

"It is not funny."

"That's your opinion," she gasped between giggles.

Max looked away from her, at the single votive candle that had survived the tidal wave of their collapse and was still burning with a flickering, feeble light. "I wanted it to be good for you," he said in a low voice. "I didn't mean to rush you that way."

"Max—" She made an effort and got her amusement under control, sensing that he was painfully vulnerable right now. "I meant what I said. It was better than good. It was perfect."

"Uh-huh," he said darkly. "Sure. The best thirty seconds of sex you ever had, I bet."

She wondered how to reassure him that she hadn't wanted to make love forever. She had needed him right then, as badly as he'd needed her. She hadn't needed romantic props to make everything perfect, or long, drawn-out foreplay. What had happened between them had just been right, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

"Trust me," she said, doing her best to keep her tone light, "any more would have killed me."

Max's expression lightened fractionally. Then he scowled again. "Hell. I totally forgot to use a condom."

"It's okay, Max. I put in my diaphragm before I came over. And I had a clean bill of health at my last exam. I haven't been with a man since then."

"Well, that's something, at any rate. I haven't been with a woman in years, so I think I'm safe enough." He frowned. "I just can't believe I lost it that totally."

"It was actually rather flattering."

Even more flattering, she thought, was the way he was gazing at her now. A few moments ago, he'd looked at her with stark desire, as if he wanted to devour her. Now he was staring as reverently as if she were an artist's masterwork.

"You're as beautiful as I thought you would be," he whispered at last.

Ordinarily she didn't much care for being described as beautiful, but the sheer awe in his voice made

her throat tighten unexpectedly. "Thank you," she said softly.

A drop of water slid suggestively between his nipples. She reached across the few inches that separated them and followed its path down his chest with her finger. He watched her warily.

"What are you doing?"

"I hardly got a chance to touch you. I thought I'd take the opportunity now, while I have you at my mercy."

He stared at her through his long, spiky lashes for a moment longer, then shot her the lethally sexy grin that always made her tingle. "I'm at your mercy, all right. I couldn't move if I wanted to."

She let her hand rove over his chest. His skin felt warm, smooth, and soft, but the muscles beneath were hard, incredibly so. She thought with a smile that he was what her grandmother would have termed brawny.

For the first time she looked, really looked, at his bare chest, seeing the heavily molded muscles that bulged beneath the skin, the light dusting of golden brown fur across his broad chest, and the line of hair that ran down the middle of his abdomen like an arrow, disappearing suggestively beneath the water, and compelling her to recall exactly what was concealed there.

Unable to resist, she ran her hand down his heavily corrugated abdomen and heard his sharp intake of breath. "Do you like that?"

"Mmm," he said, closing his eyes.

Taking that as a yes, she stroked her fingers across the fine hair of his abdomen. Beneath it she found something she hadn't expected. "Max," she said, hesitantly, "is that a scar?"

Max opened his eyes and looked at her. She sensed his wary self-consciousness. "Yes," he said at last.

In the dim candlelight she couldn't see the scar beneath the water, and because of Max's well-defined abs it was difficult to feel clearly, but it was narrow and straight, and it seemed to start just beneath his ribcage and run vertically for at least eight inches, all the way to his navel. "Were you hurt?"

"Sort of. I don't want to talk about it."

She nodded, respecting his obvious discomfort with the subject, and aware it wasn't her business anyway. They were just having a meaningless affair, after all, which meant even important parts of his past were off limits to her. Oddly, the thought depressed her. She distracted herself by moving her hand to his thigh and letting her fingers stroke the powerfully sculpted muscles there.

He leaned back his head and sighed. "God, that feels good," he murmured.

She let her hands explore him for a while, enjoying his soft moans and sharp inhalations as she touched him in various places. It gave her a feeling of power to be able to make him feel pleasure, and there was a peculiar sense of intimacy in caressing him like this. She couldn't remember ever touching a man just for the sake of learning every inch of his body, just to discover what pleased him.

At last her hands slid between his thighs. And stopped in surprise.

"I thought you were worn out," she whispered, encircling him with her fingers.

He lifted his head and grinned at her. "You seem to have woken me up again."

"That's funny. I'm feeling rather awake myself."

"I'm glad to hear that," he murmured, leaning forward and put his arms around her waist. His serious gaze met hers.

"This time," he said, "I swear to you it's going to be perfect."

It was.

Afterward he dried her off and they lay on his bed together, arms wrapped around each other, too tired to move. Drew must have drifted off to sleep, because she came to with a jerk at the sound of Blue barking.

Max lifted his head and looked at the clock on the bedside table. "Damn," he said in an undertone. "I forgot all about Mom."

Drew suppressed the giggle that rose up. What was wrong with her tonight? She hadn't felt like giggling this much since she was fourteen. The situation had made her giddy. No, she realized, it wasn't the situation.

Max made her giddy.

"You're right," she said softly. "It's just like being a teenager. What if she catches us together?"

"It's my house," Max pointed out.

"I should think it would be a little awkward, though."

"A little awkward, yeah. I'll probably hear about it for the rest of my life."

"Just pretend you're asleep, then. She won't know."

At the door, Blue whined eagerly, then uttered a series of short, happy yips. Max gave a snort of disgust. "Like anyone could sleep with that going on. Anyway, I swear she's psychic. She'll probably know anyway." He sat up. "Look," he said softly, "just stay here. I'll go down and talk to Mom for a couple of minutes, and I'll let you know as soon as she's gone to bed. Then we'll sneak you out. Okay?"

Drew grinned in the dark at the absurdity of the situation. Here they were, both in their thirties, having to sneak around like teenagers. "Sounds good," she whispered. "You want to make up a secret signal, so I'll know it's you? Or should we communicate in Morse code?"

Max sighed. "Just shut up and stay put." He yanked his clothes back on, then pulled the covers up over her, bent down, and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. Then he went out the door, taking Blue with him.

Drew lay in the dark and waited. She hadn't had a man kiss her on the cheek that way, as if she were something infinitely precious and fragile, since she'd been a little girl and her father had tucked her in every night. It was, she thought, an odd way for him to kiss her, since their relationship was based mostly on sex.

To be more accurate, their relationship was sex.

And yet... She thought of how vulnerable he'd seemed, of how he'd hesitated to kiss her, and later to take off his clothes, and felt a warm affection toward him despite herself. He was about as far from a smooth operator as you could get. Even though they had nothing in common, there could be no denying that Max was a likeable guy.

She noticed the pillow smelled like his hair and pressed her face into it.

When Max came downstairs, his mother's face lit up. "Oh, you're still awake," she said. "I'm glad."

He looked at her happy expression, which he rather suspected mirrored his own. "So how did it go,

Mom?"

"Very nice," she said. "Pete took me out for a lovely dinner, then we went to see a show."

Max pictured Pete, in his Hawaiian shirt and Bermuda shorts, at a fancy French restaurant. He hoped the guy had remembered to bring a tie. "A show? You mean a movie?"

"No, the off-Broadway production of Full Moon Over New York."

There was a theater downtown that specialized in such things, he recalled vaguely. Since they didn't run off-Broadway productions of action movies, he'd never paid much attention to it. "Sounds very romantic," he said.

"It was," his mother said with a little sigh. "That's the way I expect a gentleman to treat me."

"So are you going to marry him?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet. I expect to be courted, Max. Gentleman court ladies."

That was a nice, old-fashioned view of things, he thought. He wondered how Drew would react if he were to "court" her.

The thought took wing in his mind. What if he were to take her out to a nice restaurant? Or to someplace she'd like to go, like the symphony?

She'd know I hated it, he realized. She'd know it was all just pretend.

Whereas what they'd shared tonight wasn't pretend in the least. He knew full well there hadn't been any pretense on his end, and he was reasonably certain there had been no faking on her part either. What they'd shared had been earth-shatteringly, powerfully real.

But if sex was really all they had in common, then he couldn't hope to lure Drew into a deeper, more meaningful relationship. There would be no point in it.

He wondered if, for her sake, he could learn to like snooty restaurants.

"Mom," he said. "What was the name of that restaurant?"

Chapter 18

Men shoot to wound.

Women shoot to kill.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, *Farthest Space*

"So where were you last night?"

Drew avoided her sister's eyes. She'd been up until well past midnight, and getting up this morning at six o'clock hadn't been the easiest thing in the world. She was uncomfortably aware there were big purple circles under her eyes. She was getting too old to live on so little sleep.

Especially after such vigorous exercise.

"I had some stuff to do," she said, purposely vague.

"Grading papers? You usually do that here."

"Yeah, well, these were pretty important papers. I figured I better have peace and quiet."

She realized she'd just crossed the line between vagueness and outright lying. Damn it, she hated lying to Tiffani. She rationalized it by telling herself Tiffani didn't have the right to give her the third degree whenever she was out late.

"I came in pretty late myself," Tiffani admitted. "I figured you were already asleep."

"Did you have to work late?"

Tiffani turned pink. "Not really. I sort of met somebody."

The oddly diffident way she said it rang alarm bells. Drew looked at her with a lifted eyebrow. "Are you seeing someone new already?"

"Not exactly someone new, no."

Chills ran down Drew's spine. "What do you mean?"

"I kind of ran into Lucas at the store," Tiffani admitted.

The mention of Tiffani's ex-husband made Drew see red. "You ran into him at the store?" she repeated carefully. "Surely you don't believe that was just coincidence, do you?"

"Well, no. The fact is he came to see me."

"I thought he was in California."

"He's been back in town a couple of months. Uh, he's come to see me a few times lately. He says he wants to see me again."

Drew remembered the fragment of phone conversation she'd overheard, when she'd assumed Tiffani was talking to James. It seemed more likely she'd been talking to Lucas. How dumb could her little sister be? There were rocks with more intellectual capacity.

"Tiff—" Drew broke off, too upset to formulate a complete sentence. She tried again. "Look, Lucas is scum. You know it. I know it. Good grief, even he knows it. Why on earth would you even consider going out with him?"

"I didn't say I was considering it."

"You must be, if you stayed up late talking with him."

Tiffani sniffled. "I couldn't help it, Drew. I'm just so lonely."

"So you're going to go back to Lucas because you're depressed over Max? Is that it?"

Tiffani said nothing. Drew went on angrily, "Look, if you think I'm going to let you go back into a bad relationship because you're depressed—"

"You don't have anything to do with it," Tiffani snapped. "You're not my mother, Drew."

"I might as well be your mother. I raised you after Mom died."

"That doesn't give you the right to run my life," Tiffani retorted angrily. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm all grown up now. And I'll damn well date anyone I want to. It's none of your business what I do!"

At the fury in Tiffani's voice, Drew hesitated, wondering how much Tiffani knew about what she had done. She had been the one to get rid of Lucas, and she thought she'd done it in such a way that Tiffani never knew. For the first time it occurred to her she might be wrong.

"You're right," she said in a more conciliatory tone. "You're a grownup, and you have the right to make your own decisions. But Tiffani, you just can't fling yourself from one bad relationship into another."

"I can do whatever the hell I want," Tiffani retorted. "I'm not a child."

"You act like one, damn it!"

The minute the words left her mouth, Drew was sorry. But it was too late to take them back. Tiffani looked at her coldly.

"I'm tired of you trying to run my life," she said. "I'm moving out."

"Tiff—"

Drew reached out her hand, but Tiffani turned her back on her.

"I'm leaving. Now," she said. "And if I feel like having wild sex with Lucas, or Max, or a stranger I've just met, I'll do it. It's none of your damned business what I do." She picked up Alice from the playpen and her purse from the end table, and stalked out the front door without another word. Drew watched them go in silence.

The house felt empty once they had gone.

She had been stupid to open her mouth. She should have been subtler, the way she had been when Lucas and Tiffani were still married. She'd managed things well enough then, without Tiffani ever finding out about it. She still could have managed Tiffani without infuriating her. Instead she'd said too much and alienated her sister.

Tiffani was probably just bluffing, but she couldn't be certain of that. For all she knew Tiffani would make good on her threat and move out permanently. And even worse, with nowhere else to go she might move in with Lucas.

Drew feared that their relationship might have been irreparably damaged, and she was more worried than ever about what might happen if Tiffani found out about her and Max. She couldn't let Tiffani turn to Lucas for consolation. She just couldn't.

If Tiffani hated her now, she would despise her if she found out she and Max were involved.

There was no other choice. She was going to have to get Max out of her life.

The phone rang in Drew's office that afternoon, between her History of Western Poetry and her Overview of American Literature classes. She picked it up. "Hello?"

Max's deep, masculine, and incredibly seductive voice sounded in her ear. "Hi, Drew."

She was amazed by the way he made a simple salutation sound like an invitation to spend a week in bed with him. "Oh," she said, doing her best to ignore the sudden, heavy pounding of her heart. "Hi."

"Is this a good time?"

"Well ..." She did battle with her cowardly impulses, which told her to just keep putting him off until he took the hint and went away of his own accord. "Yes, I suppose it is. I think we need to talk."

"I agree."

"Really," Drew said. Maybe he'd decided he didn't want to keep up their affair. That would save her the necessity of having to be the bad guy. "So what do you want to discuss?"

"I wanted to know if you wanted to go out with me."

Drew hesitated. Whatever she'd been expecting, that wasn't it. "Out?" she repeated.

"Yeah, out. You know, in public."

"And do what?"

She heard his sexy chuckle, which implied he could imagine all sorts of illicit things to do in public. His reply, however, was entirely non-suggestive. "How about going to the symphony together?"

That took her completely by surprise. "The what?"

"The symphony. You know, a bunch of instruments playing music. You've heard of it, haven't you?"

His easy amusement annoyed her. "Of course," she snapped. "I simply thought you hadn't."

"I may be uncultured, but I'm not quite that bad. So, you want to go tonight?"

"Tonight?" She felt irritated, and let it show in her voice. "I thought we agreed on an affair, Max. Not dating."

"Uh—" For the first time she heard a shadow of the vulnerable, uncertain man he'd been the night before. "Well, I kind of thought after last night—"

"You thought what? That a night of halfway decent sex would make me want to be seen in public with you?"

At the deliberately insulting words, there was a long pause. At last he said in a tightly controlled voice, "Last night I got the impression you thought sex with me was more than halfway decent. You didn't seem to find me totally repulsive, at any rate."

Drew sighed. She wasn't about to confess that sex with him was the most amazing thing she'd ever experienced. She took refuge behind her most shrewish tones. "I explained this to you before, Max. I cannot be seen in public with you. What if Tiffani heard about it? What if she saw us together?"

"What if she did? Are you going to live your life in fear of making her angry, Drew? She's a big girl. She'll get over it."

"She's still upset over you, Max. In fact, she's so upset she's thinking about getting back together with

her ex-husband."

He paused again. "You're telling me she's so heartbroken over me that she's already in love with another man? Drew, don't you realize how crazy that sounds?"

"She's not in love with him," Drew snapped. "She was never in love with him, or you, for that matter. She's just too needy."

"I'll agree with you there. Needy is definitely the word to describe her. But how do you know she doesn't love the guy? Don't you think it's kind of presumptuous to claim you know exactly how she feels?"

"Believe me, I know."

"Maybe she's really in love with this guy. After all, he is Alice's father, right?"

"He's a repulsive human being."

"Well, your feelings seem clear enough on the subject. Are you sure hers are?"

"Look," Drew said between her teeth, "what it comes down to is that my sister is very upset. I don't want to upset her any further. I just can't take the chance of her finding out I'm seeing you, all right?"

He hesitated a long moment. "We're not just talking about the symphony here, are we?"

"No, we're not." She took a deep breath and spat the words out in a rush. "I'm sorry, Max, but I can't see you any more."

"Don't you think you're going a little overboard protecting Tiffani, Drew?"

"No," Drew said tightly. "I won't let her be hurt again, Max. I won't."

"I think you're throwing away more than you realize," he said softly.

"I'm throwing away cheap, tawdry sex," she snapped. "Something I can get just about anywhere."

There was a long silence. At last he spoke.

"Whatever last night was, Drew, it wasn't tawdry." His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "It was beautiful."

He hung up while she was still trying to think of something to say.

She held the phone in her hand, feeling tears burning in her eyes.

It wasn't tawdry. It was beautiful.

Max had no idea how right he was.

She'd never felt so close to anyone as she had to Max last night. With a pang, she remembered the awe in his voice when he'd told her she was beautiful. She recalled the way he'd kissed her on the cheek with what she could only describe as tenderness, and admitted to herself that there had been nothing tawdry about what they'd shared last night.

After years of sleeping with men who left her so bored that sex with them inspired yawns rather than fantasies, she'd finally found one who set her on fire. For the first time in her life she knew what intimacy was. And for Tiffani's sake, she had to let him go.

She put the phone down and let the tears slide down her cheeks.

Max sat in his office, staring at the blinking cursor—the only thing visible in the document on screen.

He wondered what he'd expected from Drew. Last night had been the most singularly astounding experience of his entire life, but he'd had no reason to think she had felt the same way. Just because she had seemed to enjoy herself last night, had he really believed she was going to agree to go out with him? That would have required capitulation, and he should have known Drew well enough by now to know she rarely gave in.

He'd pretty much expected her to say no.

What he hadn't expected, though, was her decision to break off their affair.

Stupid, he chided himself. She'd gotten what she wanted from him, a night of good sex, and she'd decided she didn't need him any more. Either that, or she hadn't enjoyed it as much as he'd imagined. He decided morosely the latter was probably correct. God knew he wasn't anything special in bed. Recalling the way he'd rushed her the first time, he cringed in embarrassment, her harsh words burning in his mind. A night of halfway decent sex.

He'd been deluding himself. Obviously last night hadn't meant anything to Drew at all. He'd forgotten Captain McNeill's famous catchphrase, Never lower your shields. And now he was paying for it.

He turned back to the keyboard and his fictional world, musing that fictional women were the only kind he could count on.

An hour later, he was startled to hear the doorbell ringing. Even after eight years he was only on a waving basis with most of his neighbors, so ordinarily the only people who rang his doorbell were Girl Scouts hawking cookies and Jehovah's Witnesses trying earnestly to save his soul. Pete had come by earlier, to take his mom out for the afternoon, so it couldn't be him. Most likely it was Drew.

His heart pounded at the thought.

Opening the door, he found Tiffani standing on his doorstep.

"Hi," she said. She looked like she'd misplaced her customary perkiness. There was an unusual solemnity in her eyes, and her speech was noticeably lacking in giggles. "Can I come in?"

"Uh—," he said. After his conversation with Drew, he really just wanted to be left alone. The absolute last person he felt like dealing with right now was Tiffani, but one look at her wide, unhappy eyes convinced him she needed to talk to someone. "Sure. Come on in."

Leading her into the family room, he offered her a seat. She perched on the edge of the tattered couch, looking uncomfortable. He debated sitting down next to her, then thought better of it and sat on the floor.

"I guess you're wondering why I'm here," she said. "Especially after what I said to you last time."

Max had an uncomfortable feeling he didn't want to know why she was here. Not if it involved more Tiffani-style drama, complete with protestations of undying love.

"I'm a little surprised to see you," he admitted.

Tiffani bit her lip, then burst out, "I moved out of Drew's house."

Oh, hell. Had Tiffani somehow found out about their affair? Or was this somehow related to what Drew had said earlier about Tiffani's ex-husband? He found it odd that Drew hadn't mentioned anything about Tiffani moving out. Maybe Tiffani hadn't told her. Or maybe she simply hadn't figured he needed to know. She certainly wouldn't have expected Tiffani to show up on his doorstep.

"I see," he said neutrally. "Any particular reason why?"

"She keeps trying to run my life," Tiffani said. Her lower lip stuck out again, reminding him vividly of

a small child.

"That could be annoying," he agreed.

"See, I ran into my ex-husband last night," Tiffani said. "And he wants to get back together. But Drew thinks he's bad for me."

"I'm not sure that's any of Drew's business."

"You're exactly right. It's not."

"But maybe she's worried about you," Max suggested.

"It's one thing to worry about me," Tiffani said irritably, "and another to tell me what to do. I'm not a child."

Max wisely refrained from comment. "Is this the first time you've seen your ex-husband since he left you?"

Tiffani shook her head. "No, he's been back in town for a couple of months. I didn't tell Drew, because she'd have a fit, but we've been talking on the phone quite a bit, when Drew wasn't at home. And he's come to see me at the bookstore a few times. But last night was the first time he's actually suggested we get back together."

"Are you in love with him?"

Tiffani looked as thoughtful as she was capable of looking. "I'm not sure, Max. But he's Alice's father. Don't you think I should give him a chance?"

Max hesitated, afraid of hurting her feelings. At last he decided to be blunt. "I don't know. Didn't you tell me he left you when you were nine months pregnant?"

Tiffani bit her lip. At last she burst out, "He says Drew manipulated him into leaving me. He says he never would have left me if she hadn't forced him to."

"Yeah, right," Max said cynically. "Come on, Tiffani, let's apply a little logic here. How could Drew have forced him to leave you? What did she do, offer him money?"

"I wouldn't put it past her," Tiffani retorted.

"That sounds pretty far-fetched, but let's assume for the sake of argument she did. Even if she did, what kind of guy would take a bribe to walk away from his pregnant wife?"

Tiffani looked at him. Her wide blue eyes brimmed with tears. "All I want is a father for Alice. She's such a great kid. She deserves her father."

"Has this guy ever tried to see Alice?"

"No," she admitted.

"When you talked last night, did he even ask how she was doing?"

"No."

"How about the other times you've seen him? Did he ask to see pictures of her, or anything?"

Tiffani shook her head.

"Come on, Tiffani. How can you imagine this guy could be a good father to Alice, if he doesn't even want to see a snapshot of her? Why on earth would you even consider getting back together with a man like that?"

Tiffani snuffled. Her brimming eyes began to overflow. "I don't know what to do," she sniffed.

He thought about putting his arms around her in a friendly hug, but worried it would be misinterpreted. God only knew he had good reason to be concerned about that, he thought, remembering the little black dress from hell. "Just forget about your ex-husband, okay? And forget about finding a father for Alice, while you're at it. If you happen to fall in love with a good guy who'll make a good father, that's okay. But quit trying to force yourself to fall in love just so Alice can have a dad."

"You think that's what I've been doing?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure of it. And it's dumb. You're the best parent Alice could have."

She smiled through the tears. "Thanks, Max. You're very reassuring."

"Glad to be of service. So do you feel up to going back home now?"

A shadow of her pout reemerged. "No. I am not living with Drew anymore. She keeps trying to run my life, like I was still seventeen or something."

He could hardly blame Drew for that, considering Tiffani acted like she was still seventeen. "So where are you staying?"

She slanted him an unreadable look through her wet lashes. "I was sort of hoping I could stay here for the night."

Max stiffened. "Look, Tiffani, I thought we already discussed—"

"Just on your couch," she interrupted. "Just for the night, okay? That's all."

Max looked at her dubiously. His couch was almost as old as he was, and he doubted she was going to find it really comfortable. He hoped she wouldn't be inclined to use that as an excuse to find somewhere more comfortable to sleep. Like his bed. His life was already complicated enough without having to fend off Tiffani again.

She read his expression, a combination of uneasiness and abject terror, and a corner of her mouth lifted in amusement.

"Don't worry, Max. You made it clear enough you're not interested."

Max scowled, knowing his gentlemanly better nature was about to get the better of him. "Look, Tiffani, I don't have a guest bed to offer you because my mom is staying here. But you can take my bed. I'll take the couch."

Tiffani glanced over her shoulder at his couch. "You're kidding, right? You might as well sleep in a teacup."

"My couch isn't that short."

"Yeah, but you're that tall. Don't worry about it, Max. I'll sleep on the couch." She grinned. "I promise to stay there."

At least his mom would be here, he thought. Chaperonage should keep Tiffani within reasonable bounds. He hoped. "What about Alice?" he said at last.

"She's at the sitter's. I called her and made sure she didn't mind keeping Alice overnight. She keeps her pretty late most of the time anyway, because of the weird hours I work. I'll pick her up in the morning."

"And find an apartment."

"I guess I'll need one, yeah." She sighed. "I've never lived on my own before, Max. I went straight

from living with Drew to living with Lucas, then right back to living with Drew again."

"Didn't you go to college?"

"I took classes at the university here. I never lived in a dorm or anything like that. I don't know the first thing about looking for apartments."

The look she fixed him with was so beseeching that he sighed and yielded to the inevitable. "I'll be happy to help you tomorrow, Tiffani."

"Thanks," she said happily, looking like she'd rediscovered her perkiness. Max looked at her and wondered how a grown woman had managed to make it to adulthood without the slightest trace of competence. Obviously Drew had tried so hard to replace their parents that she'd been way too willing to do everything for her. No wonder Tiffani was so needy. He wondered if moving out of Drew's house might not be the best thing for Tiffani, after all.

He just hoped she'd keep her promise to stay away from him.

At eleven o'clock that evening, Drew sat at her kitchen table, eating from a container of low-fat fudge ripple ice cream that had somehow survived the onslaught of Tiffani's depression two nights ago. Despite the Schubert octet she'd put into the CD player when she got home, the house seemed way too quiet without Tiffani and Alice. She was lonely.

She'd figured Tiffani was just blowing off steam, the way she had when she was a teenager and threatening to move out every week or two. Drew had purposely stayed out late despite her exhaustion in order to give Tiffani time to cool down. But when she'd gotten home, she'd found that Tiffani had taken the portable crib, as well as her and Alice's clothing. She had realized then that Tiffani wasn't bluffing.

She just hoped against hope Tiffani hadn't moved in with Lucas.

For the first time, she admitted to herself that it was no business of hers where Tiffani had decided to go.

Tiffani was right. Drew had been running her sister's life for much too long.

Ever since their mom had died, she'd focused all her efforts on making Tiffani happy. But despite everything she'd done, her sister had insisted on screwing up her life, running after men who were bad for her, working in a dead-end job, and refusing to complete even a simple bachelor's degree.

Max's words came back to haunt her. Don't you think you're going a little overboard protecting Tiffani, Drew?

She'd done everything she could to mold Tiffani in her own image. And it hadn't worked.

Maybe she should just let Tiffani be Tiffani.

She ate the last bite of ice cream and sat back in her chair, thinking the house still seemed awfully quiet. She realized she had empty nest syndrome.

Standing up, she wandered restlessly into the living room and did something she almost never did—turned on the TV. She flipped through the channels, unimpressed by the Game Show Channel and the local news, but stopped as a round, gray spaceship filled the screen.

She'd never watched Farthest Space before, although she'd caught glimpses of it out of the corner of her eye when Tiffani watched it, but now she stared with interest as Captain McNeill came on the screen, firing his ray gun... no, particle weapon. Whatever, she thought with a mental shrug.

The actor bore a more than passing resemblance to the bare-chested hero on the cover of *Farthest Space: The Beginning*. For that matter, he looked quite a bit like Max— tall, muscular, and with strong, rugged features. His hair was blonder and longer than Max's, though, and he lacked Max's blazing green eyes. Max was definitely better looking.

Too bad she wouldn't be seeing Max any more.

For the first time, she admitted to herself that she missed Max. She thought about their conversation this morning, about the deep, sexy tones of his voice, and sighed. If she were to be honest with herself, she'd admit Max was the best thing that had happened to her in a long time. Maybe he wasn't precisely what she was looking for in the long term, but he was a nice guy and a lot of fun. He was also terrific in bed.

She shouldn't have been so willing to dump him, just because she didn't want to upset Tiffani.

Are you going to live your life in fear of making her angry, Drew?

This morning, Tiffani had decided that she needed to live her life the way she wanted to, even if it meant hurting Drew's feelings. Drew, on the other hand, was still living her life to avoid hurting Tiffani, just as Max had accused on the phone.

Drew thought wryly hell must have frozen over. Because on reflection, she realized Tiffani's actions were more mature than hers were.

She was going to follow Tiffani's lead. From now on, she was going to live her life to suit herself. And what suited her was to include Max in her life.

She picked up her cordless phone and dialed his number.

The phone rang twice. Then a sleepy voice said, "Hello?"

It wasn't Max's voice. This voice was feminine.

It was Tiffani.

Drew gasped in shock and dropped the phone on the floor.

Chapter 19

"Did you sleep okay?"

Tiffani smiled at Max, and he noticed there were big violet circles under her eyes. "Not really. Your couch is pretty lumpy."

"Well, cut my couch some slack. It's older than you are."

"Besides that, the phone rang sometime in the middle of the night and woke me up."

Max frowned. "I didn't hear it."

"Of course you didn't. You left it downstairs. It rang right in my ear, and I picked it up, but whoever it was hung up."

"Probably a wrong number," Max said, although he felt a slight uneasiness. Suppose Drew had called? What would she have thought if she'd heard Tiffani's voice?

Don't be stupid, he told himself. Yesterday Drew had made it extremely clear that she had no intention of calling him. Ever.

His mother came down the stairs and paused as she saw the two of them eating Froot Loops at the table. "Oh," she said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Max looked up. He'd explained to his mom last night that Tiffani was just a friend who needed a place to stay. He'd figured that with her "psychic" ability she'd know better than to mention the woman he was involved with. Had been involved with. Wanted to be involved with. Whatever.

Sure enough, his mom had possessed enough sense to keep her mouth shut.

He could tell, though, that she didn't really care for Tiffani. Something about the way she looked when Tiffani giggled, or made a Valley Girl comment, was mildly disapproving. She thought Tiffani was a ditz. He could tell.

He was pretty sure she would like Drew, though.

Too bad she'd never meet Drew.

"You're not interrupting, Mom," he said. "Tiffani and I were having a quick breakfast, then we're going out to look at apartments for her." He picked up the box of cereal and held it out to her. "Want some Froot Loops?"

"Thanks, but I prefer some grain in my cereal."

"Grain just gets in the way of the sugar."

Despite his retort, his mother sailed over to the pantry and found the Grape-Nuts she'd bought. Over her shoulder, she said, "Maxfield, dear, don't worry about me today. I'll be out with Pete most of the day."

"Again?" Max was impressed. Old Pete was a fast operator. The way he was going, he'd have a ring on Mom's finger by the end of the week.

Unaccountably, the thought depressed him. Pete hadn't taken no for an answer. He'd come all the way from Florida to convince Mom he was the right man for her. A little adversity hadn't discouraged him from getting what he wanted.

Max had a nagging feeling there was a lesson to be learned there.

Then again, he reminded himself, he'd already tried asking Drew out. All he'd gotten for his effort was a severely bruised and lacerated ego, an injury almost severe enough to send him to the emergency room. He'd be crazy to try again. His ego might just die of blood loss.

His mother came back to the table and sat down with her bowl of Grape-Nuts, which looked, Max thought with disgust, like gravel with milk. "Pete is taking me to the art museum," she informed him.

"That sounds like fun," he lied. He knew she liked art, or he wouldn't have been named Maxfield Parrish Sinclair. He had to give Pete credit for taking Mom where she wanted to go.

Of course, he'd tried that too. Drew hadn't been impressed.

He wondered just what it would take to make her give him a second chance.

After her classes were done for the day, Drew walked across campus toward Cafe Cantata. She could really use a frappucino, she thought. For that matter, she could have used some brandy.

The thoughts she'd been doing her best to suppress all day rose to the top of her mind as she walked along the quiet brick path that led along the edge of the campus, past the cluster of rose-brick Georgian buildings that housed the science department.

Max and Tiffani were together again. And it was her fault.

She remembered that Max had told her, in no uncertain terms, that he wasn't interested in Tiffani. But when Tiffani had gone to him, needy and lonely and looking for comfort, he'd evidently discovered he wasn't as disinterested as he thought. Drew remembered all too clearly what Tiffani had said about having wild sex. She'd left the house looking for trouble. And she'd obviously found it in Max.

Drew reminded herself that Max had wanted to go out with her. But she'd said no. She didn't own him, she'd refused to admit their relationship might go somewhere, and she couldn't be critical that he had moved on.

Even so, the less logical part of her was angry and resentful that Max could have gone from sex with her to sex with Tiffani so readily, so damned quickly. He had seemed so shy, so vulnerable, the night they'd made love. She'd have sworn he really had been celibate for as long as he claimed, unlikely though that seemed.

But evidently Max wasn't the guy she'd thought he was. She felt disappointed in him.

She felt miserable.

Even through her introspection, she thought she heard the sound of nearby footsteps, shuffling through the leaves that littered the brick path. She turned and looked behind her.

The path was empty.

I'm starting to imagine things, she thought. But an odd feeling prickled down her spine anyway. She felt as if she were being watched.

You're being silly, she told herself firmly. Obviously the situation with Max had thrown off her equilibrium more than she wanted to admit to herself. No one was following her.

Despite her reassurances to herself, however, she quickened her pace.

When she stepped inside Cafe Cantata, she ordered, then sat quickly and kept an eye on the door. It was probably paranoia, but it couldn't hurt.

As she sat sipping her frappucino, Ken Harshaw walked in.

She saw him glance at her, then quickly look away. She couldn't blame him for not acknowledging her. Because of her, he'd had no choice but to drop out of school. True, she'd simply been enforcing the school's honor code, but she doubted he viewed it that philosophically. He probably figured she'd ruined his life.

When she came to think about it, she was surprised that he was still on campus. She knew his parents lived in Swift Creek, but she wouldn't have thought he would still be hanging out on campus. Presumably he still had friends here.

She watched him as he ordered a drink and sat down across the room from her, and she remembered the uncomfortable sensation she'd had that someone was following her.

Could it have been Ken?

Ridiculous, she told herself. Despite his big, muscular body, his thick, bull-like neck, and his battering ram shoulders, Ken was perfectly harmless. A really nice kid, in fact, which was why she hadn't really wanted to report his honor code violation to the school. He didn't deserve to be condemned to flipping burgers for the rest of his life.

Intellectually she knew the whole mess wasn't her fault. Somewhere back in Ken's history, a single teacher had let him slide through without knowing grade-level material. Like dominoes falling, every teacher since then had let him slip through, and his father had done exactly the wrong thing by trying to protect him. The fault lay in his parents and his teachers. Even so, this was obviously the first time he'd been held accountable. She wouldn't be surprised if he blamed her for everything that had happened.

With a start, she remembered the anonymous typed paper she'd received.

You'll be sorry for what you did to me. I'll make you sorry.

She had gotten it directly after James had been in her office, so she'd assumed it had come from James. But for the first time she realized Ken had been in her office that day, too.

She sat back in her chair and forced herself to think logically. What could she have done to Ken to make him angry, so early in the school year? She hadn't caught him cheating until much later.

But he'd cheated for a reason. Because she'd given him failing grades on several papers.

She thought about it some more. She was pretty sure Ken had already had two failing grades by the day she'd gotten that note. Hadn't he mentioned he'd already been told by his coach that he was in danger of being cut from the football team? She knew football meant a lot to him; in fact, it was the one area of his life in which he had been a star. Could he already have been angry with her?

Could he possibly have been angry enough to leave her that note?

Uneasily, she gulped the rest of her frappuccino and headed out the door. Instead of walking down the street toward the faculty parking lot, she strode hastily around to the side of the building and stood, concealed by the brick corner of the structure, watching and waiting.

A minute later Ken Harshaw emerged. He stood looking around for a long moment, then shrugged his broad shoulders and headed back toward town.

She couldn't rid herself of the uneasy certainty that Ken had been looking for her.

"This is perfect," Tiffani gushed. Since college was in session, and the town was full to bursting with students, it had taken her a full week to find a suitable apartment. It was small, with two bedrooms, a tiny living area, and a kitchen that could only be described as miniscule, but she seemed happy with it.

She had flatly refused to go back to Drew's house, or even talk to her sister, and Max was relieved at the prospect of finally having her off his sofa. At any rate, he was getting tired of helping her look for a place to live. He must have walked through three dozen apartments with her during the course of the week, and carried Alice for her most of the time.

Alice wasn't a lightweight, but he hadn't minded. He found he liked carrying babies. He was particularly delighted when Alice beamed at him and tried to carry on conversations with him. Unfortunately, her words were mostly in what sounded like a foreign language, but she didn't seem to mind his ignorance of Baby Babble. She seemed to consider his repeated assurances that she was a wonderful, beautiful, brilliant girl to be adequate responses.

He stood behind Tiffani, Alice's little arms around his neck, and decided he really wanted one of these. The baby, not the apartment. What was more, he discovered, he wanted one right now. Evidently his biological clock's alarm had just started ringing.

Too bad babies weren't available at the local K-Mart.

He reminded himself there was a very good chance he couldn't sire a baby, even if he wanted to. And even if he wanted to try, there was another prerequisite he was missing—a mother.

Drew, he thought, would make a hell of a good mother.

Tiffani turned back to him, and he handed over Alice, feeling the sturdiness of her warm little body. She giggled and said "Maa" happily as she went back to her mother, and Max was stunned by the intensity of his longing.

He'd never thought much about kids before this week, and hadn't realized how addictive they were. Just one week carrying a toddler around had given him a full-blown case of baby blues.

He realized it wasn't Alice who was making him feel this way—it was Drew. Somehow he'd gone from casual sex with Drew to wanting to have children with Drew. Which was crazy.

"I'm glad you like it," he said. He thought about the duffel bag of stuff she'd brought from Drew's house and wondered for the first time if that, along with Alice's portable crib, was the sum total of her possessions. "Do you have any furniture?"

"Yes," Tiffani said. "I'll have to go over to Drew's to get it, though."

"I guess you need to rent a truck."

"Yeah," she said with a giggle. "I don't think it'll fit in your Mustang."

Not much fit in his Mustang, although at least it had a back seat big enough to accommodate a baby seat. He couldn't comfortably crowd his long legs into the battered, rattling Pinto Tiffani drove, so they'd been taking his car on the apartment search.

"So do you need help moving?" he said, and immediately wished he hadn't. There was a real good idea—going over to Drew's house on a Saturday to help her sister move out. Drew was going to hate him even more than she already did.

Not one of the better ideas he'd ever had. In fact, it was probably one of the dumbest.

Tiffani didn't appear to notice his second thoughts. She lit up. "Thanks, Max. You're the greatest."

Which was why he found himself, at eight o'clock the next morning, driving a big truck down the road toward Drew's house. Tiffani had taken one look at the stick shift and informed him he had to drive, since she only knew how to drive automatic. She and Alice were traveling behind him, in her little car.

The truck was about ten times bigger than his Mustang, and he didn't have the slightest idea where the bumpers or sides were, but by the grace of God he managed to get the truck to Drew's house without hitting anything. He pulled the monstrosity up the driveway, knowing he couldn't possibly parallel park the thing. It grumbled and roared, and Drew stepped out onto her front porch to stare in bewilderment at the huge yellow truck marked "Move Cheap!" bouncing up her gravel driveway.

He turned it off with enormous relief and jumped down from the high cab. Behind him, Tiffani pulled to a stop, got out, and heaved Alice out of her car seat. Drew watched them warily as they walked toward the house together.

Even though he hadn't seen her for a week, Max was prepared for her to be chilly toward him, but he wasn't prepared for her first acerbic comment.

"Well," she said coldly, "just look at the happy little family."

That wasn't fighting fair, since she knew perfectly well he and Tiffani weren't dating any more. He refused to let her get under his skin and annoy him. Instead he fixed her with his best stupid, amiable look. "Tiffani needs her furniture," he explained, like that wasn't real obvious with a giant yellow truck waiting in the driveway.

"Fine," Drew snapped. "The sooner you get it out of here the sooner you two can leave."

That, he thought, was an odd statement for a woman who'd been willing to sacrifice half her life to keep her sister happy. Evidently Drew was seriously pissed off because Tiffani had actually followed through on her threat to move out. She was apparently more of a control freak than he'd realized, and furious because her sister had slipped out from beneath her thumb. "Fine," he retorted. "Why don't you get out of the way?"

She looked startled, then stepped back, out of the doorway, and let them in.

Tiffani headed up the stairs, and Max followed in her wake without another word to Drew. Tiffani dropped Alice in her crib, where the child settled down happily, then went to her own room.

"So is all this stuff yours?"

Tiffani nodded. "Yeah." She smiled a little wistfully. "My mom bought this all for me when I turned twelve."

He could believe it. It looked for all the world like a little girl's bedroom.

The bed was a pretty little white four-poster with pink flowers on the headboard and a pink-and-white, ruffled canopy. The dresser was white and pink too. Tiffani's bedroom was obviously stuck in a time warp.

It soon became obvious that the bed was not going to go through the doorway unless it was dismantled. Tiffani set about picking up the various knickknacks that adorned the top of the dresser and packing them away while he sprawled on the floor and worked on the bolts to the bed. It seemed that no one had taken it apart in ten years, because the bolts wouldn't move, no matter how much pressure he applied. He wondered irritably if someone had cemented them to the bedframe.

It only took Tiffani a few minutes to pack all her mementos away. She picked up the box carefully and headed downstairs with it. Max looked after her and for the first time noticed Drew standing there. Tiffani had brushed past her at the door without saying a word.

"What do you want?" he said curtly.

At this point in his latest novel, Elonai had whispered, You, McNeill. I want you.

Drew naturally didn't say anything of the kind. "I thought you guys might like help," she said uncomfortably.

He recognized that she was trying to extend an olive branch, if not to him, at least to her sister. He sat upright and stretched his arms, grunting. "Not unless you're better with a socket wrench than I am," he said, and glared at the bolt, which hadn't moved in the least. "You know, I think Tiffani's going to have to leave this bed behind."

Drew's expression froze into ice again. "I don't really see why she needs it anyway," she said in a voice that could have chilled a glacier. "You've got one."

Max blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"That's one of the only pieces of furniture you own, after all."

Max stared at her, seeing her defensive posture, arms crossed over her chest, and the stiff expression on her face, and it slowly dawned on him that she thought he was sleeping with Tiffani. For some reason she thought he had made love to Tiffani, in the same bed he'd held Drew in his arms.

Drew thought Tiffani was moving in with him.

He stood up and walked across the room to her, slowly. She looked at him suspiciously but didn't back away. "Drew," he said, softly. "You know Tiffani's moving into her own apartment. Right?"

He expected to see her posture relax. Instead it stayed as rigid as ever. "I guess you guys haven't been a couple long enough to live together."

"Drew," he persisted, gently, "we aren't a couple. And we definitely are not sleeping together."

This time her posture did relax a trifle. She looked confused. "Of course you are. I called you last week ..." She trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"Yeah," he said, remembering. "And Tiffani picked up the phone."

"She sounded like she'd been asleep, Max. And the only phone in your house is upstairs. In your bedroom."

He felt an enormous wave of relief pass through him. Drew was jealous. She was wearing that frozen expression of anger because she thought he was sleeping with Tiffani. That had to mean she wanted him more than she'd let on.

"It's a cordless phone," he explained. "I left it downstairs, and Tiffani picked it up when it rang. Tiffani didn't have anywhere to go, so I let her crash at my place until she found an apartment. On the couch, Drew."

"Then you and she—"

"I told you before," he said. The desperate desire to make her understand how much she meant to him made his voice rough with emotion. "You're the one I want, Drew."

She stared at him a moment longer, studying his face as if she might discover the truth there, then flung herself against him. Her arms went around his shoulders and she pressed her face into his neck.

"You want me?" she whispered shakily. "Really? After everything I said to you?"

He tilted her head up and stared into her eyes. "Drew," he said, very solemnly, "believe me. All I've ever wanted is you."

He bent his head and kissed her.

For an eternity she clung to him, her lips pressed to his, and he slid his arms around her waist and

pulled her against him as if he could somehow merge her into his body. Her warm, soft curves felt perfect against him. It felt so damned right for her to be there. A soft yearning sound rumbled in the back of his throat, and he kissed her harder.

"Oh, my God."

The shocked voice brought Max back to the present with a jolt. He lifted his head swiftly.

Tiffani was staring at them.

Chapter 20

"Oh, my God," Tiffani repeated as she walked into the room. She was staring at them with as much disbelief as if she'd just discovered they were green-skinned aliens. "What are you two doing?"

Drew wanted to sink through the floor. She had absolutely no idea what to say, so she fell back on the classic cliché. "This isn't what it looks like, Tiffani."

"The hell it isn't," Tiffani retorted. "You guys were French kissing. Are you two some kind of item?"

Now there's a brilliant deduction, Drew thought, but she wisely kept the comment to herself. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Tiffani more than she already had. Shooting a helpless look at Max, she saw he had no idea how to deal with Tiffani's shock either, but he gamely did his best. Faced with an awkward situation, he reverted to his usual articulate self. "Uh," he said. "Yeah. An item. I guess so."

Tiffani continued to stare at them. "You dumped me so you could go out with Drew," she said slowly.

"That's not exactly the way it happened," Max said defensively. "I liked Drew from the beginning."

Oh, great, Drew thought. That was just the way to make Tiffani feel better. She stomped on his toe to make him shut up, but it was too late.

"You liked Drew better than me? Then why did you go out with me?"

"I, um ..." Max paused, looking sheepish. "You're the one who asked me."

"So if Drew had asked you out, you would have gone with her instead? How come you didn't just ask her?"

"I did. She said no."

Tiffani walked across the room, sat down on her bed, and regarded them with a bewildered expression. "I just do not believe this." She looked at them, standing with their arms around each other's waists, and shook her head. "I thought you two couldn't stand each other. You always acted like you wanted to kill him, Drew."

"I guess I was jealous of the fact he went out with you," Drew admitted.

Tiffani looked stunned. "You guys really like each other, don't you? So have you been out on, you know, a date?" She snapped her fingers. "Hey, the night you were out so late, Drew. Did you guys go out then?"

Drew nodded, mentally crossing her fingers. In her opinion, what they'd done that night hadn't exactly constituted a date.

"Oh, my God." Tiffani buried her face in her hands. "And the night before that I tried to—Oh, jeez. I am so embarrassed."

"You tried to what?"

"Never mind," Max said hastily. "Look, Tiffani, you have to believe neither of us ever wanted to hurt you, okay? We kept our mouths shut about this because we were trying not to hurt your feelings. Maybe in retrospect that was kind of stupid, but we just weren't sure how to tell you."

Tiffani lifted her head and stared at them. Drew disengaged herself from Max and sat down next to her sister on the fluffy pink-and-white coverlet. "Look, Tiff," she said gently, "I know you have every right to be mad, but I wish you wouldn't be. Max and I tried very hard to deny what we feel."

"What exactly do you feel?"

Drew blinked at the blunt question. Looking up, she saw Max waiting alertly for her answer.

"We like each other. A lot."

"Are you in love with him?"

Yes. The answer sprang immediately to her tongue, but she tamped it down firmly. It was ridiculous to be talking about love this early in her relationship with Max. Besides, a small voice of doubt in her heart questioned why Max was interested in her anyway. Virtually every man she'd ever dated had been interested in nothing more than her face and her body. When she started talking, their faces went blank.

She vividly recalled an intense conversation about Sense and Sensibility she'd once had with James. She had been making what she considered an extremely salient point when she noticed he was staring at her breasts, completely oblivious to her words. As if she was a Playboy centerfold, instead of an intelligent, well-read human being.

Max, though, wasn't like that at all. Sure, his eyes filled with heat when he looked at her, but he listened to her, too. When she was with him, she felt valued as more than just an attractive body and face. She was pretty sure he actually enjoyed her company.

But that wasn't enough to build a real, lasting relationship on. And neither was the wild attraction she felt to him. Simply because he made her feel things no other man had made her feel, simply because she couldn't live without him, didn't mean she was in love with him. Did it?

"To tell you the truth," she said slowly, "I'm not sure how I feel. All I know is I want a chance to find out."

She felt Max's eyes on her, but she didn't dare look at him. The last thing she wanted was to give Max the hope that they could have a genuine, meaningful relationship, when she wasn't yet at all certain what she wanted. She remembered all too clearly what he had said, and the way he had said it.

All I've ever wanted is you.

The memory of the rough sincerity in his voice made her shiver with a mixture of fear and longing. She'd never had a man look at her that way before, and it was immensely flattering. She didn't have any doubt that he felt quite a bit for her. Maybe he wasn't in love with her, but she meant more to him than she'd ever meant to.

Even so, she wasn't sure she wanted to be the answer to all Max's hopes and dreams. It was a little unnerving.

For that matter, she wasn't sure that Max was the answer to all her dreams, either.

But he was certainly the answer to a good many of her fantasies.

"Are you okay with this, Tiffani?" she asked gently.

Tiffani frowned. "Yeah. I guess so." She lifted her head and smiled at Max. "Max says I've just been trying to force myself to fall in love with guys so I can find a father for Alice."

"Do you think that's true?"

"I guess that might be part of it. But I think maybe I was looking for an excuse to move out, too."

Drew stared at her wordlessly, hurt.

"Don't look that way, Drew. I'm getting kind of old to live with my sister, don't you think?"

Drew shrugged. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"After Lucas left me, we agreed I'd move in for just a little while," Tiffani pointed out. "But then I never found a good reason to move out again. I guess I really wasn't sure I could make it on my own."

"But you're sure now?"

"No," Tiffani said slowly. "But I don't know how I'll ever find out if I don't try it." She offered Drew a tentative smile. "Anyway, it's not like I'm moving to another country or anything. I'm just across town. And it's a small town, right?"

"It sure is," Drew said, feeling unaccountably relieved that Tiffani seemed willing to stay on good terms with her. Maybe she hadn't screwed up as badly as she'd feared. "And you can borrow a cup of sugar from me any time you want, you know."

Max frowned as the two of them hugged. "Tiffani," he said slowly, "are you sure you're not upset with us?"

Drew understood his hesitation. A couple of weeks ago Tiffani had been so depressed over losing Max she'd spent an intimate evening with Ben and Jerry. Now it seemed like she wasn't particularly upset over discovering Max and Drew in a compromising position. Losing a guy she liked to the older sister she was jealous of ought to be enough to send her diving nose first into a gallon of ice cream and disappearing from sight for a week. But Tiffani just grinned, blushing slightly.

"Well, I've sort of met this guy."

Somehow Drew wasn't surprised. Despite Tiffani's newfound insights into her own psyche, she just wasn't the type to embrace a single lifestyle. Tiffani's world tended to begin and end with men. "A guy?" she repeated dubiously.

"Yeah, a guy at my adult literacy group. We spent a couple of hours talking last night, after the others went home. He was a football player at the college."

Tiffani had always had a weak spot for football players in high school. Drew raised her eyebrows, wondering if Tiffani could possibly have fallen for Ken Harshaw, of all people. "No kidding. Is he nice?"

"He's nice, all right. And gorgeous. With an ass to die for. I think I'm already in love."

"Oh, God, not again," Drew said.

Chapter 21

Max thought he looked like a complete idiot.

He rang Drew's doorbell, hoping she liked seeing men wearing brightly colored nooses around their necks. He hadn't worn a suit and tie in years, and had almost forgotten how much they made him feel like a victim of the gallows. Working in jeans and T-shirts was a definite perk of novel writing. It was, he thought, one of the better aspects of being self-employed.

Drew opened the door and paused for a long moment. Her eyes regarded him, dressed in a charcoal gray suit, white pressed shirt, and a red-and-blue striped tie. "Wow," she said.

He grinned despite himself. "Thanks. It's worth getting dressed up for a compliment like that." He handed her the dozen long-stemmed roses he'd brought, and she blinked hard, looking as if she might cry.

"Max," she said softly, "they're beautiful. But you didn't have to bring flowers."

"I wanted to. You deserve it."

She buried her nose in the crimson roses, then looked up and smiled, crinkling the little lines around her eyes. "Come on in."

As he followed her to the kitchen, he noticed she wasn't wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, or her gray power suit that looked like a feminine version of the one he was wearing. Instead she was wearing a stunning black dress. Unlike the almost obscene one he'd seen on Tiffani, this one was conservative, reaching down to just a few inches above her knees and only exposing a modest amount of cleavage. But it clung to her body in an incredibly alluring way, displaying her centerfold breasts and her wasp waist. Encased in silky black stockings, her legs looked pretty damned amazing too.

She also wore black, three-inch heels that made her precisely his height, which impressed him. He recalled the way she'd snapped at him in the hospital when he'd suggested she was six foot three, and was glad she was getting over her self-consciousness. He'd always admired tall women who were proud of their height, who flaunted it, rather than being ashamed of it.

He noticed she had worn her hair down again, a smooth sheet of gilded silver. He wondered if she'd realized through some mysterious feminine intuition that he liked it best worn down.

Then he laughed at himself. Feminine intuition, hell. He doubted it took feminine intuition to see his eyes popping out of their sockets every time he saw her hair falling free to her waist.

In the kitchen she carefully placed the dozen roses into a vase full of water. "I don't think anyone's ever brought me roses before," she said. "That's very romantic."

And very clichéd, he added mentally. He was grateful she hadn't mentioned that, but he found himself babbling an explanation anyway. "In my books, Captain McNeill always brings flowers to his women. They're usually exotic alien flowers, but roses were the most exotic thing I could find at the florist's."

He realized he was blathering idiotically, but she didn't appear to be laughing at him. She turned slowly and looked at him. On her face she wore an odd expression, a look he couldn't quite identify. "Max," she said slowly, "I have something to confess."

Anxiety hit him in the chest like a hard-flung brick. I have something to confess had to be one of the worst of all possible sentences to hear your date utter. He figured it was probably feminine code for I've thought better of this date and don't want to see you again. Ever. It sure as hell didn't bode well for the continuation of their relationship past the next two minutes.

He swallowed nervously. "What's that?"

"I read Farthest Space: The Beginning."

That wasn't precisely what he had expected. His heart rate slowed, then steadied. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your first Farthest Space novel. I read it."

He couldn't have been more astounded if she'd announced she'd spotted Elvis in her refrigerator, but he did his best not to look shocked. "I see," he said. "So was it awful?"

"No. Actually it was pretty good."

Pretty good from Drew was probably equivalent to the most amazing thing I ever read from anyone else. It was, he thought, even higher praise than the Hugo the book had won. He felt a foolish grin cross his face. "Glad to hear it. Thanks."

"There's just one thing..."

He wondered what criticism she was about to make and steeled himself mentally. "What's that?"

"I wondered if you realized the plot was rather similar to Pygmalion."

Trust the professor of literature to figure that out. Max smiled sheepishly. "You've discovered my secret."

It was her turn to look confused. "What?"

"I base all my books on classic plots. Read them and you'll notice it." He started to tick them off. "The Greatest of These was based on The Odyssey. Fire and Ice pretty much drew on Romeo and Juliet. The Flame of Valor was based on The Little Mermaid, believe it or not. I love Hans Christian Anderson. And you're right, The Beginning was based on George Bernard Shaw."

Drew stared at him. "How on earth did you know George Bernard Shaw wrote Pygmalion?"

Max grinned, enjoying her expression of shock. "I know you've been operating under the assumption that I'm an ignorant lout when it comes to literature, Dr. Cooper, but I happen to have a bachelor's degree in English literature. I'm a writer. What did you think my major was in college, engineering?"

"I made reservations at the Fishhouse," Max explained as he drove the Mustang away from her house.

"I thought about trying to impress you by taking you to a French restaurant, but to be honest I can't pronounce a single word of French outside of oui, and I figured that wouldn't get me very far."

"You don't have to try to impress me, Max."

He shot her a wry sideways look. "I was hoping you'd say I'd already impressed you."

"You did," she admitted. "I've never gotten roses before."

"That wasn't quite what I meant," he said with a suggestive grin, and she burst out laughing.

"Oh, that. Well, yes. You're very impressive."

"Thanks. Later maybe I can impress you again."

Drew was surprised by his easy, good-natured banter. He seemed much more at ease with her tonight. The last time they'd been together he'd been so nervous she'd halfway expected him to jump out a window. She guessed their agreement to have a torrid affair had put a lot of pressure on him after his long years of celibacy. It wasn't really surprising he had suffered a little performance anxiety. But tonight he was much more relaxed. Maybe he'd missed her.

God knew she'd pined for him. She would never have admitted in a million years that she'd spent the last week moping, consoling herself by watching a cache of Farthest Space videotapes she'd found in Tiffani's room. She'd watched the episodes over and over again until she could recite every line of dialogue from memory. In fact, she was rapidly turning into a first-class nerd. Before long she'd be attending conventions dressed as a Va'ra, buying stacks of trading cards and plastic ray guns.

But the undeniable fact was that the last week had been a lonely hell for her. Despite her jealousy, she'd missed Max an awful lot.

It was nice, she mused, to actually spend some time with the man. Sex with Max had been fun, but it was a nice change of pace talking with him, getting to know him. She hadn't realized he'd gone to college at all. She'd certainly never guessed he'd majored in English literature, just as she had.

I never even asked, she thought with a twinge of guilt.

Somehow his profession had made her assume he wasn't well read. She recalled that he'd made a reference to Chaucer when she'd gone to visit him in his hospital room, and a reference to Thoreau another time, but she just hadn't caught on. From the moment they'd met, she'd somehow assumed he wasn't very bright, simply because the books he wrote couldn't be described as literature.

She was ashamed she'd been so quick to jump to conclusions. Tiffani was right. She was a snob.

"So we both majored in English literature," she said. "What else do we have in common?"

"Not much, I guess."

"Do you like any classical music?"

He laughed. "Well, there's the music on that bank commercial. I think it's Beethoven. It's pretty nice."

"Actually, that's Vivaldi."

"Whatever. Do you like any classic rock?"

"I rather thought that was a contradiction in terms."

He chuckled. "You really are a snob, you know that, Drew?"

"I'm beginning to realize that."

"Maybe you should try listening to some classic rock before you dismiss it as junk." He took a hand from the steering wheel, opened the console, and groped inside for a minute. "Here. Take this home and see if you like it."

She took the CD, marked Joni Mitchell. She vaguely recalled the name from a previous conversation.

"Only if you'll try some Vivaldi."

"Uh ..."

"Vivaldi is very accessible music, Max. I'll loan you a CD later."

He shrugged. "Okay. That seems fair. So what else do we have in common?"

"Low-fat cuisine?"

"Bleah," he said with feeling. "Hamburgers and hot dogs."

"Cognac?"

"Budweiser."

"Frasier?"

"Star Trek."

She laughed. "It sounds like the old saying about tomaytos and tomahtos applies to us perfectly."

He pulled the Mustang into a space in front of the Fishhouse, switched off the ignition, and turned to look at her. His eyes gleamed like emeralds in the fading evening light. "Yeah, well, I can think of another saying that might apply here."

"What's that?"

His sensual lips curved upward in a sinful smile, and he reached out his hand to stroke her cheek.

"Opposites attract," he said softly.

Inside, the waiter escorted them to a romantic, candle-lit table overlooking the creek through a large window. The sun was just setting, lighting the water with a golden glow. Drew sat in her chair and gazed out the window.

"That's a beautiful view, isn't it?"

"Mmmm," he said. He knew he should have said something along the lines of, Not as beautiful as you are, but that sounded too much like another bad cliché, and he couldn't think of something better.

Some writer I am, he thought with disgust. Can't come up with a compliment to save my life.

Even more irritating was the knowledge that, had he been writing a book, compliments would have flowed out of Captain McNeill's mouth like water bubbling from a spring. McNeill was always smooth, sexually experienced, and overflowing with self-confidence.

He, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck.

He'd done his best to conceal that unfortunate truth from Drew by pretending he was Captain McNeill, and it had worked pretty well so far. But now, faced with the necessity of making conversation with her for an hour or more, his confidence was beginning to waver. He simply wasn't any good at making small talk.

He didn't have a clue what to say to her.

Drew looked back at him. A small smile touched her lips. "This is a lovely restaurant, Max," she said softly.

"Mmm," he said again. Even though he'd lived in Swift Creek for a decade, he'd never been to this particular restaurant, since his taste ran more to greasy spoons. Good old Pete had brought Mom here, however, and she had recommended it to Max, claiming it had the most romantic atmosphere of any restaurant she'd ever been to. Evidently "romantic atmosphere" meant poor lighting and enough candles to set off the sprinkler system, along with a nice view of the creek that couldn't be seen at night. Even so, Drew seemed impressed.

He just hoped to God they didn't serve snails.

At that moment the waiter arrived. He was dressed in a white shirt and black bowtie, and he had a fake British accent that reminded Max of a butler from a bad murder mystery. The waiter gave them the menus and began reciting the specials, all of which sounded hopelessly snooty to Max. He'd never before heard of scallops prepared with caviar and champagne and thought fish eggs sounded almost as bad as snails. Drew, on the other hand, looked like she was in heaven.

Of course. She would.

As the waiter walked away with their drink orders, Max busied himself looking at his menu for an inordinately long time. At last he lifted his eyes to find Drew regarding him with an amused expression.

"Have you decided what you want?" she asked.

Something plain. Something normal. Something prepared without fish eggs. That was all he wanted, and it seemed exceedingly hard to come by.

"Uh ... broiled salmon, I think." That was the only thing on the menu that looked like it might come without weird stuff on top.

The waiter returned, and they ordered. Drew, naturally, ordered the special involving scallops and caviar. He blinked at her as the waiter went toward the kitchen.

"Let me guess," she said. "You don't like caviar."

He shrugged uncomfortably. "I'm not exactly a caviar kind of guy."

"How about scallops? Do you like them?"

Max scowled. "Scallops are just another kind of mollusk, like snails. I don't eat snails, either."

"Escargot, Max. They're called escargot."

"Only because no one would eat them if they were labeled snails."

She uttered a charming ripple of laughter. "You're probably right." She slanted him an unreadable look through her lashes, and he got the distinct impression she could sense his nervousness. "Too bad you ordered salmon, though. You should have ordered sole."

"I didn't see sole on the menu."

"Really?"

He felt her foot run along the calf of his leg, hidden from the view of the rest of the restaurant by the long white tablecloth. Even through the woolen fabric of his suit, he was aware she'd dropped her shoe to the floor. He could feel the graceful, arched curve of her foot as it slipped up his leg. The sole of her foot, he thought with amusement, recognizing the joke at last.

He guessed that Drew had noticed he was getting awkward and tongue-tied again, and had decided to defuse the situation with a little joke. A very little joke. Possibly one of the most atrocious he'd ever heard. But her awful sense of humor didn't bother him. He didn't need humor to distract him right now.

The truth was, he found her foot sliding up his leg plenty distracting.

An aching sensation began to pervade his lower body. Heat spread from his legs upward to his abdomen in throbbing waves. He became aware that he was as hard as he'd ever been in his life.

It was incredible, he thought, what she could do to him with a caress and a smile.

He captured her foot as it reached his thigh and held it, his hand wrapped securely around her ankle. "You shouldn't mix bad puns and seduction, Drew."

She tried to pull her foot away, but he held it fast. "Don't tickle me," she hissed.

Max did his best to look innocent. "Tickle you? The thought never crossed my mind." He shot her a wicked smile. "Until now."

"Don't," she implored. "I'll—I'll—"

Intrigued, he lifted his eyebrows. "You'll what?"

"I'll squeal," she whispered desperately.

"Really? Now that I have to hear."

"Maybe later," she murmured. "Right now we're in public."

Max glanced over the darkened room. The only sounds were soft classical music, the muted hum of couples talking in hushed voices, and the elegant clinking of forks against china. He nodded toward the room at large. "I bet they'd like to hear you squeal, too."

"Max!"

He pressed his fingers against the sole of her foot. "A bad pun like that deserves a suitable punishment," he said.

"Who are you accusing of making bad puns?" she retorted.

Max grinned. He hadn't intended that one. "What will you give me if I let you go?"

She wiggled her foot seductively against his thigh. "Let go and I'll show you."

"Hmm. Sounds like a fair deal."

He loosened his fingers, and her foot slipped free. He felt her toes slide upward and gently explore his iron-hard, throbbing erection. A bolt of pleasure sizzled through him like summer lightning, and he clenched his jaws together.

Drew regarded him with amusement as her foot moved up and down. "Am I tickling you, Max?"

"Hardly," he said between his teeth.

"Because you looked—" Humor flared to life in the silver depths of her eyes. "You looked as if you were going to squeal."

Her comment broke the erotic spell he'd been under, and he laughed out loud. At that moment the waiter came back to their table. "Your salmon, sir," he intoned. As he placed the plate on the table he glanced down and saw Drew's black-stockinged toes in Max's lap. He hastily looked away, dropped Drew's dinner in front of her with a clatter, and fled without bothering to ask them if they needed anything else.

Which was okay with Max. He was pretty sure he had everything he wanted.

"You're blushing," Drew said.

Max was uncomfortably aware she was right. "You embarrassed that poor waiter half to death," he said, conscious that he sounded more than a little priggish.

She wiggled her toes. "Do you want me to stop?"

God, no, he thought. Aloud he said, "It might help if you wait until I'm finished with my sole." He blushed again. "I mean salmon."

She smiled that slow, seductive smile that was driving him crazy. "Maybe for dessert," she said, and pulled her foot away.

Over dinner, they chatted about inconsequentials. Max was surprised to find that his tongue was no longer tied into knots, allowing his side of the conversation to flow smoothly, if not precisely eloquently. Maybe, he thought as he stabbed at his salmon with his fork, all I need is practice. Or perhaps Drew was simply an easy person to talk to.

At last the waiter, looking stiff-faced and haughtier than ever, came to take their plates away. "Are you

interested in dessert?" he inquired without actually looking at them.

Drew looked at Max instead of the waiter. "Very interested," she said in a sexy purr.

Max choked on his iced tea.

"Very well," the waiter said, staring over their heads. Max got the distinct impression he was afraid to look down. "What would you like?"

Max kicked Drew under the table before she could say something outrageous. "A hot fudge sundae," he said hastily. "We'll split a sundae."

When the sundae arrived, Drew picked off the cherry between two neatly manicured fingers and held it in the air. "I don't like cherries," she said. "Do you want it?"

"Uh ... sure," he said. He took it from her fingers and ate it while she watched.

"You ought to feel flattered, Max."

He laid the stem on the table. "Why is that?"

"It's been a long time since I've given my cherry to a man."

Max started to cough. When he could speak again, he glared at her. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

She grinned and dug into the whipped cream, then lifted the spoon to her lush, full mouth, her eyes on his. Her tongue flicked out to slowly lick the cream off the spoon. Watching her, he became conscious of a melting sensation in his lower abdomen. She was reducing him to a puddle of goo, he thought, and enjoying every minute of it.

"You've got a little whipped cream there," he said.

Drew patted at her lips with the napkin. "There?"

"No." He reached across the table and touched her lips with the tip of a finger. She closed her eyes for a minute, which pleased him. He didn't want to be the only one melting into a puddle here. "Right there." He wiped off the small smear of cream and licked it off his own finger as she watched.

"Maybe we should just skip the sundae," he suggested.

"And pass up hot fudge?"

He leaned forward and brushed her lips with his finger again. "I have something better in mind."

"Better than hot fudge? Are you sure?"

"I guarantee it."

She smiled. "Let's go."

While the radio in his Mustang played the Hollies' "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress," Drew ran her hand up and down his thigh. Luckily it was only a five-minute drive back to her house, or he might have driven off the road. Even so, the trip took way too long to suit him. At last he pulled into her driveway. He jumped out of the car, nearly ran around to her side, and opened the door.

She stepped out and gazed at him. Her eyes were unreadable in the dark.

He'd never wanted a woman as badly as he wanted her. He put his arms around her and pressed his mouth to hers, hard. He knew he should be gentle, take it slowly, but he couldn't seem to hold back his reactions.

She didn't appear to object. Sliding her arms around his waist, she leaned back against the Mustang. She raised her leg and wrapped her muscular calf around the back of his thighs, reminding him entirely too vividly of the last time they'd made love. He made a small, animal sound of longing in the back of his throat.

"Max," she whispered, and the sound of his name falling from her lips was the most beautiful thing he'd ever heard. He yanked up her skirt and let his hands run over her hose-covered thighs, totally uncaring that her neighbors might be watching. Her legs were soft and sleek and well-toned.

She shoved at the suit coat, and he let her push it off his shoulders. It fell to the grass, which probably wasn't recommended care for a dry-clean-only coat. He found he didn't give a damn. Somehow the well-being of his one decent suit wasn't high on his list of priorities just now. Hell, for all he cared she could run a lawnmower over it.

Her fingers fumbled with his tie. He pushed her skirt up around her waist and leaned into her warmth, wanting to be nearer her. Wanting to be inside her. He felt her groping at his belt, then unbuttoning his trousers.

Reality began to intrude. No matter how much he wanted her, he wasn't sure he could let his bare ass hang out in front of her neighbors. He caught her hands before she could shove his pants to the ground.

"Drew," he whispered. "Let's go inside."

Somehow they made it to the front steps, stopping to kiss and touch each other every couple of steps. At the front door they stopped for a long, long kiss, and Max almost reconsidered his position on being naked in public. He started to feel like he wouldn't mind joining a nudist camp for this woman.

Then a car drove by, its headlights skimming over them, and they both jumped.

Drew dug in her purse for her house key. "Just a second," she said, giving him a gentle smile. She inserted the key in the lock, opened the door, and groped in the darkness. A light came on.

Max heard her startled gasp and stepped in right behind her. He paused in the foyer, frozen with shock.

Her house was a shambles. The chairs and tables in the living room had been tipped over, the wallpaper had been shredded, and someone had ripped up newspapers and strewn them all over the floor. Black ink had been splattered on every available surface.

The dining room didn't look any better. Someone had tipped the dining room table over and apparently had taken a knife to it. Long, deep scratches rent the mahogany surface. Someone had emptied out the china cabinets and deliberately smashed the contents, leaving shards of china scattered across the floor.

Drew stared for long moments, then glanced back at Max and smiled wanly.

"I'm not usually this bad a housekeeper."

Chapter 22

"I don't think it's that big a deal, Max."

Max had yanked her out of the house the minute he'd seen what had happened while they'd been gone, in case the culprit was still lurking in the house. Now he was standing in her front yard, glaring at her. The passion that had all but consumed him a moment before had utterly vanished in the shock of finding Drew's house vandalized.

"Not that big a deal?" he repeated angrily. "Come on, Drew, someone broke in and tore your house apart. They've probably stolen anything they could find, too. Call the police, damn it."

She couldn't think of anyone who hated her this much. Well, sure, Tiffani's ex-husband hated her guts, for reasons she wasn't about to confess to Max, but Lucas was a coward at heart. Look at the way he'd snuck into town covertly and called Tiffani while avoiding her. Maybe trashing her house behind her back was the kind of thing a coward would do, but she'd have thought Lucas would be too afraid of being caught in the act. And James was clearly annoyed she'd turned him down, and a bit on the obsessive side, but she was pretty sure he didn't hate her enough to do something like this. He simply didn't have enough motive.

She had a bad feeling she knew who'd done this, Drew thought wearily, given the fact that Ken had been following her the other day. Ken obviously blamed her for forcing him out of school, and he'd set out to punish her for it. The problem was that she didn't want to get the kid in trouble, even if he deserved it.

"I don't think it was a thief," she said. "My sterling candlesticks weren't taken. I saw them lying on the floor."

"Maybe we interrupted him before he could get what he came for," Max suggested.

"I think it's probably just a student prank," Drew said, doing her best to sound calm. In fact she felt horribly violated. No one had ever broken into her house before, let alone destroyed her furniture and belongings. She found herself wondering what might have happened if she had been at home, and suppressed a shiver.

"A student prank? Drew, toilet papering your trees is a prank. Writing on your car with soap is a prank. This is breaking and entering and wanton destruction of property."

"Why don't we go inside and see what else was done?"

"Why don't we stay outside in case the guy's still in there?" he snapped. His heavy eyebrows drew together in a frown as he glared at her. "Look, Drew, I don't think you realize the seriousness of what happened. Someone went through your house and destroyed your stuff. Your furniture. Your wallpaper. Your carpets. I only got a glimpse of what was done, but it's going to cost thousands of dollars to replace and repair all that stuff. You have to call the cops, or your insurance company is going to refuse to cover it."

Drew thought again of Ken Harshaw, of the way he'd sobbed when she told him she was going to report him to the school for an honor code violation, and she felt the pit of her stomach turn to ice.

If she called the cops, Ken wouldn't just have to leave school this time. He'd go to jail.

"Look," she said, a little more forcefully. "I have an idea who did this, Max. I don't want to see him arrested. He's basically a nice kid."

"A nice kid wouldn't destroy your house!"

Drew did her best to explain. "He's had a rough time of it lately," she said, aware her words sounded lame at best. "I forced him to drop out of school."

Max looked at her with surprise. "You must have had a reason."

She nodded. "But he probably blames me anyway."

"Why are you so sure it was this kid, and not your ex-boyfriend?"

Drew thought of the way Ken had walked into Cafe Cantata, seen her, and glanced away hastily. The way he'd followed her back outside and stood there, looking around. "I just think it's more likely to be Ken," she said lamely. "And I just hate to see the kid in more trouble than he already is. Besides ... I'm pretty sure Ken is the new guy Tiffani is interested in."

"Jesus. She can sure pick them, can't she?"

"She's going to kill me if I get her newest boyfriend thrown in jail."

"It's not your fault if her boyfriend is a criminal, Drew. Anyway ..." Max sighed. "It's not just this one incident, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

Max looked at her for a long moment. "Charity Rogers suggested to me that everything that's gone on lately might be related. At first I thought she was crazy. But lately I'm beginning to wonder."

"I don't understand."

"Well, two minutes after I met you someone shot at us," Max said, ticking it off on his fingers.

"That was aimed at you, Max. It was a crazy Farthest Space fan. The police said so."

"They never identified the guy, so how would they know for sure?" He folded down another finger.

"Then Tiffani was driven off the road and almost killed."

Drew blinked. "But that was just one of those things."

"There have been a lot of 'those things' lately, Drew. Add to that a possessive and possibly crazy ex-boyfriend who's trying to tell you how to run your life. Now your house has been broken into and completely trashed. Are you absolutely sure none of it's related?"

Drew hesitated for a long moment, and then decided to come clean. "There's something else, too. I got a note."

"What?"

"An anonymous note. Almost a month ago now. It said, 'You'll be sorry for what you did to me. I'll make you sorry.'" She knew she'd never forget those simple words, starkly threatening in their anonymity. "And that same night someone was hanging around the house. I didn't see the guy, but he left a photo of Tiffani and me." She hesitated. "My face was blacked out of the photo."

For the first time it occurred to her to wonder how the hell Ken could have gotten a photo of her and her sister. James probably had a few photos of the two of them lying around. And then there was Lucas. But it simply couldn't be Lucas. He was a coward, pure and simple. Look at the way he'd run from town when she'd confronted him a year ago.

Max cursed under his breath. "I don't suppose you reported all that to the police, either."

"No. I figured ..." she hesitated. "I figured it was James again. But I didn't worry about it too much at the time, because at that point he wasn't acting quite so..."

"Psychopathic?"

She nodded. "It gets worse, Max. The other day...I'm pretty sure someone was following me. Ken Harshaw, the student I was telling you about."

Max's scowl deepened. "And after all this, you're seriously considering not calling the police?"

She hesitated for a long moment, picturing Ken's broad, innocent face in her mind. Remembering the tears coursing down his cheeks. At last, reluctantly, she nodded.

"I guess you're right," she admitted. "We'd better call them."

An hour later the cops had taken their statements, examined the house for evidence, and put yellow tape around the premises to keep curious bystanders away. Drew had walked through the house, accompanied by one of the officers, and she'd almost cried at what had been done to her beautiful house. The antique Haviland china she'd inherited from her mother had been smashed into shards, wallpaper hung in strips all over the house, and bathtubs had been plugged and left running, causing massive water damage to the ceilings below. Whoever had done this had managed to wreak the maximum amount of damage in a fairly short period of time.

"You'll need to find another place to stay tonight," the officer told her as he exited the house. As if that wasn't immediately obvious. Like she was going to camp on the front lawn or something.

She stood in the front yard, shivering, barely aware of Max until he stepped up to her and put his arm around her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She pressed her body against the comforting warmth of his chest and let her head rest on his broad shoulder. "Could you give me a ride to Tiffani's apartment?"

He shook his head. "Tiffani's apartment is too small for guests, Drew. Anyway, she just moved in. And she doesn't have much furniture. Nothing you can sleep on, at any rate."

"I don't have anywhere else to stay," Drew whispered.

"Don't be ridiculous, Drew. Of course you do."

She hesitated and looked in his eyes, seeing nothing there but sympathy and the desire to comfort her. "But your mother—"

He shrugged. "You can sleep in my bed. I'll take the couch."

What she really wanted was to sleep curled in the safety of his embrace, his strong arms wrapped around her, but she realized that wasn't feasible with his mother in the house. Even so, she'd feel a whole lot safer in Max's house than in a hotel room. "Okay," she said, feeling a rush of gratitude. "Thanks."

"Come on," he said. As they walked toward his car, Max lifted his head.

"Damn."

She didn't have to ask him what was wrong, for she saw it at the same moment. From beyond the gaggle of parked police cars a van was approaching. Its side was emblazoned with the words, NewsChannel 9.

"Oh, God, not the vulture," she moaned. "Not tonight."

Her wish was apparently not going to be granted. The van stopped, and the vulture herself emerged, her

long red fingernails glinting oddly in the police cars' blinking blue lights. Charity Rogers walked over to them.

"Mr. Sinclair ... Dr. Cooper," she said, smiling slightly. "So nice to see you again, but how unfortunate it has to be under these circumstances."

"Charity," Max said. "Drew doesn't feel like giving an interview tonight."

"I understand," Charity said. "Truly, I do. It must be so frightening to have one's house broken into. I can only imagine how terrified I would be."

Drew felt like snapping, I'm not terrified, but that wouldn't have been the truth. She had to admit she was frightened. She kept her mouth shut.

"Have the police found any parallels between what happened here and your sister's accident, by any chance?" Charity inquired.

Max put an arm around Drew's shoulder and pulled her toward his car. "Why don't you talk to the police, Charity?"

"But Dr. Cooper—"

"Dr. Cooper is tired," Max snapped back over his shoulder. "She's going to get some sleep."

Charity fired a parting shot. "With you?"

In the blue light from the police cars' light bars, Drew saw Max's face go rigid. He dropped his arm from around her shoulder, spun around, and headed back toward Charity. He suddenly looked very big and very dangerous.

"Ms. Rogers," he said coldly, "I think we have made our feelings very clear. We do not wish to be interviewed right now. I suggest you talk to the police officers about what has happened here tonight, but let me make one thing very clear. If you make any unsubstantiated claims about Dr. Cooper that might affect her professional reputation, I will personally see to it that your station is slapped with a defamation suit the size of Texas." He took a step forward and towered over Charity. "I trust I have made myself clear enough on that subject."

Drew watched, fascinated, as Charity seemed to shrink before her eyes. She actually looked cowed. "I understand," she said in an undertone.

"Good," Max said. He turned his back on her with unmistakable contempt and walked back to Drew.

"Thank you for what you did."

Max didn't take his eyes off the road. "You mean making you call the cops? You would have gotten around to it, once you thought it through."

"No. Defending me from Charity."

She saw the wry curve of his mouth in the glare of the oncoming headlights. "I don't really think you need defending, Drew. You're more than capable of looking out for yourself."

She sighed. "Not tonight. Tonight I really needed someone to look out for me, Max. Charity Rogers makes me crazy. I just couldn't cope with her again. I'm glad you did." In fact she had been stunned by how amiable, placid Max, ordinarily so quiet and unassuming, had suddenly become nothing short of fierce in his desire to protect her.

They pulled into Max's long, curving driveway, the kind of driveway that practically demanded that a

big, imposing Rolls-Royce be parked out front. She couldn't stop herself from reflecting that his house wasn't at all like him. He was an unpretentious, nice, simple guy who for some reason she couldn't guess at had bought a huge, ostentatious house. And then hadn't bothered to even decorate it. She figured it had something to do with his ex-fiancée, but she didn't want to bring up the subject again, considering how upset he'd gotten last time. Once again, she reminded herself that his past was really none of her business.

Even though Max's house reminded her of an empty, whitewashed cave, it was nice to walk into a house that wasn't a complete ruin. The moment they entered, Blue fawned all over Max, wagging his tail frantically, then turned his attention to her. He obviously hadn't forgotten her, she thought with amusement as Blue's happily flying white feet, and the sharp nails at the end of them, made short work of her hose.

A woman with iron-gray hair and a regal manner walked into the foyer, then paused at the sight of them together. "Oh," she said in some confusion. "I didn't realize ..."

Obviously she thought Max was bringing his date in for a nightcap, Drew thought. She smiled at the woman. "You must be Max's mother. I'm Drew Cooper."

She held out her hand, and the older woman took it with a hesitant smile. "I'm Virginia Sinclair." She turned her gaze to Max. "I didn't know that you two were coming back here," she said in an undertone.

"We weren't," Max answered shortly. "But Drew's house was ransacked. She needs a place to say."

Virginia's eyes widened. "Ransacked?"

"Totally torn apart," Max said grimly.

"Oh, dear. How awful."

"It wasn't exactly the date I had in mind. We spent most of the evening conversing with cops," Max went on. He walked toward the kitchen, and the women followed him. "When they let us go, we came back here. I figured I could sleep on the couch for a day or two, and Drew can have my room."

Virginia looked at Drew with a concerned gaze. "Do the police have a suspect, dear?"

"More than one," Drew said. "But they've taken fingerprints. Hopefully they can discover who it was." She sent up a prayer that it wasn't Ken.

Max escorted her to his room, kissed her chastely, and excused himself. He shut the door behind him, leaving her in the same room where they'd snoozed together after making mad, passionate love. She sat down on the bed and heard Max's mother's voice.

"She's the one you really like, isn't she?"

She knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but she couldn't help herself. She stepped quietly to the door and heard Max's rumbling tones as he went down the staircase with his mother. His voice rang with quiet sincerity.

"Yeah, Mom. She's the one."

Chapter 23

Seated on Max's incredibly ugly couch, Drew clicked off the phone and handed it to Max. He lifted his eyebrows as he dropped it onto the floor. "Well? Was it James?"

"No, James had an alibi," she said softly. "He was at a party on campus that night. But they found Ken Harshaw's fingerprints."

"Your student?"

She nodded. "My former student," she said, not without a trace of self-disgust. Max must have noticed the tone in her voice, because he reached over and took her hand.

"You can't blame yourself for this, Drew."

"I know. But Tiffani is going to blame me anyway. Besides—" She hesitated. "Ken seemed like a nice kid. He just couldn't cope with college. I hated having to threaten him with turning him in for an honor code violation, but I didn't have a choice. I can't blame him for being mad, though. The system failed him."

"The system failed him," Max agreed. "Not you."

"I guess..." Drew sighed. "I guess I represent the system to him. All the teachers who didn't challenge him enough. All the teachers who let him slide through without knowing anything."

"Look," Max said with a trace of impatience, "I don't know why you're so anxious to acquit this kid. I don't care how much the system failed him. He's the one who wrecked your house, Drew."

"It looks like it. And I'm furious about that, believe me. I can't believe he smashed my Haviland. That china belonged to my great-great-grandmother. I just wish it hadn't turned out to be him. And I wish I understood why he'd do this. I thought he was a nice kid."

In fact, she'd been absolutely certain he was a nice kid, and the fact that he'd been willing to drop out of school, rather than wait for her to report him, had confirmed her belief. Something simply wasn't right here.

The memory of the photo that had been left on her deck niggled at the back of her mind. How could Ken have gotten that photo?

"Maybe you should ask him."

She lifted her head and stared at him. "That's not a bad idea."

Max looked at her suspiciously. "You aren't seriously thinking about going down to the jail and asking him, are you?"

"He's not in jail, Max. They let him out on bail."

"Bail?" Max repeated. "The kid totally destroyed your house, he's been following you around, and he's out on bail?"

Drew shrugged. "It's not a violent offense, Max. There's no proof that he's the one who left the threatening notes, either. And his parents are pretty prominent people in the community. His mother was on the news this morning, crying and claiming her baby boy couldn't possibly have done something like this."

Max looked at her for a long moment. He hadn't let go of her hand, and his fingers tightened around hers. "Until that kid is convicted," he said with quiet intensity, "I don't want you wandering around

alone. Okay?"

"I can't afford a bodyguard, Max."

"You don't need a bodyguard. You've got me."

She looked at him, six foot four inches of solid muscle and bone, and thought he looked like he'd make a pretty good bodyguard. "Maybe you should consider that as a career," she suggested.

"I'm perfectly happy with the career I have, thanks. But I don't think you should take chances. I'll drive you to campus and pick you up in the afternoons from now on. Okay?"

"Sometimes I work weird hours, Max."

"Not a problem. I always work weird hours. I'm a writer, after all."

She didn't like the idea of hiding behind him, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was using this as an excuse to worm his way further into her life. Somehow, over the past twenty-four hours, his status had changed from "date" to "boyfriend," and the speed at which that had happened was a little alarming. She wasn't sure she wanted a boyfriend.

She did, however, want Max in her life. She was surprised to realize she was certain of that.

At any rate, her instincts for self-preservation suggested that having a big, muscular, intimidating-looking guy around couldn't hurt. She was tall enough, but Ken Harshaw was bigger than she was and a whole lot stronger. She had to be reasonable about it and admit that if Ken wanted to hurt her, he could. And even if it turned out Ken wasn't the one who'd trashed her house, someone definitely had it in for her. A bodyguard wasn't a bad idea.

"Okay," she agreed. "You can drive me back and forth for a while."

"Great. I'm glad you're being reasonable for once."

"For once?" Drew repeated, a trifle annoyed.

He flashed his crooked grin. "You wouldn't take my suggestion that we go out on a date for weeks. But you have to admit, once we finally went out, you enjoyed it."

"It was fun," she admitted. She thought of the way she'd run her foot up and down his leg in public, clear into his lap, and felt her cheeks flush. She'd never behaved that way before in her life. But there was no denying it had been fun. "You're a nice guy, Max."

He looked disgusted. "Drew, don't you know 'nice' is the worst thing you can call a guy?"

"What's wrong with nice?"

"Nice is bland, that's what's wrong with it. Nice is boring. Nice is nondescript, ordinary, and insipid."

"Don't be silly, Max."

"Nice," he went on, "is something you call a guy you won't go out with. You know—'you're a nice guy, but I'll be washing my hair all next year.' Nice is something you call a vegetable. 'Here's a nice tomato.' Nice is something people call Blue. 'Nice doggie.'" He snorted. "Please, whatever you do, don't call me nice."

"Fine," she said softly. "What would you like me to call you?" She stroked her fingers through the gold-threaded strands of his rumpled hair. "Sexy?"

"Sexy is good," he agreed.

"How about gorgeous?"

"I can live with that."

She ran her hand down the flat muscles of his stomach. He was toned, lean, and solid, and she offered the first adjective that came to mind. "Hard?"

He grinned. "Getting more appropriate all the time."

Involuntarily she glanced down and saw the bulge in his jeans. "Oh," she said in sudden confusion. "I didn't mean to—"

He caught her hand before she could yank it away. "It's okay, Drew. Mom took Blue out for a walk, remember?"

"That's not enough time for—"

"Not if we do it right, no," he agreed, and she knew he was thinking of their first time together. The time he'd thought he'd gone too quickly. The time she'd thought was just right.

He leaned toward her. Into his green eyes leapt a spark, a look of intense masculine interest. A dangerous glitter. "Just enough time for a kiss or two," he whispered.

A kiss sounded like a really good idea. In fact, Drew reflected as his lips slid across hers, kissing Max was starting to become more of an addiction with her all the time. Kissing Max was like eating dark chocolate—she loved it while she was doing it, and when she was done she wanted to do it all over again. Kissing Max was as sinfully decadent as consuming a whole box of Godivas in an evening, all by herself. Kissing Max, like eating chocolate, was a thing no woman in her right mind could resist.

She wondered vaguely how she'd managed to resist it all these weeks.

Or why she'd bothered.

She tangled her fingers in his hair, moaned, and decided not to resist any longer.

After her poetry class, Drew discovered that she was ravenous. She was pretty sure she must be about to get her period, because she would have killed for chocolate. Probably that accounted for all the fantasies about chocolate she'd had this morning while kissing Max. She decided to walk over to Cafe Cantata and have a cup of frappuccino and something sweet. An éclair, maybe.

Max had told her to call him if she left the English building, but she recalled he'd mentioned he had a lot of work to do to catch up on his writing, and she wasn't about to drag him down to the campus just to escort her over to the coffee shop. She figured she could walk across the campus without running into Ken Harshaw.

As it happened, she was wrong.

Chapter 24

"I need to talk to you."

At the voice behind her, Drew almost jumped out of her skin. Spinning around, she saw Ken Harshaw, approximately as large and immovable as the Great Wall of China, standing behind her on the path.

She almost screamed, but she managed to pull herself together. She forced herself to speak in her chilliest, most professorial tones—the tones that had intimidated more than one unruly frat boy into a cowed silence. "What do you want?" she growled.

Ken held out a hand in what appeared to be intended as a supplicating gesture. Unfortunately, his hands were the size of a grizzly bear's paws, and the gesture came across as more threatening than reassuring. "Look, Professor Cooper, I just want to talk. That's all."

"About what? The way you destroyed my house, or the way you've been following me around?"

Ken winced. "Ah, I admit I was following you around one day. But I had my reasons. I didn't mess up your house, honest."

"They found your fingerprints," Drew snapped.

"Yeah, I know. But I didn't destroy your stuff, Dr. Cooper, I swear. I wouldn't do something like that."

Drew hesitated a long moment, seeing the boyish earnestness on his broad face. For all his size, Ken didn't look like he could hurt a mosquito. Even so, she couldn't imagine why he'd been following her around if his intentions were good. She realized she'd never know until she talked to him.

"Fine," she said at last, hoping she didn't regret this. Max is going to kill me, she reflected, but quelled the thought almost instantly. She was a big girl, and didn't need Max's permission to talk to someone, even if that someone was a psychopathic stalker. "If you want to talk, we'll talk. But in public. I'm headed for Cafe Cantata. Care to join me?"

Ken nodded. "Thanks," he said, and fell into step beside her.

At the nearly deserted coffee shop, she ordered her coveted éclair and a cup of mocha coffee, then sat down at a table. Ken settled his bulk into the dainty iron chair across from her. She took a bite of her éclair and regarded him through cold eyes. "Precisely what was it that you want to discuss?"

At her chilly tone, Ken wilted further. "I guess you hate me now," he said, looking miserable. "I know you believe I trashed your house, but I just wanted you to know I didn't."

Drew nodded. "Yes, Mr. Harshaw, you said that already. You also admitted you'd been following me around campus. Care to tell me why?"

Ken looked down at the table and spoke softly. "I wasn't the only one following you that afternoon, Dr. Cooper."

"I beg your pardon?"

"This weird guy was following you."

Drew snorted. "Oh, please. I didn't notice anyone following me. I even looked around pretty carefully. I didn't see anyone. I think I would have noticed someone like that."

"He was watching you from behind trees and stuff. He followed you all the way over here and hid behind parked cars the whole time. The way he was staring at you—well, it was pretty creepy."

His words unpleasantly recalled to her mind the way James had stared at her in her office. Pretty creepy

was a disturbingly good description of James these days. She recalled the way James had pawed her and shuddered.

Was it possible that James was stalking her?

She reserved judgment for a few moments and went on with her questions. "Very well, let's assume for the moment that someone else was following me that day. Exactly why did you decide to follow me?"

"I thought he might give you trouble. I figured I could protect you, if he started hassling you."

"So you were following me in order to protect me?" Drew said skeptically. "Forgive me, Mr. Harshaw, but that sounds a little too far-fetched to be believable."

"It's true," Ken said defensively.

"In that case, why did you go to my house? To protect me again? I wasn't even there that night."

Ken shook his head. "I went to your house to talk to you, Dr. Cooper. I figured I ought to tell you about the guy I saw following you. I should have done it earlier, but I was sort of embarrassed to talk to you after what I did. Plus... well, I wanted to apologize for copying that paper. It was dumb. I should never have done it."

"It was more than dumb, Mr. Harshaw. It was wrong, and you knew it."

"Yeah, well, you had a right to be mad at me. Considering what I did, it was pretty nice of you to suggest that adult literacy group. I wanted you to know I've been attending. Your sister is real nice." His cheeks flushed a dull red. "I like her a lot."

"Are you finding the group helpful?"

"I guess. Tiffani says it'll be a while before I can read much, but she thinks I can do it if I put some effort into it." His expression turned glum. "Only problem is I'll be in jail."

"Which brings us back to my original question. What were you doing in my house, if not destroying it?"

Ken looked embarrassed. "I guess it was stupid of me to go inside of your house. Like I said, I came over to see you, and I heard these weird noises inside, so I tried to open the door. I thought maybe that guy was, you know, hurting you or something. The front door was locked, so I went around back. The back door was open, so I went on in. That's all I did, honest."

"Did you see anything out of the ordinary?"

Ken shook his head. "Everything looked pretty normal. I didn't get a real good look, though, because it was pretty dark by then. I called for you a couple of times, but you didn't answer, so I decided you must be out. I figured I'd been hearing things, so I left."

"How did your fingerprints get on my furniture?"

"I didn't want to turn on a light, so I felt my way into the house. I was kind of groping around in the dark. I probably left fingerprints on a couple of tables and chairs." He grimaced ruefully. "I know I got a couple of bruises on my shins, anyway."

Unlikely though his story sounded, Drew looked at his broad, innocent face and realized she believed him. Recalling the way he'd cried when she'd told him she was going to report his honor code violation, she just couldn't believe Ken would deliberately destroy her belongings in such a callous manner. He simply didn't strike her as a vicious or vindictive person.

James, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter. James wasn't above being vindictive, or

even deliberately cruel.

At that moment the door opened, admitting a blast of cold air... and Max. His gaze swept the room, then settled on Ken. His eyes narrowed with fury, and he headed toward them with swift strides.

"Max—" Drew began.

Max ignored her. He lifted Ken by the front of his shirt and slammed him against the wall. Ken was a big guy, but Max was just as tall and evidently quite a bit stronger, despite the fact that he didn't have a neck like a bull's.

"What the hell are you doing bothering Drew?" he demanded.

Across the room, the only other two patrons of the coffee shop jumped to their feet and scurried out the door. Behind the counter, the waitress cowered, looking alarmed enough to call the cops. The last thing Drew wanted was for Max to be arrested when he was just trying to protect her. She scrambled hastily out of her chair and put a restraining hand on his bicep. "Max, he wanted to talk to me. I agreed to listen to him."

Max didn't take his gaze from Ken. His face was hard with anger. "Your graduate assistant told me you'd come over here. I thought we agreed you were not to leave your building without me, damn it."

"I just needed a cup of coffee."

Max turned his head and stared at her with mingled fury and bewilderment. "You risked your life for a cup of coffee?"

"Actually, I risked my life for an éclair," she said lamely.

Max looked away from her, annoyed, and glared at Ken. "This son of a bitch should be locked up."

"As it happens, he claims he wasn't the one who messed up my house."

"Of course he'd say that."

"He says someone was following me that day, Max, and he was watching me that day to protect me."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"Don't you see, Max? James has been following me."

For the first time Max loosened his grip on Ken's T-shirt. "James? You mean the balding guy? Your ex-boyfriend?"

Drew nodded. "It makes sense, Max."

Max hesitated a moment longer, then his fingers relaxed their grip and Ken stumbled free. He pinned Ken with a laser-green stare. "Why didn't you tell the cops about this?"

"They didn't tell me they suspected me because I was following her that day," Ken said defensively.

"They didn't even mention that, or I would have told them why. They just said they'd found my fingerprints in her house, and that Dr. Cooper had said I might be holding a grudge because I had to drop out of school."

Max frowned. "So you noticed a guy following her across campus?"

Ken nodded. "But this guy wasn't bald."

Drew lifted her eyebrows. "Are you sure? I suppose you couldn't exactly call James bald, but his hair is getting pretty sparse up front. He wears the back in a ponytail."

"No, this wasn't the guy, then. He had a lot of thick black hair, but it's too short for a ponytail."

Max slanted a look at Drew. "Know anyone who fits that description?"

"It could be almost anyone, I guess. What else did you notice about him, Ken?"

"Uh... he was kind of little and skinny. No muscles. He was wearing jeans and a science fiction T-shirt."

Drew stiffened. "A science fiction T-shirt?"

"Yeah, you know, Star Trek or Farthest Space. Some TV show. I can't really remember, but it was definitely one of those. It had a big spaceship on it."

"I see," she said faintly. "What else?"

"He had kind of a mark on his face. A mole, I guess. On, uh, his left cheek."

Drew stared at him a long moment. In her mind the pieces of the puzzle all abruptly fell into place, but she simply couldn't believe the image they formed. Ken's words explained everything, and yet... something still wasn't right.

"Drew?" Max queried. "What is it?"

"It isn't James," she whispered hoarsely. "It's Lucas."

"Lucas?" Max repeated. "Tiffani's ex?"

Drew nodded. "He's the one who was following me around."

Chapter 25

"I knew Lucas was back in town," Drew said that afternoon. "Tiffani mentioned it to me."

"Yeah, I remember you told me that. Tiffani told me about him too. She asked me if I thought she should get back together with him, and I said the guy sounded like a loser."

Drew gave a short, contemptuous laugh. "That's an apt description, all right. The guy's a world-class loser."

After Drew had finished her classes for the day, she and Max had come over to her house to see the full extent of the damage. Max had watched as Drew went through the house, her lips compressed, and he couldn't help but wish this had happened to him instead of her. It wouldn't have meant as much to him, since his own house was devoid of anything that meant something to him.

Her house, on the other hand, had been filled with things that reflected her life, things that obviously mattered to her. Photos had been ripped up and left shredded on the floor. Some of them, to judge from the sepia color, were old and probably irreplaceable. Just like her rose-covered Haviland china, which she swept into a dustpan. He saw her lips quiver as she did it and felt a stab of sympathy.

At least her CDs and stereo equipment hadn't been destroyed. She had put some classical music on, and it seemed to cheer her up slightly. He was beginning to realize that music was as important to her as it was to him, even if they did like different kinds of music. And the truth was that the music flowing from the speakers was actually quite beautiful. He was surprised to discover he liked it.

"Tiffani also suggested there was some bad blood between you and Lucas," he said over the fluid sounds of a Vivaldi bassoon concerto. "Like you broke her and Lucas up or something."

Drew dumped the china shards into the trashcan and stared at them without turning around. She hesitated so long he knew he'd hit a nerve. "Drew? You weren't actually the one who broke up Tiffani's marriage, were you?"

"Uh ... kind of."

Max found himself getting a little annoyed by her reticence. Drew might have thought it was her duty to defend Tiffani, but destroying their marriage was surely beyond her, no matter how protective she was. "Kind of? You kind of broke up their marriage? What if Lucas hadn't wanted to leave Tiffani? Would you have kind of bumped him off?"

"You're not being fair, Max."

"Probably not," he agreed. "I happen to be the old-fashioned type when it comes to marriage. Mom brought me up that way, I guess. I think marriage should be forever, and anyone who meddles in someone else's marriage is the lowest form of life."

Drew winced. "I guess maybe I deserve that."

"If you really broke them up, you do."

Drew threw down the broom and dustpan with annoyance and turned to face him. "Look, would you mind just listening for a minute, and quit judging me until I'm through? I still don't know if I did the right thing. I think about it all the time and wonder if I should have just kept my nose out of Tiffani's business. But I just couldn't, Max."

"Fine," he said shortly, tamping down his irritation. He knew she was right. He didn't have enough facts to be critical of her actions. "Tell me about it."

Drew took a deep breath. "Look, I know I tend to be overprotective where Tiffani is concerned. Ever since Mom died, I've been responsible for her, and I guess I took it a little too seriously. You know, most people ease into parenthood. They get to practice on their two-year-olds. I just found myself in charge of a sixteen-year-old with a bad case of adolescent rebellion, and the more I tried to control her the worse she got. Finally, when she was nineteen, she met Lucas. I always thought he was bad for her, but I did my best to keep out of their marriage. Really, I did. But one day ..."

She hesitated for long moments. At last she said, "Tiffani was almost nine months pregnant. She was so excited about the baby, Max. I think she thought it was going to be the solution to all her problems with Lucas. She felt it was going to bring them closer together."

Max nodded. That much didn't surprise him. It was the sort of incredibly dumb thing Tiffani would think.

"Anyway," Drew went on awkwardly, "I came home early from work one day. And I found Lucas in my living room."

Max frowned. "Didn't he and Tiffani have their own place?"

"Yeah, but Tiffani had a key to my house. I guess he borrowed it. In retrospect, I think he'd been using my house for a while, to keep Tiffani from figuring out what he was up to. Anyway, he was sort of ... occupied ... on the floor."

"He was having an affair."

"I think that label might be giving it more dignity than it deserved. You see, he wasn't just, uh, involved with one woman. There were three of them there on the floor with him."

"Three?"

"You don't have to sound so impressed," she said, nettled. "Imagine how poor Tiffani would have felt if she'd found out."

Max was impressed, but he kept it to himself. One woman was more than enough for him, particularly if the woman was Drew. Three would probably kill him. He doubted he could have managed three at sixteen, although he'd had a fantasy or two in that direction. "Yeah," he agreed. "I guess that would have been a pretty bad shock. Although, to be honest, it sounds like she already knew they were having problems."

"Problems are one thing," Drew said tersely. He heard the quiet anger in her tone. "Disagreements, even fights, you can work through. But he was a pervert, Max. He wasn't going to mend his ways and suddenly become a model father. He told me he'd been finding women at local clubs for a while. He was starting to look for them on the Internet, too. In fact, he was beginning to spend most of his free time on the Internet, and he told Tiff he was doing a lot of research on child development." She snorted. "I checked their computer after he moved out. Child development was definitely not his area of interest."

"So what did you do?"

"I told the women to get the hell out of my house, and then Lucas and I had a little chat. I told him to go back to his apartment, pick up his things, and get out of Tiffani's life forever, or I would tell her everything. Everything."

"And he just walked out?"

"He begged me not to do it," Drew said. "He swore to me he loved Tiffani, that she meant everything in the world to him."

"He had a funny way of showing it."

Drew sighed. "The weird thing is I think he really did love her, in a strange way. I used to watch them together, and he'd look at her like she was something special. I think he just had some perverse appetites he couldn't control."

"And now he wants Tiffani back."

Drew nodded. "But he knows I'll tell her everything if they get back together. I kept a list of every website he'd gone to. Some of them were almost too raunchy to be believed. He really was scum, Max."

"I agree with you," Max said gently. "Even so, Drew, it wasn't your decision to make. It was Tiffani's."

She stared at him for a long moment. Behind the glasses, her silver-blue eyes began to well with tears. "I just couldn't stand for her to be hurt, Max."

"You don't think she was hurt when he walked out on her without a word of explanation?"

"I didn't know what else to do. She was nine months pregnant. I had to protect her."

"She was an adult, Drew. Not a child."

"So you think I should have kept it to myself? Let him go on cheating on her?"

"Hell, no. I think you should have told her about it and let her kick the bastard out."

Drew sighed heavily. "There was no guarantee she'd kick him out, Max. You know how she is."

"She may be needy, but she's not stupid, Drew. At the least she would have insisted he get counseling. At any rate, now the guy is back in her life, begging her to get back together with him, and she doesn't know anything about him. How is she supposed to make an informed decision when you've kept the truth from her all this time?"

Drew dropped her face into her hands. "I hoped he'd never come back," she said in a muffled voice.

"Looks like you were wrong, Drew."

Drew lifted her head and stared at him. "This whole mess is my fault," she whispered miserably. "The whole time they were dating, I kept telling Tiffani what a loser the guy was, how she ought to avoid him like the plague. I should have realized she'd just feel like he was misunderstood. She married him because I kept telling her what a loser Lucas was. It was my fault."

Max put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. "You're not the first person to underestimate the power of teenage rebellion, Drew. Plenty of parents with a lot more experience than you have made the same mistake." He paused. "So how much does Lucas hate you for this?"

Drew gave a heavy sigh, looking around at the stained and ripped wallpaper. "I don't know, Max. I can't figure this out. I thought Lucas was too much of a coward to do something like this. It wasn't hard to get him out of Tiffani's life. When I confronted him, he ran like a kicked puppy. He ran all the way to California, for God's sake. But he must hate me more than I realized, so much that he's grown balls. He hates me enough to wreck my house, apparently. My house and everything in it. I guess he hates me enough to destroy my life."

Max saw the tears slipping down her cheeks, and he was filled with a quiet anger. Two nights ago, when he'd realized she was in danger, he had suddenly recognized that Drew had become more than just a gorgeous body to him, more than merely an intriguing woman he wanted to get to know better. The instant he'd seen her house vandalized, realized that someone was out to get her, he'd been struck by the overwhelming desire to protect her. He'd wanted nothing more than to put himself between her

and anything that threatened her.

In that moment she had become his.

And he had to protect her. No matter what.

Seen in that light, the words she had just uttered suddenly took on a chilling significance. Lucas hated her. Enough to destroy her life.

An icy chill went through him, and his hand tightened on her shoulder as he spoke softly. "Does he hate you enough to try to kill you, Drew?"

Drew lifted her head and stared at him. "What?"

"What if Charity Rogers is right, Drew? What if everything that's happened lately has been connected somehow?"

"That's crazy, Max. You're being paranoid."

"Am I? The guy's been following you around for at least a few weeks, according to Ken. Maybe longer, for all we know. Normal people don't become stalkers, Drew. He's obviously crazy as a loon. What if he shot at you at the convention?"

"That's nuts. The guy was a fan aiming at you. He was wearing a mask."

"If you wanted to blend in at a science fiction convention, you'd wear a costume just like everyone else. Anyway, I'm pretty sure Lucas is a fan of Farthest Space. Tiffani said she started reading my books because of him."

He knew from her horrified expression that he was right, and pressed on with his line of reasoning.

"What if he somehow knew you and Tiffani were going to be there?"

Drew chewed her lip. "I guess Tiffani might have told him," she admitted. "But he might have shot you by mistake. He might have shot anybody."

"If he's unbalanced enough, he might not think that logically."

"Anyway," Drew said, "the guy kept shooting even after you knocked me behind that table, or he wouldn't have shot you."

"He was shooting in your direction. Maybe he kept shooting after you disappeared, hoping to get you. Maybe he's crazy enough that he doesn't much care if he kills other people. And what about Tiffani's accident?"

"What about it? That can't possibly be related. It doesn't make any sense. Why would Lucas be trying to kill Tiffani if he wants to get back together with her?"

"You're right. It makes no sense, except for one thing. It was your car, Drew."

Drew paused for a long moment. At last she said, "I just don't think Lucas has the nerve to become a killer, Max."

"I'm not sure it's a matter of nerve. When people lose their grip on reality, they do strange things. I have a feeling he's totally lost it where you're concerned, Drew."

Drew heaved a long sigh. "I don't know, Max. I just can't see it. Lucas was always—I don't know, I guess I'd describe him as meek. But I think you're right. An awful lot of bizarre things have happened, and I guess we need to talk to the cops again. Maybe they'll at least look for Lucas, consider him as a suspect."

"I doubt it," Max muttered darkly. As far as he was concerned the cops hadn't exactly covered

themselves with glory on this case. They hadn't even been able to locate a man who'd shot bullets in a crowded convention center. They'd arrested Ken Harshaw because they'd found two or three of his fingerprints, for God's sake, and let the real culprit go free. "We're not giving them much to go on. But who knows, maybe they'll at least take him in for questioning."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me this," Tiffani said later that afternoon. She and Ken Harshaw were seated on Drew's sofa. The formerly attractive chintz was now ink-splashed, its stuffing oozing out. It actually made his own sofa look pretty good by comparison, Max thought, then admitted nothing in the world could make his blue-and-mustard sofa look good. "Lucas was into porn, he was having affairs with other women, and you never told me?"

"I figured you wouldn't need to know," Drew said, looking unhappy. Knowing she needed support, Max covered her hand with his, and she threaded her fingers through his.

Tiffani shook her head. "He left me," she whispered. "He just walked out one day, and I never knew why. I thought he just didn't want me anymore. I thought it was something I did."

"I know I was wrong not to tell you," Drew said. "It was stupid. I was trying to protect you again."

"Suppose he'd wanted to share custody of Alice?" Tiffani demanded. "You think I want a pervert around my daughter? You should have told me the minute I said he was back in town, Drew."

Drew stiffened, and Max saw the dawning horror on her features. "I never really thought about that, Tiff. As far as I could tell he wasn't into child pornography."

"People change," Tiffani snapped. "The fact is you can't really know what he was into. You were so busy protecting me that you made it impossible for me to protect my daughter."

Max was impressed by Tiffani's tirade. She was giving Drew a tongue-lashing her sister richly deserved, in his opinion, although he knew saying so would land him in deep shit. His relationship with Drew was still too new and fragile for him to dare to be openly critical of her actions. Sisters, on the other hand, had the right from birth to criticize each other. He kept his mouth shut and listened with interest.

"You're right," Drew said meekly. "And it's worse than I thought. Lucas hasn't just been hanging around, trying to get you back. He's been following me around too."

"You think Lucas has been following you?"

"Not just following me," Drew said. "We think he might be the one who destroyed my house."

"Oh, come on, Drew. You're just looking for a scapegoat. Lucas might be a perv, but he's not a criminal."

"It's true, Tiffani," Ken said. "I saw him following her around about a week ago."

"Lucas has been stalking Drew?" Tiffani said.

"Looks like it," Max said. They'd called the cops earlier, but the detective they'd talked to hadn't been particularly impressed by Drew's information. He certainly hadn't been willing to entertain the notion that Lucas had been after Drew for a month. He'd stopped just short of calling them crazy. "It sounds kind of farfetched, but we think Lucas might have been shooting at Drew at the Farthest Space convention, too. Did he know you guys were going to be there?"

Tiffani stared at him a long moment, then nodded. "In fact," she said slowly, "it was his idea for me to take Drew. He said maybe she'd understand me better if she went."

Cold fury settled in Max's chest. "So he's been after her for at least a month."

Tiffani frowned. "I can't believe he was actually shooting at her, Max. He doesn't like her, I know that. In fact, the last time we talked, he said some pretty mean things about her."

Max felt his muscles tense. "When did you two talk last?" he asked carefully.

"About a week ago. You know, after you and I talked that night? I realized I was stupid to keep thinking about going back to Lucas, and when he stopped by the store one night I told him so. He said she'd turned me against him. In fact, he blamed the whole situation on Drew."

"Did he say he was going to hurt her?" Max said.

"Uh—" Tiffani's forehead wrinkled. "Not exactly. He just kept going on about how she'd poisoned me against him, and how she was going to be—" She stopped suddenly.

"Tiffani?" Max prodded gently. "Tiffani, what did he say?"

Tiffani swallowed and turned big blue eyes on him. "He said she'd be sorry," she said in a near-whisper.

Max all too clearly remembered the note Drew had quoted. You'll be sorry for what you did to me. I'll make you sorry. He glanced at Drew and saw from her frozen expression she had made the same connection.

"Tiffani," he suggested, "why don't you talk to the police? Maybe if you give them this information they'll drop the charges against Ken."

Tiffani turned her big eyes toward Ken, and her eyes lit up in a way they'd never lit up for Max. "You think so?"

"Maybe. It's worth a try." Max realized his hand was clenching Drew's fingers so hard she was wincing. He forced himself to relax. "And maybe then they'll be willing to question Lucas."

Chapter 26

Always keep your weapon charged and ready.
—Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

At the end of the afternoon Max looked around Drew's house. They'd managed to get most of the shredded wallpaper, torn photos, and broken china up off the floor, but the house still had an eerie, disturbing look. The charming, friendly nature of the house had been destroyed, like a woman who had been beaten and had become suspicious of humanity as a result.

"I guess we better get back," he said.

Drew shook her head. "I want to stay here," she said softly.

Max turned and stared at her. "Here? Are you kidding? Suppose Lucas comes back?" Even after Tiffani had talked to them, the cops had declined to drop the charges against Ken until more evidence came to light, but Max was pretty well convinced now that Lucas was the culprit. The last thing he wanted was to have that theory proven by Lucas showing up again.

"It's my house," Drew said, displaying the stubborn streak he'd come to know all too well. "I won't be driven from it."

"Fine. Then I'll stay too. I wish Blue was here, but as long as we keep the doors locked I guess it'll be safe enough." Of course, the doors had been locked before, but he decided not to bring that up, figuring he could adequately protect Drew if anything happened. At any rate, a pleasant thought had occurred to him. "Besides, that'll give us a chance to spend the night together."

While Max borrowed Drew's phone and called his mother to tell her he wouldn't be home, Drew got started on dinner. A few minutes later he put the phone back in its cradle and headed for the kitchen.

"Hey," he said as he walked in. "That smells good."

Drew lifted a silvery eyebrow. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

"I didn't mean to imply any criticism of your cooking," Max said hastily. "It's just that our tastes in food aren't exactly the same."

"None of our tastes are the same."

"Maybe not. That smells pretty good, though."

"It's vegetarian chili," she said, stirring the thick liquid in the pot.

"Vegetarian chili?" Max repeated dubiously. "Isn't that sort of like a vegetarian hamburger?"

"There actually is such a thing, you know."

Max hadn't known. "Sounds sacrilegious to me."

"Actually, I agree. Vegetarian hamburgers are kind of disgusting. But you'll like this, trust me. Want to start cutting up vegetables for the salad?"

Working together in the kitchen was oddly companionable. Cooking was a social activity humans had engaged in since the dawn of time, and there was a special kind of intimacy in working near each other as they prepared food. Max sliced up carrots, green peppers, and radishes with a wickedly sharp paring knife, hoping he wouldn't give away his inexperience by accidentally slicing off one of his fingers.

Drew looked over and chuckled when she saw the expression of deep concentration on his face.

"You don't make salads much, do you?"

"I'm more of a meat and potatoes kind of guy."

"You still need to eat vegetables."

"I eat them all the time. A couple of times a week I order a supreme pizza instead of plain pepperoni."

Despite his inexpert slicing of the vegetables, dinner was good. Since the dining room had been completely destroyed, they ate at her scrubbed-pine kitchen table, topped with white tiles. The vegetarian chili was spicy and delicious, and he found he didn't miss the meat at all with all the beans and corn she'd filled it with. The salad wasn't half bad either. He wondered vaguely when he'd last had salad and found he couldn't begin to guess.

At last he leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and sighed with contentment. Drew chuckled. "I'd offer you dessert, but Tiffani ate most of the ice cream just before she moved out, and then I cleaned out the rest."

"That's okay. I'm stuffed."

"So vegetarian chili was good after all, huh? Stick with me, Max. I'll get you healthy yet."

Max opened his eyes and glared across the table. "I'm perfectly healthy."

"I don't know about that," she said, reaching over and patting his flawlessly flat and muscular abdomen. "Looks to me like you might be getting a little chubby."

Max glowered, and she giggled. "I'm just kidding, Max. The truth is, I think you're in amazingly good shape. Typing must be really good exercise."

Standing up, Max began to clear the dishes off the table. "Yeah, I'm thinking of writing an article for Glamour. 'The Author's Workout: Typing Your Way to a Fitter, Leaner Body.'"

"Sounds like a sure winner." She reached out and pinched his rear end as he went past her, toward the sink. "It's absolutely amazing what typing does for your ass."

Max almost dropped the dishes. "All right, I admit it. I work out at the gym three times a week, okay?"

"I figured as much."

She got up and followed him across the kitchen. As he rinsed the dishes and stacked them into the dishwasher, she put her arms around his waist and pressed against his back. "So are you ready for dessert?"

"I thought you said you ran out."

She slipped a hand down to the fly of his jeans. "I think we can come up with something."

Max snorted. "If you keep doing that, something is definitely going to come up."

"I hope so," she said softly, beginning to unbutton his fly. She added, "You know, I've been thinking a lot about Farthest Space. You and McNeill are more alike than I think you realize."

"Uh, thanks, but I don't think I have a lot in common with McNeill. He's a lot smoother with women than I am."

"You're a lot like McNeill in at least one way."

Max closed the dishwasher and turned around. He lounged back against the counter, and she leaned against him, warm and soft and full of promise. Putting his hands on her slimly rounded behind, he

pulled her closer, enjoying her nearness. "What's that?"

Drew grinned up at him. "You both have really big ray guns."

Taken by surprise, Max burst out laughing. When he could trust himself to speak, he said dryly, "Maybe so, but McNeill never fires his too soon."

"You didn't fire yours too soon that night," she whispered, moving her hips against him in a way that he liked a lot. A whole lot. "Your aim was just perfect."

He pressed his face into her hair and breathed in the fragrance of peaches, grateful to her for being so damned considerate of his feelings. It was amazing, he thought, how terrific she managed to make him feel. Like a world-class lover instead of the clumsy, awkward nerd that he really was. It made him want her more than ever.

"Why don't we go upstairs?" he suggested.

"Why bother? There's a perfectly good table over there."

He lifted his head. "A table? You want to do it on a table?"

"Sure. Remember that article you were reading at the hospital? 'Ten Ways to Drive Your Lover Crazy'? Wasn't that item number three? 'Keep romance alive by making love in unexpected places.'"

"Let's see," Max said. "So far we've done it in a car, a tub, and standing up. Seems to me that at this point in our relationship, the most unexpected place might in fact be a bed."

"Technically speaking, we didn't actually do it in your car."

"As it happens, the car wasn't terribly comfortable. I practically broke my kneecap on the gearshift. I'm not sure your kitchen table would be soft enough, either. I don't want a back injury or a sprained muscle. It would be pretty embarrassing to have to explain how I got it when you took me to the emergency room."

"So you want to make love in bed? Isn't that a bit unoriginal? I mean, you're a novelist. Do your characters usually make love in bed? In the first book, I seem to recall McNeill had sex in a jail on Va'ra, in a lifepod, and on a toxic waste barge."

"I think you left out his interlude with A'cana in her father's garden. I'll admit McNeill doesn't spend a lot of time in his bunk. But his sexual exploits aren't exactly grounded in reality."

"No kidding. I call him the Amazing Space Stud."

Max found himself laughing again. Drew might be a serious, scholarly professor, but her irreverent sense of humor kept catching him by surprise. "That's a pretty accurate nickname. McNeill can make love four or five times in a night."

"Can't you?" she purred.

"Not unless I want a heart attack. Although with you, I'm afraid I might be tempted to try."

Drew smiled, obviously pleased by the compliment, and glanced thoughtfully around the kitchen. "How about the island?"

"Make love on a butcher block? Are you kidding? Come on, Drew. Let's go upstairs."

Her white, frilly comforter and canopy had been ripped apart, and the cherry wood of the bedstead had been damaged beyond repair, but the mattress was still in good shape. Drew tossed her glasses onto the nightstand, then sat down next to him on the bed. He put his arms around her.

She pushed him over.

Max lay on the mattress and blinked up at her. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," she said softly, leaning over to kiss his cheek. Her warm breath fanned his ear, causing him to shiver involuntarily. "But tonight I want to be in charge, Max."

"In charge?"

She took his wrists and pinned them over his head. "I'm running the show tonight."

Max stared up at her. Given everything that had happened to her lately, he could understand why she wanted to be in control over some aspect of her life. He understood. But that didn't mean he was comfortable with it.

"Um... I'm not really into the dominatrix thing, Drew."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Max. I'm not going to whip you. I'm not even going to handcuff you to the headboard. I just want to be on top."

"I'm sort of used to being on top." In fact he and Paula had never done it any other way, but he forbore to say so, figuring she would think he was hopelessly unsophisticated. Which he was.

"You're a missionary position kind of guy, huh?" She bent and brushed her lips across his throat. She still had his arms pinned, and he felt oddly vulnerable. He knew that was ludicrous, since he could have broken her hold instantly if he'd wanted to, but he couldn't totally suppress his unease.

"Yeah. I guess it goes along with being a meat and potatoes guy. I'm conservative. Conventional. Boring, even."

"I don't think you're boring. But it can't hurt to try something different."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say they had done something different. For a guy used to sex in the missionary position, making love in the bathtub had been a big creative leap. He realized with chagrin that Captain McNeill was a whole lot more creative than he was, sexually speaking, then reminded himself firmly that McNeill was a figment of his imagination. What McNeill and his alien women could do, Max could do too.

The trouble was, he wasn't sure he had the nerve to be that uninhibited.

Drew was apparently oblivious to his unease, or else she'd just decided to ignore it and run things according to her own plans. She let go of his wrists in order to tug off his shirt, and he let her. Then she bent again, and her moist, warm lips slid across the hollow just beneath his collarbone, making him twitch nervously. His heart was pounding heavily against his ribs, and he was pretty sure it was from anxiety rather than arousal.

Once again he realized Drew had been wrong. He and McNeill didn't have anything in common. McNeill wouldn't be lying here in a state of panic, shaking with nerves while a beautiful woman made love to him.

"Uh, Drew, I really don't think—"

Her hand slid down his chest, and he felt his body jerk with surprise. He knew he ought to loosen up, but he didn't like feeling vulnerable and exposed. He didn't like having her watch every reaction, every involuntary shudder. He didn't like having her listen to every moan that escaped him.

"Drew," he objected, more forcefully.

"Max," she whispered. "Just shut up for a minute. And relax."

Slowly, she bent and brushed her lips lightly against his chest. A small noise of helpless pleasure

rumbled in his throat.

"You like that," she whispered. It was a statement, not a question, and he made no reply. He couldn't have answered if he'd wanted to. His jaw was clenched too tightly.

"Why are you so nervous?"

There was a long silence, punctuated only by the harsh rasp of his breathing. "I've never done anything quite like this before," he admitted at last.

Drew reached for his hand, which was balled into a rigid fist, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "There's a first time for everything."

She straddled his thighs, her jean-clad crotch brushing against his. He felt an immediate and violent reaction, which he did his best to suppress, without a whole lot of success. She rubbed against him in a slow, deliberate rhythm, and he could feel the hot moisture of her even through two layers of denim. He bit down on a groan.

As she leaned forward again her loosely flowing hair brushed against his chest. Her lips grazed his nipple, and he gasped and twisted suddenly beneath her, unable to prevent his reaction. She kissed it again, and he uttered a soft groan, a deep, elemental sound of pleasure.

Slowly she kissed her way down his abdomen, toward his navel. Max forced himself to remain still and quiet. As she began to unbuckle his belt he caught at her hands again.

She lifted her head. "Would you be more comfortable if you took off your own clothes?"

"I would be more comfortable on top."

She sighed. "You have got to be the most stubborn male I've ever met in my life. Don't you believe in trying things different ways?"

"It's always worked perfectly fine the way I've done it in the past."

"Last time neither one of us was on top," she pointed out. "You didn't seem to have a problem with that."

"Last time was ..." He paused, then used her word. "An aberration."

Wild, raw, unrestrained sex wasn't normal for him. Last time he'd been so frantically aroused, so incredibly hot for her, that he had totally lost control over the situation. He'd practically ignored her needs entirely, and he wasn't proud of that, although he recalled plainly enough that she hadn't seemed to mind. The memory of the way they'd come together was still vivid enough to make him melt inside. It had been incredibly exciting.

It had also made him feel extremely vulnerable.

"You mean you lost control of yourself."

He looked up at her, her long, blonde hair falling around her slim shoulders, her silver-blue eyes intense even in the twilight, and he nodded. "I don't like being out of control, Drew."

"Being out of control can be fun," she whispered.

He felt her hands begin to work on his belt buckle again, and without conscious volition his hands released her wrists. She was right. Being out of control had been fun. A whole lot of fun.

Maybe that was what he was afraid of.

She undid his belt and slacks and shoved them off. Then she stood up and pulled off her own clothing, piece by piece. Unable to look away, he watched as she slowly shimmied out of her jeans, stripped off

her sweatshirt, and tossed away her bra and panties. She might dress in severe gray suits and confine her hair in staid styles most of the time, but underneath it all she had the soul of a stripper.

Stark naked, she knelt on the bed next to him, hooking the elastic waistband of his briefs with her thumbs and pulling them down. Unlike her, he wasn't able to channel the spirit of a Chippendale's dancer, and being stripped all the way down to his skin made him even more nervous. Maybe in another lifetime he'd been a monk. He did manage to cooperate to the extent of pushing his pants and briefs off and kicking them onto the floor.

She stared at his erection for a long moment, while Max felt himself go red all over. "Wow," she said at last. "I'd almost forgotten how gorgeous you are, Max."

He felt his flush deepen. "Uh, thanks."

He wanted to cover himself with his hands, or the sheet, or anything. She must have read his intention, because she caught his wrists and pinned them back on the mattress. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, Max. You're beautiful."

Then, slowly, she lowered her head and kissed him.

His whole body jerked with surprise. "What are you doing?" he demanded in a scandalized whisper.

"Don't you like it?"

He heard the amusement in her tone, but at least she didn't laugh at him. Yeah, he liked it, all right. He liked it entirely too much. "I don't think—"

He broke off with a startled gasp, abruptly losing interest in arguing, as she lowered her mouth to him and began to make long, careful strokes with her tongue. The smooth, moist warmth made him sob out her name in shocked pleasure. He arched his head back, panting harshly for breath, and his fingers curled into the platinum depths of her hair.

Her tongue slipped readily across his smooth skin, finding the most sensitive spots, drawing small moans of pleasure from him, making him writhe beneath her. "Drew," he whispered, his voice soft with wonder. "Oh, yes. Yes."

She explored him thoroughly, every rigid, aching inch of him, until he throbbed, until his body shuddered with pleasure. He was vaguely aware he'd lost control of the situation, but he no longer cared much. He'd never experienced anything so erotic, so intimate, in his life.

He never wanted it to end.

She began to stroke him more rapidly, and he heard his own gasps rise to a crescendo, until at last he was sobbing for release. Then she paused and looked up with a wicked light in her eyes. "Do you want me to stop now?"

He caught frantically at her hair, attempting to press her head back down, but she resisted. "Tell me what you want, Max."

"Please," he entreated in a hoarse whisper.

"What do you want?"

"You," he whispered. "I want you. Please."

She straddled him and lowered her body onto his, and they slid together as smoothly as silk. He was hard and hot, throbbing with pleasure, trembling on the verge of climax, and as he surged into her he cried out hoarsely and surrendered to an incredible, white-hot rush of molten heat, his body jerking fiercely in the throes of overwhelming ecstasy.

When his keening cries had diminished to gasps, she collapsed against him, pressed herself against his chest, and slipped her arms around his waist. He tightened his grip and clung to her, almost desperately, while his ragged breathing slowed to normal.

At last he spoke in a wondering whisper. "What did you do to me?"

She lifted her face to his and brushed her lips across his. "I made love to you, Max. That's all."

"That was ..." A thousand adjectives tumbled through his befogged mind. It had been extraordinary. Amazing. Fabulous. The most astonishing experience of his life.

"...Fun," he finished at last, lamely.

"What did I tell you? Being out of control can be fun."

He tightened his arms around her waist and buried his face in her hair. "I'll never doubt you again."

Chapter 27

It's a bit late to look for a lifepod when the ship is already exploding.

—Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

It was after breakfast the next morning that Max totally screwed up. He figured it was a nutritional problem. His body was accustomed to the full and complete range of nutrients that Froot Loops provided. The oatmeal Drew cooked had obviously left him lightheaded. Inadequate nutrition could do that to a guy.

After they finished eating, Max loaded the dishes into the dishwasher while Drew went upstairs to take a shower. When she came back down again, dressed in her weekend uniform of faded jeans and a university sweatshirt, she smelled so good he couldn't resist putting his arms around her.

"Your hair smells gorgeous," he said thickly, pressing his nose into her hair. Despite the three times they'd made love last night, despite what he had thought of as complete physical exhaustion, his body began to respond to her. Noticing his reaction, she grinned.

"Better watch it, Max. We're getting dangerously close to heart attack territory here."

"I'm willing to risk it if you are."

She put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. "Go on, Max. We're not going to get a thing done today if you keep dragging me off to bed."

Max thought about pointing out they didn't have too much left to do, since most of the pitiful remnants of her belongings had been swept up and tossed into the trash yesterday. He decided that observation would just add to her pain.

"Anyway," she said lightly, pulling away from him, "we've got plenty of time later."

"Yeah," he agreed. "We've got the rest of our lives."

The minute the words escaped his lips he knew he'd made an error of monumental proportions. Drew stepped back, establishing several feet of space between them, and stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted antennae.

"Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"Uh—" Max struggled to find words, but his tongue, so disarmingly fluent a moment ago, seemed to have turned to marble, and his brain had abruptly gone numb. "Well. Um, I guess..."

"The rest of our lives?"

The shocked tone of her voice made it sound as if he'd suggested they should become serial murderers, or maybe join the mob. He opened his mouth to explain, but no sound came out. The fact was he didn't have a clue how to explain himself without making the situation worse.

"It sounds as if you're entertaining thoughts of a long-term relationship," she said in that annoyingly brisk tone that was designed to make him feel mentally inferior. "But I'm sure you realize this isn't a permanent sort of thing. We both agreed to a casual fling, as you no doubt recall. Nothing more."

With a desperate effort, he managed to get his tongue back into gear. "Is that all I am to you, Drew? A casual fling?"

Drew looked at him with what he thought was sympathy. "Max, you're a really nice guy."

There it was. The phrase that spelled death for any male-female relationship. He felt his teeth begin to grind together as she went on primly, "I like you a lot, Max. I simply don't think we have enough in common for any sort of long-term relationship. I'm certainly not ready for marriage."

Max heard the blood roaring in his ears. The memory of Paula dropping her engagement ring on his bedside table shot through him like an arrow.

I'm just not ready for marriage, Max.

Paula hadn't had the same sense of commitment, of unwavering loyalty, that he did. When life became a little complicated, she'd bailed on him, leaving him to face the worst crisis of his life alone.

He had begun to believe that Drew was different. Over the past few days he'd begun to feel that Drew might share his sense of loyalty. Over the past few days he'd begun to feel a real and genuine affection for Drew, and he'd allowed himself to believe she felt the same way.

Evidently he'd been wrong.

He forced himself not to react with irritation, aware that some of his anger was directed at Paula rather than Drew. There was no point in flaying Drew for the mistakes another woman had made eight years before. Taking a deep breath, he somehow managed to speak calmly.

"I think we have a lot more in common than you realize, Drew."

"We've discussed this, Max. We simply don't share the same interests."

"Maybe on the surface we're different," he admitted. "But what about deep down, Drew? We've both got pain and sorrow in our past. We've both struggled to get where we are. Our careers are important to us, but neither of us has ever managed to have a successful long-term relationship. In fact, we've both been in destructive, negative relationships. We're both lonely people."

"I'm not in the least lonely. I have a large number of friends."

He recalled the big crowd at her party. "Do you really? Then why did you call me when Tiffani was involved in that accident? Why not someone else?"

She made no answer.

"Look," he said, extending a hand to her, "I didn't go into this expecting to fall for you. I admit I suggested a casual fling in the hopes of getting to know you better, but I didn't realize..." he paused, then spoke softly, "I didn't realize what you'd come to mean to me."

She ignored his outstretched hand. "I'm sorry if I've hurt you," she said stiffly. "It wasn't my intention to give you the wrong impression."

Max drew back his hand. Despite his best efforts to remain calm he felt hurt. Hurt and angry. "So you're saying I don't mean anything to you at all?"

"I like you, Max, but that's as far as it goes." She met his gaze with calm silver eyes. "That's as far as it will ever go."

"Then I guess there's nothing else to discuss, is there?"

"Max—" She hesitated. "This doesn't mean we can't continue to have fun together."

Rage flared to life in him. She was back to treating him like an object, like a sex toy, something to be played with for a few days and then discarded. He had been wrong about her. She had no sense of loyalty, no desire for commitment. And she didn't have a problem with treating a man like a vibrator instead of a feeling, breathing person.

Feeling his fists clench, he spoke through his teeth. "What the hell do you think I am, anyway?"

Drew returned his gaze coolly. "I think you're the same man who proposed we have casual sex together. As you may recall, it wasn't my idea to have a fling with you. In fact, I objected to your suggestion. I said sex shouldn't be the main point of a relationship, and you said—"

"Why not?" Max muttered. Some of the rage drained out of him as he began to realize this mess was at least partly of his own making. "Yeah, I guess I did say that, didn't I?"

"How was I supposed to know you didn't mean it?"

He had meant it. Sort of. He'd wanted to get to know her better, but he hadn't imagined that she could get under his skin so quickly, that he would want to make love to her three times a day, that her smile would so rapidly become the most important thing in the world to him. He hadn't imagined the primeval protectiveness that would flare to life in him when she was threatened.

He hadn't imagined that passion could turn to love so quickly.

That thought floored him. Love? Could he really be in love?

"I guess I screwed up," he said at last, and thought that was probably the biggest understatement of his life. He'd totally wrecked any chance he might have had with Drew, all because he hadn't been straight with her from the very beginning. "I thought—well, I guess it doesn't matter now." He looked at her, standing four feet away, her expression cool and aloof, and felt something inside him shatter. "All I know is I want more than fun, Drew."

"I'm sorry, Max. I'm not ready for any sort of commitment."

I'm just not ready for marriage, Max.

With a fierce effort, he pushed the memory away and spoke as calmly as he was able.

"Then I guess it's over."

She shrugged gracefully and gave him a slight smile. "Well, it was fun while it lasted."

Her complete lack of regret for the end of their relationship sent a stab of burning pain through him. After all they'd been through together the past few days, after the incredibly passionate way she'd made love to him last night, he couldn't imagine how she could be so blasé about ending their fling. He was ready to put his fist through the wall with anger and frustration, and she was completely unmoved.

"Yeah," he said, and noticed vaguely that his voice sounded oddly hoarse. "Yeah. It was fun, all right."

"Do you want to go?"

He lifted his head and stared at her. "And leave you here alone? Are you kidding?"

"I just thought—"

"You thought because we're not dating anymore I'd leave you alone when some psycho tore your house apart two nights ago?" He shook his head. "Jesus, you really don't think much of my character, do you?"

"I only meant—"

"If you're trying to get rid of me," he interrupted, "you're going to have to wait until they catch Lucas. Until then, you're not going anywhere without me. And when they catch him—" he took a deep breath to steady his voice, "—then you won't have to see me again. Ever."

You won't have to see me again. Ever.

Drew stood alone in her bedroom and wondered why that thought made her feel empty inside. It wasn't as if she felt anything for Max beyond friendship. But they had become good friends lately. She supposed it was perfectly natural that she'd miss him when he was gone.

A little bit, anyway.

She couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor guy. Stereotypically, women were supposed to be the ones who mistook a few nights of passion for a lifetime commitment. Men were the ones who indulged in sex without commitment, promised to call the next morning, and never did. Trust Max to be the exception to the rule.

Not, she assured herself, that she'd done anything to mislead Max. It wasn't her fault he'd fallen for her. She'd never promised to call him, or given him any sign that might suggest their relationship was a permanent one.

None of this was her fault. If anything, she was the victim here. Max had deliberately deceived her into thinking their relationship would be casual and devoid of meaning. And then he'd tried to manipulate her into agreeing to a more long-term relationship. She had every right to be angry with him.

She did her best to whip herself into a frenzy of righteous indignation, but it didn't work. Despite her rationalizations, she was beginning to see she should have recognized the signs. She should have realized.

Max had it bad for her.

She had seen the way Max looked at her when he thought she wasn't looking. She had noticed the way he couldn't seem to keep his hands off her for more than two minutes at a time. She had seen his protective rage whenever someone threatened her, whether a psychopathic stalker or a nosy news anchor.

She should have known.

With shame, she recalled her own voice, distant, cold, and impossibly cruel. Well, it was fun while it lasted.

She wished she could take back those flippant, hurtful words. She wished she could erase the wounded look in Max's eyes.

But even to save him from pain, she wasn't willing to commit to a man she didn't love. And she was fairly certain she wasn't in love with Max. He was a nice guy. That was all.

Okay, a really nice, sexy, fun guy, but that was definitely all.

She certainly wasn't in love with him.

Blue wasn't accustomed to being without Max at night. Even though his mother was perfectly capable of feeding and walking the dog, she reported that Blue was sulking. Max didn't want Blue to feel he'd been abandoned, so he drove Drew back over to his own house late that afternoon. They didn't have a lot to say to each other. Max drove in silence, too depressed to listen to the classic rock he loved. Even Journey couldn't have cheered him up.

He was a little surprised to find that the front door of his house was locked. He guessed Mom must have gone out for the afternoon. Inserting his key, he stepped inside. Blue instantly dove at his legs in a frenzy of delight, barking his idiotic head off.

"Mom?" he called, as Blue diverted his attentions to Drew, getting long white hairs all over her blue jeans.

There was no answer, but he thought he heard the murmur of voices. "She must be in the kitchen," he said, more to himself than to Drew, and headed down the hall. He stopped so short that Drew bumped into him.

Mom and Pete were sitting together at the kitchen table. And they were both wearing robes. Despite the fact that it was practically evening, they had evidently just gotten out of bed. Together. Pete's long, fuzzy-heron legs stuck out from beneath the hem of a pink and purple flowered robe. Not the most attractive sight, but Mom didn't seem to mind. In fact she was gazing at Pete as if he bore a striking resemblance to Mel Gibson.

Max felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach. His mouth dropped open. "Uh—hi," he said awkwardly.

His mother beamed at him. "Maxfield, dear. I'm glad you're back. We have some news."

Yeah, that you've been doing the wild thing in my house.

Somehow the thought of his mother being intimate with Pete bugged him. Which was stupid. Mom was a grownup, and after fifteen years as a widow, she was certainly entitled to a love life.

"News?" he repeated, doing his best to pull himself together. He gave her a feeble smile as he walked into the room with Drew just behind him.

"Oh, hello, Drew," Virginia said. She turned her attention back to her son. "Maxfield, we've decided to get married."

Try as he might, Max couldn't work up a lot of enthusiasm for her news. "No kidding."

Virginia held out her hand, which was adorned with a fairly good-sized diamond. "Isn't it lovely?"

It looks like old Pete isn't dependent on his social security check.

Max squashed the comment just before it left his lips. What the hell was wrong with him, making snide remarks—or at least having snide thoughts—about the biggest news his mother had ever broken to him? He needed to get a grip on himself. Dad had been dead for almost fifteen years, for God's sake.

He realized his reaction didn't have a damned thing to do with Dad. On the contrary, it had a whole hell of a lot to do with Drew.

Old Pete has all the luck, he groused to himself. Pete had mentioned eternity to a woman and not gotten dumped for it.

He, on the other hand, sent women fleeing for their lives every time he even hinted at forever.

He realized Virginia was still holding out her hand, looking slightly hurt at his lack of enthusiasm. He took her hand and inspected the ring closely, as if he knew the difference between a spectacular diamond and a cubic zirconia. "It's beautiful, Mom. Congratulations." He extended his hand to Pete and shook the older man's hand warmly. "You too, Pete. Welcome to the family."

"We've decided to get married next Saturday," his mother said.

For the second time, Max felt all the air rush out of his lungs with a whoosh, and he wished irritably that Mom would quit sucker-punching him.

"No kidding," he said weakly. "That's not a lot of time to get ready, is it?"

"Well, when you're sure about your feelings for someone, you might as well get married," Pete said

heartily.

Max glanced at Drew, standing just behind him, and looked away hastily.

"At any rate, we wanted to get married before we went back to Florida," his mom said. "I wanted you to be at my wedding, Max."

"What about your friends in Florida, Mom?"

"We'll just surprise them," his mother said. "We'll be flying back Sunday."

So Mom would be going in a week, and he'd have his house to himself again. He was surprised by how empty that made him feel. He'd sort of gotten used to having company lately.

"I'll miss you, Mom," he said.

Pete guffawed. "I bet you'll be glad to have your house back to yourself, Max. Give you and your lady friend a little more privacy."

Max felt himself go red. His mother's eyes riveted on his reaction instantly, and he turned away deliberately and headed for the fridge.

"So what do you guys want for dinner?"

After dinner, Pete went back to his hotel room. Immediately after he left, Max claimed he needed to brush Blue and took the dog out on the back deck, leaving Virginia and Drew together in the family room.

Virginia fixed her with a thoughtful stare. "I'm sorry you and Max aren't getting along," she said gently. "I thought you made a nice couple."

Drew blinked. She and Max had been perfectly polite to each other through dinner, if not exactly warm. "Max told me you could read minds," she said at last. "I guess he was right."

Virginia smiled. "It doesn't take a psychic to tell you two had a fight. A big one."

"It wasn't exactly a fight," Drew muttered. "We just don't have enough in common."

Virginia looked at her a long moment. "Tell me, Drew, why are you so afraid?"

Drew lifted her head abruptly and met the older woman's steady gaze. "What do you mean by that? I'm not afraid of anything. I just don't think Max and I have enough to build a relationship on, that's all."

Virginia lifted her eyebrows. "How do you propose to build a relationship with anyone if you won't let them get close enough to you to begin the foundation?"

Drew scowled. "You're making it sound like I'm afraid of commitment."

"Aren't you?"

Finding the older woman's unwavering gaze to be oddly unnerving, Drew stood up and walked across the room. "I've had relationships in the past," she said defensively. "I was in a relationship with a man last year, in fact. A man who was perfectly suitable for me in every way. Another professor. But it didn't work out."

"Were you in love with him?"

"Uh... no. I guess I wasn't."

Virginia smiled. "When was the last time you were really in love, Drew? Wildly, desperately,

irrevocably in love?"

Drew thought for a long moment, staring at the blank mantel over the fireplace, where there were no photos, nothing whatsoever to show what was important to Max. Not even a picture of his dog. She reflected that before her house had been vandalized, it had been full to bursting with photos. Pictures of Tiffani, pictures of her parents, pictures of Alice. But for the first time she realized there hadn't been a single photograph of any of her past boyfriends.

Perhaps none of them had mattered that much to her.

She turned and faced the older woman. "I'm not sure I've ever been in love," she said at last, honestly.

"But you probably wonder why you haven't been able to maintain a relationship."

"Well, no. I mean, when you look at it that way, it seems kind of obvious, doesn't it? I've never made a relationship work because I've never cared that much."

"Precisely," Virginia agreed with an emphatic nod. "And you've never cared that much because...?"

"I suppose," Drew said carefully, "I've never met the right man."

"Are you certain? I think it's more likely that you've never found the right man because you've been avoiding any man you truly found attractive."

"I imagine you're suggesting that's because I'm afraid of commitment?"

Virginia shrugged. "It seems likely. I suspect you've had plenty of men to choose from. A beautiful woman like you surely must have had men falling at her feet all her life."

"Uh-huh," Drew said dryly. She was aware of the bitterness in her tone but couldn't seem to suppress it. "If that's true, it's because of the way I look. No one's ever cared about me."

"I think Max cares about you, Drew."

"Maybe he does. But I'm not that interested in him."

"Are you sure? I saw the way you looked at him the other night, Drew. I think he means a great deal to you. And I think you're afraid."

Drew let out an exasperated huff of breath. "I told you before, I don't have any reason to be afraid of commitment."

Virginia abruptly changed her tack. "You spent a great deal of the past few years taking care of your sister, didn't you?"

Drew nodded. "Six years. And before that I took care of my mother before she died. I haven't had a lot of spare time for relationships. That's the real problem, I think. I just haven't had time."

"I'm sorry to hear about your mother. I didn't realize she'd passed away. You must have been quite young."

Drew narrowed her eyes. "I was old enough to cope with the loss, thank you. But now I suppose you're going to say I'm afraid of loving someone because I lost my mother when I was younger."

Virginia paused thoughtfully. "I wasn't going to say that, no. But I think it's interesting that you said it."

Drew snorted and sat down on the couch again, feeling very much on the defensive. "All this pseudo-psychology is very interesting, Ms. Sinclair. You must watch a lot of Oprah. But really, the basic problem I have with your son is simply that we don't have enough in common."

"Perhaps you have more in common than you think."

Max had suggested that, and she'd ignored his assertion. It was silly to say two such different people had anything in common. Or was it? Aware that she wasn't being entirely fair, she mentally reviewed what he'd said.

He'd said they were both lonely. Okay, she admitted, maybe she didn't have a lot of friends. Acquaintances, sure, but no one she could call on a Friday night just to chat about movies, guys, or a bad day at the office. She'd invested too much emotional energy into her sister, the same way Max had invested his emotions in his writing. And she had to confess her love life hadn't been any great shakes either, probably for the same reason. Negative, destructive relationship was an uncannily accurate phrase to describe her time with James.

What else had he said? He'd said they both worked hard at their careers. She could go along with that. Their careers were very different, to be sure, but she knew how much time she'd dedicated to building her career. Writing science fiction was a very different career path from teaching English lit, but she was no longer inclined to look down on Max's career, or underestimate the effort he put into it. She'd written three books, and knew how difficult and time-consuming it could be.

She recalled the other thing he'd said, which had left her confused. We've both got pain and sorrow in our past.

Max knew about the worst time of her life, when her mother had died a slow, excruciating death from cancer, while Drew visited her in the hospital and did her best to keep her spirits up. But what had Max suffered? She seemed to recall him saying his dad had died in his sleep, fifteen years before. Sure, it was tough to lose a parent, but that hardly seemed to constitute a lot of pain and suffering.

He'd been dumped by his fiancée, too. She recalled that, and remembered his reaction when she'd asked about it. He'd gotten so upset he'd squished an innocent foam cup and practically burned his hand. Obviously the memory still bothered him. Maybe that could constitute suffering, but it had been quite a while ago. Eight years, as she recalled. He really ought to be over it by now.

Overall Max's life seemed to have gone by smoothly, without any sort of really significant pain or struggle. At least none he had ever told her about.

But how much had he told her? She had the distinct impression there was something she was missing.

Then it clicked. His scar. He had a long scar, cutting vertically across the muscles of his abdomen, and he'd refused to tell her about it when she'd asked.

"How did Max get hurt?" she said abruptly.

Virginia glanced up in surprise, and Drew realized she'd lapsed into a long, introspective silence.

"Hurt?" she repeated cautiously.

"His scar," Drew said. "How did he get it? It had something to do with his ex-fiancée, didn't it?" She wasn't sure when she'd formed the certainty that the scar was somehow related to his ex-fiancée, but she knew she was right. Max didn't like to talk about his scar. He didn't like to talk about his ex-fiancée. Somehow the two things were related.

Virginia looked at her curiously. "He didn't tell you about it?"

Drew shook her head, understanding Virginia's surprise clearly enough. If she had seen the scar, then it was a logical inference that she and Max had been intimate. And yet if they had been intimate, she should be familiar with Max's past.

He's never told me anything important about himself, she started to say, then caught herself. She

couldn't confess to Virginia they hadn't been intimate in any real emotional sense.

"Perhaps you should ask him," Virginia suggested mildly, but with a note of steel in her tone that said plainly it wasn't her business to volunteer the information.

Drew nodded, knowing Virginia was right. She should ask Max. Admittedly, she had tried to ask him a long time ago, but he hadn't wanted to talk about it. But later, after they'd grown closer, she should have asked again. It wasn't fair to judge the man, to refuse to consider him for a long-term relationship, when she knew next to nothing that was really important about him.

Getting to her feet, she walked to the deck and opened the door, hesitating on the threshold.

It was dark and cold. Despite the suburban lights, the stars sparkled overhead against a background of blue-black velvet. Max looked up as she opened the door, and a mask of icy courtesy settled over his features as he saw her standing there.

She spoke hesitantly, afraid he would tell her to just go back inside. "It's nice about your mom and Pete, isn't it?"

Max looked away, going back to the work of grooming Blue's coat. The dog, obviously well-trained, was standing patiently on the deck while Max worked on him. She guessed a collie had to learn to stand still for frequent brushings. A long, thick coat like that probably snarled even faster than her own hair did. A frightening thought, that.

"Yeah, I guess."

At his curt reply, Drew hesitated, tempted just to go back inside. Subduing her cowardly impulse, she stepped out onto the deck and closed the door behind her.

"I imagine it must be kind of strange to know you'll have a new stepfather at your age," she said.

Max shrugged. "Just as long as they don't present me with a little half-brother or sister, I don't mind."

"I don't suppose that's too likely."

"Considering Mom's past sixty, I guess it's not a possibility. Just as well, I guess. I'm not sure I could take it if Mom had a baby before I did."

At his offhand comment, a longing she'd never felt before spread through her body like wine, and an image of her holding Max's baby in her arms filled her mind. A giggling, chubby, golden-haired baby with green eyes. She could see it as clearly as if it were real, rather than a manifestation of an overactive imagination. Which was ridiculous. She'd never given serious thought to having a baby before.

She shook her head to dispel the dizzy feeling and did her best to keep the conversation going. "Your mother seems happy."

"I just hope it works out. Sometimes things don't go exactly according to plan."

Drew winced. Obviously she had been one of his plans that had gone awry. "Look, Max, about us—"

"There is no us," he interrupted. "You made that perfectly clear."

"I just don't want what happened between us to sour you on the idea of marriage."

"Believe me," Max said dryly, "I was already soured on the idea long before I met you."

Drew hesitated for a long moment, then decided she wanted to know. She had to know. She spoke softly. "What did she do to you, Max?"

"It's none of your business."

"I just wanted to know what happened," Drew said in her most reasonable tone. "It obviously still bothers you. I wondered why."

"As far as I'm concerned, you gave up the right to know anything about me this morning," Max said shortly. Drew couldn't argue that, but despite his unfriendly tone, she persisted.

"You said you were engaged. And she left you. Why?"

Max slammed the brush down on the deck, jumped to his feet, and spun around to face her. "I don't want to talk about it, all right?"

Drew didn't back off. Max obviously wasn't in a mood to volunteer information, so she decided to deliberately provoke him, figuring that might be the best way to get him to come clean. "I just wanted to know what happened, Max. You said we had things in common. You told me we'd both been in—how did you put it? Negative, destructive relationships, that was it. You said we'd both suffered. Forgive me, but it doesn't look to me like you've ever suffered through much of anything. It looks to me pretty much like you've had everything handed to you on a silver platter."

He stared at her a long moment. "Is that what you think?" he said at last, in a voice barely above a whisper. "Is that what you think about me?"

Drew shrugged. "Your career came to you easily enough, didn't it? Your very first book was a bestseller, right?"

"The first one I got published, yeah. I wrote two others that never sold."

"And you were going to get married to, uh—"

"Paula," he said roughly. "Her name was Paula."

"So what did you do to scare her off? Did you get too serious too fast, the way you did with me?"

"I didn't do anything, damn you."

Despite the ominous growl in his voice, she persisted. "So Paula just handed back your engagement ring one day? For no reason at all?"

"She had a reason. It just wasn't a good one."

"What was the reason?"

"I do not want to talk about this."

Behind Max, Blue whined and licked anxiously at his owner's hand, alarmed by the stark anger in his voice. Max dropped his hand onto the dog's head and rubbed the soft fur, obviously taking comfort in the dog's simple affection. He patted the dog for a long moment, as if trying to get a grip on his emotions.

"Look," he said at last, in a more reasonable tone, "Paula was scared. She panicked. That's all. Okay?"

"What scared her? You?"

Max closed his eyes for a minute. "Sort of." Opening his eyes, he met her gaze squarely. "I got sick."

Whatever she had been expecting, that wasn't it. "Sick?" she repeated dubiously. "Like the flu?"

Max sighed. "I got this lump in my neck. It was a pretty good size, but it didn't hurt, and I was only twenty-four, so I didn't worry much about it. Eventually, it got bigger, and Paula got worried, so I went to the doctor. They did some tests and found out I had Hodgkin's disease."

"Hodgkin's disease?"

"It's a kind of cancer that attacks the lymph nodes. It's actually one of the more common cancers among men in their twenties."

Max had had cancer.

Drew vividly remembered her mother's five-year battle with breast cancer, the painful tests, the treatments that were very nearly as bad as the disease, the debilitating pain as the tumors spread throughout her body. Had Max had to go through all that?

"Oh, my God. Then what happened?"

Max shrugged in a typical masculine gesture probably intended to downplay the severity of his illness. "It was fairly advanced, because I'd let it go too long. Stupid, but you know when you're twenty-four, cancer isn't exactly the first thing that jumps to your mind when you find a lump, even a big one. So they did this thing called a staging laparotomy. It's exploratory surgery in your abdomen to see if the cancer has spread there. They took out my spleen and took a biopsy out of my liver." He scowled. "It happened to be on my birthday. Not the best birthday I ever had."

"The scar on your abdomen," she whispered.

"Yeah, that's where I got it. It hurt like hell. If you've never had an eight-inch incision in your abdomen you can't imagine what it feels like. It gave me a real appreciation for what my mom went through having me by C-section."

She lifted her hands to her face. The thought of Max in severe pain, fighting for his life against the relentless, malevolent march of cancer, brought tears to her eyes. She spoke through the tightness in her throat. "And Paula?"

Max swallowed. "I guess she was scared I was going to die and couldn't deal with it. She got really quiet when I was diagnosed. At first she cried, then she wouldn't talk about it at all. We'd been dating for years—ever since our first year of college—but all of a sudden she just closed up. And the day I had my surgery, my twenty-fifth birthday, Paula came into my room..."

He paused for a long moment. "I was doped up on morphine after my surgery," he said softly. "I could hardly focus. But I still remember her standing there like it was yesterday. I figured she had come in to give me moral support. But she just took off her engagement ring and dropped it on the table beside my bed. I tried to ask her what was wrong, but I had too much morphine in my system. I couldn't even make a sound. And she said, 'I can't watch you go through this. I know it's cowardly, but I just can't do it. I'm just not ready for marriage, Max.'"

Drew felt a huge lump in her throat. "Oh, Max," she whispered.

With an impatient gesture, Max brushed something off his cheek. "Maybe she was right to do it," he said harshly. "I went through months of radiation, and I puked my guts out practically the whole time because the radiation treatments irritated my stomach. I lost forty pounds. And then, almost of a year later, they discovered the damn cancer had spread anyway, and I had to go through six months of chemotherapy. That took care of the cancer, but they warned me it might leave me sterile. I don't even know if I can have children."

"Did Paula ever contact you?"

"In a way. When we got engaged, we bought this house together. A couple of months after she left me I got a note from her lawyer, offering to let me buy her half. I did."

Drew closed her eyes, imagining what a blow that must have been to a man already suffering through a life-threatening illness and the nausea of cancer treatments. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

"She never called me or anything, though. I heard she got married a couple of years later. I never tried to get in touch with her. I didn't want to."

"Max—"

She stepped toward him and touched his arm. He jerked his arm away, rejecting her show of sympathy, and turned his back on her, staring out into the darkness.

"It's ancient history, Drew. It doesn't matter that much anymore." He sighed, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Nothing matters anymore."

She couldn't bear to let him feel that way. She couldn't let him turn his back on her, not now that she knew what he'd gone through. Not now that she knew he was stronger and more courageous than she'd ever imagined.

God knew he was braver than she was. Despite everything Paula had put him through, he wasn't afraid to risk his heart in a new relationship. Whereas she herself had spent her entire adult life running from commitment. And she'd spent the last few weeks running from him.

Maybe it was finally time for her to face her feelings.

Stepping around him, she looked up into his eyes. His gaze met hers, and she shivered at what she saw there.

His eyes were brimming with vulnerability and a crushing loneliness.

Without conscious volition, she pulled his head down and kissed him.

Chapter 28

For a long moment, Max stood frozen, too shocked to move. Then his arms went around Drew and he let himself respond to her kiss. Her mouth felt like velvet, soft and yielding. It seemed like an eternity since he had last kissed her.

At last, endless moments later, he lifted his head and looked at her. "What was that for?"

"I didn't realize—" Looking embarrassed, Drew stumbled to a halt. "I'm so sorry, Max. You were right. I think—I think I've been judging you on things that don't matter that much."

He cocked an eyebrow. "So you're admitting to being shallow and superficial?"

"I'm afraid so," she admitted meekly.

"Good thing we broke up, then," he said cheerfully. "I can't see myself dating a shallow and superficial woman." She looked horrified, and he broke out laughing and kissed her again. "Just kidding," he assured her in a whisper between kisses.

Suddenly Blue barked. Breaking away from Drew, Max looked at his dog. Blue's ears were up, and he was glaring off into the darkness of the back yard, a sharp, angry note in his bark. Max stared into the night and felt his muscles go taut.

"What's wrong?" Drew whispered.

"Someone's out there." He shoved Drew toward the house. "Go on, get inside."

"Are you kidding?"

"Inside. Now." Max thrust the door open, shoved her inside bodily, slammed the door, and took off running, calling to Blue.

His neighborhood had been built on a farm, and the builder had planted a grand total of two trees in his yard, neither of which was particularly large, even after eight years. Behind his house, however, was a narrow strip of trees, about ten feet wide, which he and his neighbors usually dignified with the title of "the woods." He figured whoever was out there had to be hiding in the trees. After all, there wasn't anywhere else for them to hide.

Blue raced along by his side, still barking. Max didn't expect him to be a lot of help. Blue wasn't a pit bull, he was getting along in years, and he'd never been trained to attack. He'd probably bite a person who attacked his owner, like most good dogs, but otherwise all he was really good for was scaring people off. Which it sounded as if he'd already done, judging from the crashing sound in the underbrush just ahead of them.

A dark shape loomed up just in front of them. Max slammed into the figure, spun it around, and brought it to the ground with a crash. Beside him, Blue did a really convincing imitation of a pit bull, alternating fierce barking with savage-sounding growls.

The guy had fallen hard onto his back, driving most of the air from his lungs, but he was still clawing frantically at Max, trying to get him off. Max subdued him with two hard, well-placed blows to the stomach, then looked at him. He was pretty sure he recognized the face.

A voice behind him said, "James!"

Max sighed. "Drew," he said without turning around, "didn't I tell you to get inside and stay there?"

"After what happened at the convention center, I was afraid he might have a gun," Drew said. He

glanced over his shoulder and saw her frowning down on them, holding the biggest, most wicked-looking knife in his kitchen. Drew didn't mess around, he thought with admiration, turning back to James.

"Isn't this your professor?"

"He's not mine," Drew said, distaste in her voice. "But yes, this is Professor James Barton, my former boyfriend and current psychopath. What's he doing here?"

"I don't know. Maybe he'll tell the cops."

"The cops!" Barton wailed. "I just wanted to talk to Drew. You aren't going to call the police, are you?"

Max glanced back over his shoulder. "Do you think he's the one who's been doing all this, Drew?"

She scowled. "I don't know how he could be. Ken said he never saw James following me, remember?"

"We don't know for sure Ken is telling the truth."

Drew nodded. "That's true. But James had an alibi the night my house was ransacked."

"Alibis can be faked, I guess. Maybe he got his friends to cover for him." Max stood up and dragged James to his feet, twisting his arm behind him. James whimpered. He was almost as tall as Drew, but skinny and stoop-shouldered. "Come on, Barton. Let's go wait for the cops."

"I just wanted to talk to Drew," Barton sniveled as he limped toward the house, Max holding his arm in a painful grip. "I need to talk to her. It's important."

"How'd you know she was here?"

"I heard about it through the campus grapevine. Everybody knows she's shacking up with you, the slut."

Max twisted the thin arm a little harder than he had to, and Barton yelped. "Barton," he said coldly, "let's keep this civil, shall we?"

"Sorry," Barton squeaked.

"If you just wanted to talk to Drew, why didn't you just ring the doorbell instead of hiding in my woods? Kind of cold for a campout, isn't it?"

"I wanted to talk to her alone, away from you. I told you, I need to talk to her. I was waiting for her to come outside by herself."

"Yeah," Max said grimly. Drew opened the door, and he slammed Barton down into a chair at the kitchen table. "That's what I was afraid of."

Max was unsurprised when Barton refused to talk to the cops, beyond repeating several times that he needed to talk to Drew. After the cops took their statements, and took Barton off to warm himself in jail for the evening, Max took Drew upstairs. Mom or no Mom, he wasn't going to let her out of his sight. He wouldn't let her sleep alone.

He wasn't going to let her go ever again.

She fell into bed while he changed, giving him a good look at her as she sprawled luxuriously out across his dark green sheets, her platinum hair spilling across the sheets like a waterfall. Her long, curvaceous body was clad in a peach-colored satin and lace thingamajig that he supposed could be called a nightgown. He thought a more accurate term for it would be blatant advertising. The top of the

garment was mostly lace, so sheer that the dark pink of her nipples showed through, and there were slits up either side that provided tantalizing glimpses of the strong, slim ivory columns of her thighs.

Max generally slept in briefs and not much else. Looking at her nightgown, he rather wished he were wearing armor. A little reluctantly, he stripped all the way down to his briefs, conscious that his body had already reacted to her presence, and that his reaction was highly visible.

He lay down on his own side of the bed, as far away from her as he could get, but she rolled toward him and snuggled against his chest. He put his arms around her awkwardly.

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"It's just that—" He sighed. "Mom is right down the hall."

"So?" She wiggled against him in a way that sent little shock waves through his body. "We'll be quiet."

Max groaned. "I'm just not comfortable with making love while my mom is in the house, okay?"

She was still for a minute. "So all you want to do is sleep?"

"Believe me, I want to do a whole lot more than sleep. I just don't think I can."

Drew pressed against him. Gently, she drew his head down and brushed her lips across his, a feather-light whisper of a caress that nonetheless struck him with a dizzying impact. He felt his body spring to life as she explored the contours of his lips, causing little shocks of pleasure to explode through him. Her tongue slowly traced his lips and slid between them. He felt the lace of her nightgown, and beneath that, her nipples, small and hard, thrusting against his bare chest. Her leg slid over his bare thigh, soft and warm. "Max, do you really think your mom expects us to be celibate tonight?"

"Probably not," he admitted.

Her hand slipped across his chest, lightly caressing his nipple, then sliding down his abdomen to trace his scar. "Your mother doesn't appear to have any old-fashioned hang-ups about sex before marriage, anyway," she went on in The Voice of Reason he'd come to know so well. "She and Pete obviously were intimate last night, and didn't mind if you knew it."

Her hand reached under the waistband of his briefs, and he felt his breath catch. For a moment he couldn't breathe.

"So I don't really see the problem," Drew said as her fingers slipped lower and encircled him. He exhaled in a raw moan.

"It's just—" He shuddered at the touch of her fingers. "I know it's irrational. I just can't."

"You're sure?"

With her fingers around him, stroking him until he swelled and ached, he definitely wasn't sure. With a superhuman effort, he lifted his head, caught at her hand, and stilled it. "Yeah," he said hoarsely. "I'm sure."

Her hand moved away, and he dropped his head back to the pillow, able to think again. Sort of. "I'm sorry," he said.

Drew rolled away, to her own side of the bed, which was just as well, since otherwise he might have given in to his impulses. In fact he was pretty sure he would have, because he didn't seem to have the slightest sense of self-discipline where she was concerned. She made him as out-of-control as a kleptomaniac in a shopping mall.

"It's okay, Max." He was relieved to hear that she didn't sound in the least annoyed. "After all, we

made love three times last night. That should be enough for any woman. Anyway—" He heard her soft chuckle in the darkness. "We have the rest of our lives."

That phrase sounded wonderful coming from her lips. He wondered how seriously she meant it but decided it was probably safest not to ask. The last thing he wanted to do was upset the precarious balance of their relationship by pushing her too hard.

Right now, he decided, they needed to take it one day at a time. They would go forward slowly and see what happened. There was, after all, no need to jump into anything before they were ready.

Despite that eminently logical and sensible conclusion, however, he fell asleep with one thought uppermost in his mind.

The rest of our lives.

It sounded terrific to him.

Chapter 29

"The church looks beautiful," Virginia said with satisfaction, gazing around. She and Pete had decided to get married in the local Lutheran church. Over a hundred years old, it had an enormous pipe organ and tall, vividly hued stained glass windows.

Considering there were no guests coming to the wedding, and only four people in the wedding party, Max thought the church was rather ludicrously huge, but Mom had fallen in love with it the moment he'd shown it to her. And it was, after all, her wedding.

Max had bought the white roses that adorned the altar in spectacular profusion. He'd also paid for a honeymoon in Arizona, as it was the only sensible wedding present he could think of for two people who would be living in a rather small condo. So tomorrow Pete and Mom were leaving, but not for Florida. They were headed for Phoenix. Pete had lit up at the news and commented enthusiastically on the golf courses in the area. Max knew Mom well enough to know Pete wasn't going to be allowed to play golf on their honeymoon, but he kept his mouth shut.

Old Pete would find out who was in charge soon enough, he thought with a grin.

"Yeah, it's beautiful," he agreed, looking around at the expansive, empty rows of wooden pews. "But not as beautiful as you, Mom. You look gorgeous."

His mother was dressed in a suit of blush-colored silk, which showed off her still-slim figure nicely. Her gray hair curled fetchingly around her face, and in her hands she was carrying a bouquet of small pink tea roses.

"Wait until you see Drew," his mother said.

The thought of seeing Drew dressed up for a church wedding did something odd to the rhythm of his heart. It was, he thought, worth it to get dressed up in a gray suit and noose in order to see Drew all decked out. "I'm sure she won't be as beautiful as you, Mom," he said, lying through his teeth. "It's your day, after all."

"I hope to see you and Drew here again soon," Virginia said.

"Mom. Don't rush me."

"It's more than obvious that you're in love with her, Maxfield. What are you waiting for, anyway?"

The idea that it was obvious he loved Drew was a little embarrassing, but he comforted himself with the thought that probably only Mom, with her psychic abilities, could tell. In fact, he himself wasn't even certain that he was in love with Drew. Sure, he thought about her every moment of every day, but that might merely be plain, old-fashioned lust.

"I'm waiting for a lot of things," he said roughly.

He was waiting for Drew to want him as much as he wanted her. He was waiting for her to realize she couldn't live without him. He was waiting for her to look at him like he was the most important thing in the world to her.

He was waiting for Drew to fall in love with him.

He'd never felt so protective of anyone in his life. It made him nervous and edgy to be separated from Drew even for a couple of minutes, even though nothing ominous had happened for a week now. James Barton had been released from jail the day after they'd caught him in Max's backyard and hadn't tried to approach Drew again. Max was pretty sure Barton wasn't behind everything that had happened,

anyway. Barton obviously still had a thing for Drew, but he simply didn't have the balls to try to hurt her seriously.

Max was more positive than ever that Lucas Walters was the culprit. Knowing what he did about the unpleasant history between Drew and Lucas, he had become convinced Lucas wanted to hurt Drew, to punish her somehow. But the cops hadn't been able to find him in order to question him, despite the fact that he was clearly somewhere in the area. They'd checked all his old hangouts, questioned all his friends, and come up empty-handed. Despite the fact that it was a small town, Lucas had somehow managed to disappear.

The problem, Max decided grimly, was that the local cops had a collective IQ that rivaled a turnip's. Not one of them had the brains his dog did.

And until Lucas was found, he would spend every waking moment worrying about Drew.

As if he'd conjured her up by thinking of her, she appeared at the back of the church and started down the aisle toward him. Max gulped. She was wearing a silk suit, not unlike Mom's, but in a darker shade of rose that made her white skin glow like alabaster in moonlight. It clung to her abundant figure, and the pale hose she wore accentuated the strong, slender curve of her legs. Max couldn't stop himself from staring.

In that moment he knew that Drew Cooper was everything he'd ever wanted in a woman; brilliant, beautiful, and kind, with a resilient core of steel concealed beneath a wickedly sharp sense of humor. As she approached, it was all he could do to prevent himself from dropping onto one knee and proposing on the spot. He restrained his foolishly romantic impulse, reminding himself that this was Mom's day, and he couldn't do anything to detract from it.

Besides, he reminded himself grimly, he had no good reason to suppose Drew would marry him anyway.

"Where's Pete?" he asked as she stopped next to him.

"He's getting ready." Drew chuckled. "I think he's been retired too long. He's forgotten how to knot a tie."

"Is there some kind of rule guys have to get married in ties?" Max grumbled, yanking irritably at his own. "Why doesn't he just wear a Hawaiian shirt, like he always does?"

"I could be wrong, but I think it's because your mother would kill him."

Virginia smiled gently. "I wouldn't kill him, dear."

"You'd just maim him," Max said.

"Quite likely," Virginia agreed.

The pastor appeared at the back of the church. "Well," he said as he approached, "I've just spoken with Mr. Kirk, and he says he's ready. What about you, Ms. Sinclair? Shall we begin?"

Virginia hesitated, and for a moment Max thought he saw uncertainty in her eyes. "Mom," he said gently, dropping a hand onto her shoulder, "it's okay. When you're certain, you should get married, remember?"

Virginia patted his hand. "Yes, Maxfield. It's just that—" She paused, then spoke in a tremulous whisper. "I've been alone for such a long time."

Max put his arms around her waist. "I can relate to that," he said softly. "But you don't have to be alone any more, Mom."

His mother hugged him briefly, then pulled away and shot a meaningful look at Drew. "Neither do you, Maxfield," she said, then walked toward the altar, leaving Max with his mouth hanging open.

The ceremony was over quickly. Drew glanced over once or twice as Virginia and Pete exchanged their vows and saw Max blinking hard, as if willing his eyes to remain dry. Figures he wouldn't cry at weddings, she thought with amusement. Max might have a soft spot a mile wide, but he was nevertheless a guy, and he had a reputation to maintain.

After the ceremony the huge pipe organ played an ear-shattering recessional. Pete, in an impeccably knotted, navy blue- and burgundy-striped tie, shook Max's hand, beaming from ear to ear. "Never had a son before," he said gruffly, patting Max awkwardly on the shoulder. "Going to take some getting used to."

Max blinked in surprise, as if he hadn't ever given thought to that aspect of the situation. "Do you have children, Pete?"

"Four daughters, all grown," Pete said with obvious paternal pride. "The most beautiful girls you'll ever see."

Max blanched. "Oh, my God," he said to Drew in an undertone. "I've got four stepsisters."

Drew couldn't help herself. She broke out laughing at the horrified expression on his face. "Sisters aren't so bad, Max. You'll get used to it."

"I don't think so. I already have more women in my life than I can handle."

"You've got more now. Better get used to the idea."

Max's mom came up behind him. "Maxfield, dear, may Pete and I have a word alone with you?"

Max shot an apologetic look at Drew. She smiled, letting him know without words she understood his obligations to his family. "It's okay, Max. I've got something I need to get out of the car anyway." She'd left her purse in Max's car, and her tampons with it. Her period had been a whole week late, but it had finally come with a vengeance.

For the past few days she'd been a little worried, wondering if she might be pregnant. A little worried, but not entirely displeased by the notion. The thought of carrying Max's child filled her with an inexplicable pleasure.

She reminded herself firmly that Max was quite likely sterile. And she was definitely not pregnant. Not this month, anyway.

The November afternoon was cold but sunny. Dry leaves scudded across the parking lot as she headed toward Max's red Mustang, and the anonymous gray rental car Pete drove. There was another car a few spaces away, presumably the pastor's car, although it looked pretty beat up for a pastor of a prosperous congregation. Maybe he kept his good car for Sundays, she thought with amusement.

Just before she reached Max's car, a window rolled down in the old car nearby. Having assumed the car was unoccupied, Drew jumped with surprise. She glanced over automatically and saw, with an unpleasant shock, a familiar face surrounded by black, unkempt hair.

"Hello, Drew," Lucas said.

Chapter 30

Drew's first impulse was to scream, but she stopped herself as Lucas lifted a gun in one hand and pointed it at her. "Let's keep this quiet, Drew," he said. His voice was soft, as it always had been, but filled with menace. "Why don't you climb in? We'll catch up on old times."

In her peaceful, college-town life, she'd never seen a gun, and she couldn't be absolutely certain the one he was holding was genuine, but it certainly looked real. It definitely wasn't a water pistol. She hesitated for a long moment, tempted to run for it, but the two-inch heels she wore impeded her sprinting ability. The church was ten yards behind her, the Mustang was several feet away, and there was nowhere else nearby to hide. At any rate, she wouldn't put it past Lucas to shoot her in the back. Not considering everything they believed he'd done lately.

With the gun trained on her, she walked around the front of the car, as slowly as she dared, and got in on the passenger side, hoping against hope Max would come out any minute. Although perhaps it was just as well if he didn't. She certainly didn't want Lucas to shoot him. She couldn't bear the thought of Max being injured again, or even killed. At least this way she was the only one in danger.

Lucas put the gun in his lap and held it in his left hand, so that it was still pointing at her, and turned the key in the ignition. It started up, a little reluctantly, and he threw the car into drive. The car jolted, shuddered, and almost stalled, and she gave a desperate silent prayer that it might die on the spot, but it managed to hold together. Lucas pulled out of the parking lot and merged into traffic.

"So nice of you to come along," he said.

"So where are we going?" Drew hated the quaver in her voice, but she reassured herself that it was a perfectly logical reaction to be afraid with a gun pointed at her, especially in a car that seemed inclined to jerk and shudder every minute or two. She was a little concerned Lucas might shoot her unintentionally.

But she was a whole lot more concerned that he might shoot her intentionally.

"Out of town a little ways."

Great. Where he could shoot her without anyone hearing. She felt herself break out in a cold sweat and wished she'd had a chance to get her purse. There was a cell phone in her purse, but it was back in Max's Mustang. Not a lot of use to her now.

The more rational part of her mind recognized that she wouldn't have actually possessed the nerve to take a phone out of her purse while he was holding a gun on her anyway. It would have been a stupid thing to do, and she couldn't afford to do anything stupid right now. She had to stay calm and think logically. She realized her only chance to get out of this situation was to talk her way out.

"Look, Lucas," she said in her most reasonable tone, "I know you've been seeing Tiffani."

The hand gripping the steering wheel went white at the knuckles, as if he'd clenched his hand in rage. "She won't talk to me anymore," he said softly. "You've poisoned her against me, damn you."

"Maybe I was wrong," Drew said.

He turned his head and glanced at her, contemptuously. "You think I'm stupid, Drew? You think I'm going to fall for your little games? Playing along with me isn't going to buy you any time."

"I'm not playing along. I'm just saying I might have made a mistake."

Lucas made a rude noise of disbelief.

"I shouldn't have interfered," Drew said. "I had no business ripping you and Tiffani apart the way I did. It was Tiffani's decision to make, not mine."

She could see Lucas didn't believe a word she was saying, which was ironic, considering she was speaking the truth. "You were always controlling her," he hissed. "Telling her what to think. Giving her ideas."

"I admit I tried to control her," Drew said. "But she usually had her own ideas."

"You should have left her alone."

"In retrospect, I don't think I did a real good job with her," Drew admitted. "But I did my best. I wasn't sure how to cope with her. I didn't know what I was doing." She hesitated. "I know better now, Lucas."

The car stopped at a red light. Lucas turned his head and glared at her with such malevolence that she shivered. "Bullshit," he said. "You haven't learned a thing. You're just trying to manipulate me, to jerk my strings, the way you did a year ago."

Obviously this wasn't working. She wasn't going to be able to talk any sense into him. She guessed his need for revenge had blinded him to any sort of compromise. Or maybe, crazy or not, he was still smart enough to see that if she got out of this situation, he was going to do some serious jail time.

They drove into an expensive suburb. She braced herself to run for it when the car stopped, but to her dismay Lucas pulled around back, into an open garage. The battered old car gave one last shudder and stalled. Lucas pushed a button, closing the garage door, and got out of the car, keeping the gun trained on her. "Come on, Drew."

She got out carefully, thinking about screaming at the top of her lungs. Screaming probably wouldn't do much good, though, and was quite likely to get her shot. She wondered why he'd brought her here. Maybe this house was where Lucas was living now, but it looked way too expensive, considering what a loser Lucas had always been. There was another car, a big black Mercedes, parked in the garage. Lucas wouldn't be driving a heap of junk if he had a Mercedes. So he couldn't be the only person living here.

Lucas grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her, then pushed the muzzle of the gun into the small of her back. Terror made her blood run cold, but he gave her a shove and she realized he wanted her to go into the house.

She didn't want to go in, but she didn't have much choice.

She went up the garage steps, the gun pressed firmly against her back, and Lucas right behind her. She got a brief glimpse of a pricey stainless steel and granite kitchen, and then he shoved her roughly to the tile floor. She sprawled on the tiles, a little stunned, and waited for Lucas to shoot her in the back.

Charity Rogers' tailored image looked out from Max's TV, her red-tipped talons curled around a microphone with the NewsChannel 9 badge on it. "Local professor Drew Cooper disappeared today from a church, where she was a member of a wedding party," she said in her most somber tones. "Her disappearance follows a series of bizarre incidents involving Professor Cooper and her family. The police suspect she has been abducted, although they admit it is possible that she has been murdered."

At Charity's grim words, Max dropped his head into his hands. The worst afternoon of his life had begun when he'd gone out to the parking lot to discover Drew gone. He'd sent his mom into the ladies' restroom on the off chance of finding her there and stood outside, calling for her frantically until his voice was hoarse. Then he'd had to call the cops and file a missing persons report.

Until he'd discovered Drew missing he hadn't realized exactly what she meant to him. This afternoon he'd wondered if he loved her, but he hadn't guessed he could feel this strongly about another human being. Now he knew that his life was empty without her. He couldn't imagine letting a single day go by without seeing her smile, without holding her in his arms, without talking to her and laughing with her. The thought that he might never see her again was unbearable agony, a knife directly through his heart.

And the knowledge that it was all his fault was driving him crazy with guilt and remorse. He'd let her go outside by herself. He'd let her go. He should have known better, but caught up in the emotions of his mother's wedding, he just hadn't been thinking.

His own carelessness had led to this disaster.

Tiffani put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. She and her new boyfriend, Ken Harshaw, had driven over to Max's immediately when he'd called them with the news that Drew had disappeared. They'd picked Alice up from the sitter's and brought her along, figuring she could be Lucas' next target. They, along with Virginia and Pete, were sitting on Max's living room floor watching the news. Alice sat quietly in a corner, playing with a little electronic gizmo that played the same lilting tune over and over, grating on Max's already-raw nerves. He decided when he had kids they wouldn't be permitted to have any toy that made noise. Not even a goddamned rattle.

"She'll be okay, Max," Tiffani said confidently. "Lucas won't hurt her."

Max lifted his head and glared at her, finding her perky tones more irritating than usual. He had no patience for perkiness right now. "Lucas is a psychopath, Tiffani. There's no telling what he might do."

"If he had really wanted to kill her, he could have easily done it by now, Max."

Her voice was so even, so calm, that Max felt his temper fraying further. "Goddamnit, Tiffani, aren't you worried at all?"

"Of course," she said. "But we have to believe she's going to be all right, Max. The police are doing everything they can."

"That's not really reassuring," Ken said dryly. Max shifted his attention to the young man. He seemed like a nice kid, even though he was built like a tank. Max remembered the time he'd slammed him against a wall and winced. He was probably lucky the kid hadn't flattened him with one of those beefy fists.

But he couldn't blame Ken for his cynicism about local law enforcement, all things considered. He felt pretty much the same way.

Max got to his feet, stepping over Blue, who had sensed his master's despair and had dropped his furry bulk on Max's sneakers, presumably to indicate support and solidarity. He began to prowls the room. "If only there was something we could do," he said.

"I don't see what we could possibly do," Tiffani said.

Max turned and looked at her hard. "Tiffani, you know Lucas better than anyone. Don't you have any idea where he might be hiding out?"

"After everything Drew told me, I don't think I know Lucas nearly as well as I thought I did, Max. Anyway, I already told the police everything I could think of."

Max resumed his restless pacing. Maybe it was just anxiety, but he had an uneasy, nagging feeling that there was something he was missing. "If only I could talk to her," he said under his breath.

If only he could talk to her, find out that she was still alive, that she had survived the afternoon. The

thought of Drew murdered, her body casually disposed of somewhere, was making him insane.

He wanted to talk to her, more than he had ever wanted anything. He needed to talk to her.

I need to talk to her.

That was it.

He stopped pacing and whirled to face Tiffani again. "Did Lucas and James Barton know each other?" he demanded.

Tiffani looked confused. "Sure. Drew was dating James when I was married to Lucas. We all had dinners together every now and then. Not often, though. Drew and James were mostly into fancy restaurants."

"Did Barton and Lucas get along?"

"I don't think they liked each other very much, no."

Max scowled. "So they weren't friends?"

Ken looked at Max alertly. "You think James Barton has something to do with this, Max?"

"I don't know. I just—" He shook his head. "Barton was out behind my house last week, you know. I caught him there, and he said he had something to tell Drew. He kept going on about how he needed to talk to her. But he wouldn't tell the police what was so important."

"Haven't the police gone to his house today?" his mother asked. "It seems to me he'd be a logical suspect."

"The detective I talked to said they didn't have enough evidence to get a search warrant," Max said. "They went out to question Barton, but he wasn't there, and without a warrant they couldn't search the house." He frowned. "I think I'm going to go talk to the guy myself, see if he knows anything. Do you know where he lives, Tiffani?"

His mother frowned. "Do you think that's wise, Maxfield? Shouldn't you just notify the police if you suspect the man? If there's a good reason for suspicion, they'll take him into custody again, won't they?"

"I don't know that I suspect him of anything," Max said impatiently. "I just want to talk to him. Anyway, the local cops couldn't find a hemorrhoid up their own assholes."

"Maxfield," his mother reproved. "I know you're desperate to accomplish something, but you can't go haring off to talk to this man on your own. The night he was here, he behaved as if he were quite unstable. He might be dangerous."

"Yeah, I agree," Ken said. "If you want to talk to him, I'll come along."

"Me too," Tiffani said.

Like Tiffani, with her slight muscles and slighter brain, was going to be a lot of help. Max didn't want her underfoot. He didn't want to have to save her ass.

He did his best to discourage her. "You really ought to stay here in case the cops call, Tiffani."

"I gave them my cell phone number. They can get in touch with us."

"Yeah, well, what about Alice? You should stay here and look after her."

His mother chose that untimely moment to offer help. "We'll be happy to watch her, Maxfield."

"It's the first night of your honeymoon, Mom."

"Like we'd be able to relax and enjoy ourselves until all this is settled," Pete said grimly. "Don't be foolish, Max. Like your mom says, we can take care of Alice. It's been a long time for both of us, but I imagine we can figure out how to change a disposable diaper."

Max realized he had been outvoted. He didn't doubt his mom could babysit Alice, but he really didn't want to be stuck babysitting Tiffani. He tried one more time to convince her to stay here, out of the way. "Tiffani, I just don't think—"

Tiffani stared at him with an unusual glint of steel in her eyes, reminding him oddly of Drew. "I'm coming with you. Drew's my sister, Max. If James knows anything, I want to know about it right away."

Max groaned inwardly, realizing he wasn't going to convince her to change her mind. "Fine," he said. He just hoped he wasn't making a huge mistake letting her come along.

Drew lay in gray semi-darkness, her hands and feet bound together, a gag in her mouth, and promised herself that if she ever got out of this mess she was going to kill Lucas Walters. Slowly. Painfully.

It was bad enough he'd stripped her naked and bound her. He hadn't hurt her, although the way he'd looked over her body with an unpleasant leer ranked as one of the more humiliating experiences of her lifetime. What was worse than mere humiliation was the excruciatingly nerve-wracking experience of being forced to lie here, just waiting for something to happen.

It appeared that Lucas was waiting for something, although what she couldn't imagine. He'd herded her upstairs and tied her to a bed in a room that made her extremely uncomfortable. The walls of the small room were covered in posters depicting naked women with improbably jutting breasts and enormous rear ends. A long bullwhip was coiled on top of the dresser, along with chains, handcuffs, and numerous other things Drew was entirely too square to be able to identify.

Given the fact that Lucas had stripped her and tied her to the bed in this particular room, she thought she was justified in feeling just a tad nervous.

She lay still and repressed the shivers of fear she felt. If Lucas came back into the room, she didn't want him to know that she was terrified. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

She had spent the past hour trying to loosen her bonds, with no discernible result beyond making raw, painful sores on her wrists. Evidently Lucas had been a Boy Scout at some point in time, unlikely though that seemed, because he knew how to tie a rope. She wasn't sure what Lucas' plans for her were, but she was grimly certain they couldn't be good. Maybe he was just going to leave her here to starve, or maybe he had something even worse in mind. Either way, she was sure she wasn't going to like it.

Not for the first time, she wished she had her cell phone. She would have given anything for some way to let Max know where she was. More than anything in the world, she wanted to talk to Max.

She wanted to tell him how sorry she was for getting herself into this mess. She thought about how anxious he must have been when she disappeared, how distraught he'd be, and felt a burning stab of guilt. She'd been careless, and she knew it. But that wasn't the only reason she wanted to talk to him, or even the most important reason.

She was terribly afraid she was going to die without hearing Max's voice one more time.

She wasn't sure why it mattered so much to her. All she knew was she wanted to talk to him, hear the deep, reassuring tones of his voice. She wanted it more than anything she'd ever wanted in her life.

But she didn't have any way of communicating with him, and Max had no way of knowing where she was. If she wanted to talk to him again, she was going to have to get out of this mess on her own.

With grim determination, she went back to trying to loosen her bonds.

James Barton lived a few miles beyond the town limits, in a decaying farmhouse surrounded by several acres of overgrown fields. Max pulled up in front of the house and stared at it in surprise. It didn't look like the kind of place a snobbish professor would care for. In fact, it looked kind of eerie.

"Creepy," Ken said from the back seat. He had gallantly insisted Tiffani take the front seat, even though his big frame was much too large for the Mustang's miniscule back seat. Max glanced over his shoulder and saw the poor guy hunched over, looking as comfortable as an elephant in a shoebox.

"Yeah," Tiffani said. "It looks like something out of a Hitchcock movie, doesn't it?"

"Didn't it always?"

"No. It used to be pretty well cared for. It's a historic dwelling, and James was renovating it. He's a professor of history, you know, and I think he specializes in local history. Drew said this place meant a lot to him. It looks like he hasn't put a lot of work into it lately, though."

That was an understatement, Max thought as he got out of the car. He waded through foot-high grass to get to the front porch, knocked on the door, and waited. Silence greeted him.

He slammed his fist against the door. "Barton! Are you in there?"

There was no answer.

Ken came up beside him. "Want me to help you knock the door down?"

Max slid a sideways look at the kid. He didn't think Ken would need a lot of help from him. "That could be overkill," he said. "He might just be out getting groceries or something."

"Maybe we can break a window."

Despite his desperate anxiety for Drew, Max felt the corners of his mouth quirk upward. "Ken, have you always had these criminal impulses, or is it Tiffani's influence?"

Ken looked abashed. "I just figured this might be important."

"Might be. Then again, it might not be. Barton might not have a damned thing to do with this situation at all. Anyway..." Max tried the doorknob. It turned under his hand, and the door creaked open. He shot Ken a wry smile. "Might as well try the easy method first."

They stepped into the house. Max flipped a switch, and the lights came on. He hesitated in the entrance hall and stared into what ought to be a parlor.

"Wow," Tiffani said behind him. "What a mess."

What a mess hardly seemed like an adequate phrase to describe the clutter that was piled on every available surface. What looked like antique, velvet-upholstered Victorian furniture was barely visible beneath tall piles of dirty clothes and yellowing newspapers. A heavy, thick stench hung in the air, not surprising since filthy dishes were stacked everywhere, and pizza boxes had been casually tossed on the floor, in some cases with old pieces of pizza still inside them. As they watched, something scuttled out of sight under one of the pizza boxes. Max didn't get a good look at it, but a fleeting glimpse of it was enough to make him shudder. It had been the length of a good-sized mouse, but he was pretty sure mice didn't have antennae.

Tiffani squealed. Max could hardly blame her. He didn't like normal cockroaches, let alone mutant-sized roaches with antennae the length of his little finger. He wished he'd brought some Raid along. Or maybe a BB gun.

Hell, he wasn't sure a .38 would take out a roach that size.

"Come on," he said, steeling himself, and began kicking his way through the clutter.

The rooms beyond were as squalid as the front of the house had been. The kitchen was a revolting mess, with broken dishes everywhere and food crumbs all over the floor. In the distant corners, unseen things scurried away. Ken looked around in disgust.

"Doesn't this dude ever clean?"

"He used to keep it nice and neat," Tiffani volunteered. "In fact, he was such a neat freak he even drove Drew crazy. She said he wouldn't even let her have a Coke in the living room."

"Weird," Ken said.

Max said nothing, but he was beginning to think it was more than just weird. In his experience, neat, organized people rarely just turned into slobs one day. Neatness was a basic personality characteristic. He couldn't imagine the man Tiffani described putting up with a godawful mess like this. Either James had totally lost it some time back—not beyond the realm of possibility, given the way he'd been behaving—or someone else had been living here, too.

They made their way up the stairs, and the stench grew stronger. Max was no longer surprised to see that the master bedroom was a mass of piled-up newspapers, clothing, and junk. On one of the nightstands stood a glass of some substance he didn't want to look at too closely. He thought it might have been milk, once upon a time.

"He's not here," Tiffani said. "I guess we might as well go on home. Maybe he'll be back tomorrow."

Max frowned at the glass of milk-in-a-former-lifetime. Just behind it an unframed photograph was propped up, practically the only thing in the room that wasn't part of an untidy pile. It looked like someone had put it up deliberately so they could look at it. He reached over the glass and picked up the picture.

"Tiffani," he said, slowly, "why would Barton have a picture of you?"

"I don't think he would. He never liked me much." She added in a miffed tone, "He used to tell Drew I was childish." Walking up beside him, she took the photo from his hand. "That's a picture of me in my one and only year of college".

"Did you ever give Barton a copy of this?"

"No, but—" Tiffani flipped it over.

On the back, in her curlicue handwriting, was written, To Lucas, with love from Tiffani. Max noticed she had written the "o" in love as a heart. Naturally. She would.

"It looks like Lucas has been staying here," Max said.

Tiffani scowled, tossing the photo back on the nightstand.

"I don't get it. Why would James let him stay here? He never liked him all that much."

"I don't know," Max said slowly. "But if he's been staying here, maybe Drew is here too."

"Maybe we better check the other rooms," Ken suggested.

They went down the hall, where there were only two more doors. Ken and Tiffani opened one, and

Max opened the other.

Immediately a horrible smell assaulted his nostrils. He found himself looking at James Barton.

A very dead James Barton.

Chapter 31

Max doubled over, gagging. He'd never seen a corpse before. He'd especially never seen a several-days-old, partially decomposed corpse before. Or smelled one. It reeked worse than he could have imagined.

"Max!" Tiffani ran out into the hall. "Are you all right?"

He straightened up and did his best to get hold of himself, glancing over his shoulder. "Don't come in here, Tiffani."

Tiffani stopped just behind him and wrinkled her nose. "Yeesh. What is that smell?"

"It's Barton. He's dead. Stay back, okay? You don't want to see this."

Ignoring him, Tiffani pushed her way past him and stared into the room, and Ken looked over his shoulder. Barton lay on the bed, wearing a red satin dress and scarlet, stiletto-heeled pumps. The bodice of his dress was marred by a hole and quite a lot of dark, rusty blood. It didn't take a forensics expert to see he'd been shot through the heart.

Based on her reaction to the roach, Max expected Tiffani to start screaming, or at least shriek in panic. Instead, she gazed at Barton for a few minutes, and then said thoughtfully, "You know, Drew was always trying to get James to wear something besides black turtlenecks, but this is ridiculous."

"It might explain part of what's been going on, though." Max swallowed hard and forced himself to walk into the room, despite the horrible reek. He opened the closet door to find a rainbow array of satin and lace dresses, with quite a few high-heeled shoes scattered on the floor.

"What do you mean?" Tiffani said, and he heard the skepticism in her voice. "You think James has been trying to get back with Drew so he could get his hands on her shoes?"

"No," Ken said. "Barton had a reputation to maintain. I bet he didn't want anyone to find out he was a cross-dresser. I figure your ex somehow found out about it, and he's been blackmailing Barton into giving him a place to live."

Max turned, surprised. Ken might not be able to read well, but he wasn't dumb. "That's what I figured, too," he agreed. "And when James was trying to talk to Drew last week—maybe he wasn't trying to hurt her after all. Maybe he was trying to tell her what was going on. Trying to warn her."

"And when Lucas found out James was going to squeal, he bumped him off?" Tiffani suggested. She bit her lip. "I don't know, guys. This all sounds pretty far fetched."

"Either way," Max said, "we better call the cops and tell them about this. I mean, we have a dead body here. The cops usually like to be notified about stuff like this. Do you have your cell phone, Tiffani?"

Tiffani nodded and dug it out of her purse. Just as she was handing it to him, the phone rang. It played "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" for a moment, while he tried to figure out which button to push. At last he pressed it to his ear and said, "Hello?"

There was a brief, surprised pause. "Max? This is Charity Rogers."

Fabulous. The vulture was circling, hunting for another story, no doubt. "I guess you were looking for Tiffani," he said, wondering how she'd gotten Tiffani's phone number. He imagined it wasn't a hard thing for an investigative reporter to come by. Even so, it was a little odd that she'd gone to the trouble.

"Well, yes, but I was hoping she could connect me with you, so that's perfectly all right. Listen, Max, I have some information about Drew that I think might interest you."

A spike of hope stabbed through his chest. "No kidding? What is it?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. I have to protect my source, and cell phones aren't secure enough. I wondered if you'd be willing to come to my house so we can talk."

He had the distinct impression he was being set up, that Charity was just fishing for a human-interest slant to the story. He didn't have the time to waste right now. "Um, listen, Charity, if you know anything you really ought to talk to the police."

"I wanted to talk to you about it first. It's about a man named Lucas Walters."

Max felt his eyebrows go up. Charity knew something about Lucas. Maybe she wasn't just scouting for a story after all. "Fine," he said curtly. "I'll come. But aren't you at the studio? I just saw you on the news."

"I just got off. I'm headed home now. Meet me there, why don't you?"

"Okay. Give me directions to your house."

She gave them to him, and he jotted them down on a piece of paper Tiffani excavated from her purse.

"Okay. We'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"We? Oh, listen, Max, are you bringing Tiffani?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, that's all right, I suppose, since it concerns her too. But don't bring anyone else, okay?"

He frowned at the phone. "Why not?"

"I told you, I have to protect my source."

"If this information is that important, Charity, I'm going to have to go to the cops with it anyway. You know that."

"Look, Max—" He heard her sigh on the other end. "If you want to go to the cops with it afterwards, that's all right. But right now I want to talk to you and Tiffani, and no one else. You can trust me. I'm your greatest fan, remember?"

Max hesitated a moment longer, then said, "Okay, Charity. We're on our way."

Tiffani had just told the cops everything they'd found at Barton's place. Now she put her cell phone back into her purse and glared at Max as he drove along at a speed that bore little resemblance to the posted limit. "This is a dumb waste of time, Max. Charity doesn't know a thing. She's just trying to get a new angle on the story."

"Maybe," Max said. Something was bugging him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. His mind wasn't working as well as it should; he had too many thoughts buzzing around in his head. "But she mentioned Lucas, so maybe she knows something."

"She probably interviewed the cops and found out everything we told them," Tiffani said. "I wouldn't trust her, Max. She's a reporter."

"Maybe so. But she also said..." He trailed off as he took the Mustang around a corner a little faster than he should have. The car managed to stay on all four wheels, but it was obviously struggling to do so.

"What did she say?" Ken prompted.

"She said she was my greatest fan," Max said.

"I thought that was me," Tiffani said.

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly. "Well, maybe. But the way she said it just made me remember... I used to have this crazy fan who e-mailed me all the time, trying to get me to have sex with her. I deleted them right away, but I noticed she always signed her notes 'Your greatest fan.' She had a website, too. I remember she had posted some photos of me doing stuff like buying groceries and mowing the lawn. I figured maybe she had hired a private detective to follow me. Either that or she lived here in Swift Creek and was following me around, since she knew things about me she really couldn't have known otherwise. It got so weird I almost called the cops. But then she quit e-mailing me, I guess since I never responded."

Tiffani frowned. "I bet a lot of people would say they were your greatest fan, Max. And an awful lot of fans have Farthest Space websites."

"Not like this one. It was called 'The Greatest of These,' and the fan seemed to think I was the greatest writer ever."

"The Greatest of These?" Ken repeated, an odd note in his voice.

"It was the title of Max's third book," Tiffani explained.

"Yeah, but it's more than that. It's from the Bible, isn't it?"

Max nodded. "I'm not a great reader of the Bible, but Mom used to quote that line every time I got in a fight at school. It's from Corinthians something or other. 'Faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.' Mom really adores that quote. She had the pastor use it in her wedding ceremony today."

"Max..."

Max glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Ken frowning. "What is it, Ken?"

"You might not be a big Bible reader, but my parents were. I went to church every Sunday. And I know most of the New Testament by heart, but in the King James Version, because that's what our church used. That's not the way the King James Version goes."

"Uh-huh," Max said, wondering why Ken was lecturing him on various Bible translations, today of all days. Like he cared. "I can hardly understand the King James version."

"Well, the wording is a little different. It says, 'The greatest of these is charity.'"

There was a thunderous silence. At last Max said, "Shit."

"That's pretty much what I was thinking," Ken said.

Chapter 32

Drew had been tied to the bed for at least two hours when she finally heard the door open. She turned her head, seeing the last person she'd ever expected. A familiar, clipped voice spoke.

"Dr. Cooper. So nice of you to come."

She was staring at the vulture.

Drew had never been so shocked in her life. What the hell was going on here? What had she ever done to Charity—well, besides calling her a vulture? Surely she hadn't earned Charity's hatred by calling her an epithet or two. Given her line of work, Charity must be accustomed to people cussing her out on a regular basis.

Charity gave her a cheerful smile. "Welcome to my home, Dr. Cooper."

Could this possibly get any weirder? Drew wondered. She saw Lucas just behind Charity, holding a gun. Charity walked across and removed her gag, and she thought about screaming for help, but the gun in Lucas' hand was obviously meant to discourage that. She spoke as calmly as she could. "Look, Charity, what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I've been abducted at gunpoint by my sister's ex. I want to know how you're involved."

Charity smiled. "I think it will make a fabulous news story."

Okay. She'd answered her own question. Things were getting weirder by the minute. "I think it would be really nice if you'd call the cops. Maybe you could report on the story later."

"Oh, but the story's not over yet." Charity began to walk back and forth across the room, her stiletto heels clicking against the hardwood floor as she spoke in her curt tones. "The story started when a Farthest Space fan shot at Max Sinclair. The story should have ended there, with the death of Max Sinclair, renowned author and creator of a much-loved science fiction series. But sadly, Max survived. And that was when you got involved in our story. A serious mistake, Dr. Cooper, a very serious mistake."

Drew stared at her. "Are you saying you were the one who shot at Max?"

Charity smiled as if she were a star pupil. "Oh, you're so clever. No wonder you managed to earn a PhD."

Drew ignored the sarcasm dripping from her voice like icicles. "Why on earth would you do something like that? Just to make news?"

"Hardly," Charity said. Her smile disappeared, and her face went hard and cold. "I've loved Max Sinclair forever. I have a website dedicated to him, and I've e-mailed him hundreds of times. I've sent him photos of myself in all sorts of poses, and he's never even written me back. But he's been sleeping with you. Having sex with you."

Drew remembered that the local police had thought the convention shooting had been a deranged fan. It looked as if they'd been right. "You wanted him for yourself," she said slowly.

"I begged him to make love to me. I wrote him with every fantasy I ever had. He never answered."

Drew recalled Max's offhand comments about fans wanting to have his babies. She'd assumed he was making a joke. Evidently she'd been wrong. "So you decided to kill him?"

Charity's lips compressed into a grim line, and a fanatical light shone in her eyes. "If I couldn't have him, I didn't want anyone to have him. So I tried to kill him." She chuckled. "Irony, isn't it? An hour after I tried to kill him I was on the air, reporting on the story. I was the one who broke that story. I told my boss we had an anonymous tip."

"But you haven't tried to kill him since?"

"I dropped some rat poison into his water pitcher while I was in his hospital room," Charity said cheerfully. "But a nurse must have emptied it out and refilled it. A pity, that. And then he became involved with you."

Drew swallowed, realizing how close Max had come to death, without ever realizing it. "But the threatening note I got—"

"Oh, I didn't have a thing to do with that. You see, when Max had his date with your sister Brittany—"

"Tiffani."

"Is there a difference? I followed them all over town that night. And I noticed that someone else was following them, too."

"Lucas," Drew speculated.

"That's right. I had a little talk with him, and we discovered we have quite a lot in common. A love for Farthest Space. An enthusiasm for a certain sort of sex that some people might label kinky. And the desire to keep tabs on two people who were apparently dating. So we decided to work together."

"Charming," Drew said coolly. "Two psychopaths for the price of one. And what about Tiffani's wreck? Did you two have something to do with that too?"

Charity showed her teeth again. "The night we met, I... encouraged Lucas to take matters into his own hands." Her gaze slid toward the coiled bullwhip, making Drew wonder precisely what that encouragement had involved. She guessed she really didn't want to know.

"You couldn't possibly have met him that night," she said instead. "That was the night he left the photo on my patio."

"I decided not to follow Tiffani until she left the movie," Lucas said. His eyes narrowed to slits. "I wanted to leave a message for you first."

"So you knew Tiff was going to be at that movie?"

"She told me when we talked on the phone that afternoon." His hands clenched so hard she was afraid the gun would go off. "I couldn't believe she was going out with another guy, after I'd begged her to give me another chance."

It figured Tiffani would keep a stalker apprised of her activities, Drew thought. That was the sort of really dumb thing she specialized in. "So you got mad and ran her off the road?"

"I thought it was you," Lucas growled. "Tiffani was driving your car, and she had her hair pulled back that day. I didn't mean to hurt Tiffani, I swear I didn't. I love her."

Drew felt a cold rage sweep through her, a consuming fury stronger and more powerful than her fear. "I didn't think you had the balls to try to kill anyone," she said icily. "In fact, I honestly didn't think you had any balls at all."

Charity flashed her feline smile. "It was my idea, actually. He hated you so. I told him that simply threatening you wasn't enough, that in order to be a real man he had to kill you."

Being a real man was something Lucas had always failed miserably at. Charity had nailed his weakness and exploited it with ruthless malice. Drew would have bet her last nickel that Charity had encouraged Lucas to attempt murder so she could have something to hold over his head. Something to bond him to her, even to blackmail him with if necessary. She guessed, however, that blackmail probably hadn't been needed, judging from the stark worship in Lucas' eyes as he gazed at Charity.

Drew glared at both of them. "You almost killed her, goddammit."

"It shouldn't have been her," Lucas said. "You shouldn't have let her drive your car."

Drew took a deep breath, holding back the angry words that sizzled in her mouth. She couldn't afford to tell them exactly what she thought. She had to stay calm. "And you've been following me around."

"Lucas has been keeping tabs on you," Charity said smoothly.

Lucas made a growling sound. "Too bad I couldn't get you alone. The one day I had a chance, when the campus was pretty much deserted, there was this big kid with arms like tree trunks following you."

She felt a surge of gratitude to Ken, realizing that she probably owed him her life. There was a note in Lucas' voice that suggested he had wanted to do more than merely "keep tabs" on her. "So you trashed my house instead."

"No," Charity said. "That was me. You went out with Max again, and I'm sorry to say I got a trifle upset." She smiled again. "And I must say it made a simply fabulous story as well. Your regrettable troubles have done quite a lot to advance my career, Dr. Cooper."

"So happy I could help," Drew said between her teeth.

"But it's actually quite fortunate Lucas didn't manage to kill you," Charity went on in her insanely cheerful voice. "Because you are going to help Lucas get his beloved Tiffani back, and you're going to help me get rid of Max Sinclair."

"You can go straight to hell," Drew retorted.

"Oh, I wouldn't be allowed in," Charity said brightly. "I'm much too bad."

"If you think I'm going to help you hurt Max and Tiffani—"

Charity smiled grimly. "If you think you have any choice in the matter, Dr. Cooper, you're sadly mistaken."

"Look," Max said as he brought the Mustang to a halt, a block from Charity's house, "you guys get out here. Call the cops and tell them about all this, but tell them not to approach Charity's house with their sirens on. This whole thing might turn out to be a weird coincidence, but still..."

"No way," Tiffani said. "I'm going with you."

Max glared at her. "Damn it, Tiffani, we don't have time for you to play Nancy Drew. Charity said she'd only talk to me. If she's got Drew, she might kill her if anyone else shows up. Stay here."

She glared right back at him. "You're a rotten liar, Max. Why would she have called on my phone and then said I couldn't come along?"

Max narrowed his eyes at her, annoyed that she had picked this particular time to demonstrate that she did, in fact, have a brain under her fuzzy hair. "Goddamnit, I shouldn't have let you come along. I knew you were going to be trouble."

"We're not going to let you go up there alone, Max," Ken said.

"Look," Max said, "I admit Charity said Tiffani could come along, but she was really clear about it, that no one else could come. If she's got Drew, I don't know what she might do if all three of us show up. And if she really is behind all this, she's nuts. There's no point in all of us risking our lives. It'd be safer for both of you to stay here and call the cops. That's the best thing you can do, okay?"

Tiffani hesitated, then scrambled out of the car, yanked her cell phone out of her purse and dialed the emergency number. Ken followed her, and Max threw the car into first gear. Tiffani leaned her head in through the open door. "Don't go there by yourself, Max. Wait for the cops. They'll be here soon."

He knew it was rational advice, but he wasn't in a rational mood. "It might not be soon enough. I've got to go find out if she's there, Tiffani. I've got to know if she's all right."

Tiffani started talking to the operator, and he took advantage of her momentary distraction by slamming the door shut and hitting the accelerator. The Mustang took off with a screech of tires.

Seconds later he was pulling up Charity's driveway, trying not to look like he was in a panic. He was supposed to think he was here to get information from her. He should look eager and hopeful. Not like he thought she might be a psycho.

He got out of the car and stalked up the steps, then rang the doorbell. Charity opened the door and smiled at him. "Hi, Maxfield."

"Hi," he said, trying to remember if the fan who'd sent him all those e-mails had looked a thing like Charity. He'd deleted all of them—well, okay, most of them—right away, but he had glanced at a couple of them. Very briefly, of course. All he could remember was that she'd had dark hair and a darned impressive rack. Sexist pig that he was, he hadn't really paid much attention to the fan's face. It could have been Charity, but then again it could have been any other dark-haired woman equipped with C cups.

C cups. He replayed the scene from the convention in his mind. The panic he'd felt when he realized he was being shot at had pretty much burned the moment into his brain. He remembered noticing the Va'ra warrior watching him, remembered seeing the warrior lift the gun, remembered the shock he'd felt when he'd heard the gunfire. He'd assumed his assailant was a man. Could the Va'ra possibly have been a well-endowed woman instead?

He thought about the body armor the Va'ra wore. It was heavy and shapeless enough to disguise pretty much any anatomical feature. And Charity was taller than a lot of men. Yes, he decided with a sinking feeling, it could have been her.

That realization didn't make him feel any better.

"Where's Tiffani?"

"Uh, she wanted me to drop her off at her place so she wouldn't have to pay the babysitter any more," Max fabricated hastily, then could have kicked himself as Charity looked at him oddly.

"Does she live near here?"

Tiffani's apartment was on the other side of town, and Charity would know that if she'd been keeping tabs on him. "I meant my place. My mom was watching Alice."

Charity's brows lowered as she considered him silently, and he realized he'd totally messed up his story. She had to realize he was lying, and rather badly at that. Tiffani was right. He was a rotten liar. "Well," she said at last, "that's too bad. But come on in anyway. At least you and I can talk."

He felt like a fly being invited into a web by a very polite spider. Going into her house didn't seem like his best move. He stood firm on the porch. "This isn't a social call, Charity. Why don't you tell me

what information you've got for me?"

She smiled. "I think you'll find this very interesting. I know where Lucas Walters is staying."

Max deliberately tried to catch her off guard. "Actually, we figured that out earlier this afternoon. He's been staying with James Barton, a professor at the university."

He saw the flash of surprise in her eyes. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, but he seems to have murdered Barton. The cops are on their way over there right now."

"Oh, dear," she murmured. "How very unfortunate." Behind her, in the hall, he saw a man appear. The guy was short and slender, with straggly dark hair, and he was wearing a Farthest Space shirt. Charity's eyes gleamed as the man lifted a gun and pointed at him.

"I'm afraid, Maxfield," she said, still smiling, "that you're next."

Chapter 33

Never try to make peace with a man holding a blaster.

Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

Being killed by a man wearing a Farthest Space shirt, Max reflected, would certainly be a hell of an ironic twist. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be around to be amused by it. He had a feeling Charity would be happy to mention the irony in her report, though.

Now he realized what he should have realized before—the reason Charity was always the first newscaster on any scene involving Drew or Tiffani was because she'd been the one to create the scenes in the first place. And somehow she'd manipulated Lucas into doing her dirty work for her.

He thought about jumping over the porch railing and making a run for it, but he figured Lucas would shoot him before he could get very far. The small bushes that lined the front of the house didn't provide much cover. At any rate, Charity wanted him dead, and it seemed pretty damned likely that she had kidnapped Drew. If she failed to kill Max, she might take out her frustrations by shooting Drew instead.

He was here to save Drew. Saving his own ass was secondary.

He did his best to ignore the heavy pounding of his heart. Forcing his absolute dumbest expression onto his face, he said, "What's this all about, Charity?"

Charity stepped back. "Come on in, Maxfield."

Her tone was bizarrely, surreally courteous, as if she was asking him in for a beer. The only hint that she wasn't just being polite was the little man standing there with a handgun trained on his chest. The guy's shirt showed Captain McNeill pointing the barrel of a particle weapon outward, giving Max the weird sensation that he was being threatened by both Lucas and McNeill. Max stepped forward, into the marble-floored foyer, and let Charity close the door behind him.

"What's going on here?" he repeated.

"What's going on," Charity said, still smiling, "is that you rejected me one too many times, Maxfield. And now you're going to pay for it."

Max let his jaw hang slackly as he stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm your greatest fan, Maxfield. Don't you remember my website? It was called 'The Greatest of These.'"

He forced an expression of dawning comprehension onto his face. "Was that you?"

He knew he wasn't much of an actor, and he had a feeling he'd overdone it when Charity snorted.

"Yes, that was me. The woman you snubbed. Repeatedly. You bastard."

He heard the acid etched into her voice and understood for the first time how much she hated him. In retrospect his insistence on coming to Charity's house alone seemed kind of dumb. He could think of several plans involving Ken, several ways he and Ken could have overpowered Lucas. But he didn't seem able to come up with a reasonable plan to get the gun away from Lucas. All by himself he stood a pretty good chance of getting shot. Which wouldn't really do Drew a whole hell of a lot of good.

Stalling until the cops got here seemed like his best option. If the cops got here.

"You kept sending me pictures," Max said slowly, as if he was trying to remember a long-ago incident.

"Yeah, I remember now. There was a picture of you, uh, with a bullwhip." He remembered that particular picture because it had been vulgar enough to make him blush—okay, blush more than usual. But she seemed pleased that he remembered.

"There were lots of pictures of me, Maxfield."

"Why didn't you tell me you lived here in Swift Creek?"

Charity lifted a shoulder. "I didn't, originally. I'm from Massachusetts. I came here because you lived here. I chose a new name and got a job here."

"Charity isn't your real name?" That was what he had begun to guess.

"My real name is Jane Smith. Dreadfully bland, isn't it? I chose the name Charity after your third book was published."

"I like Charity better," he agreed. It was, he thought, beyond creepy that she'd totally uprooted her life and changed her name, her identity, just to live in the same small town he did. He did his utmost not to let his distaste show on his face.

"No one ever wanted me as Jane," she said softly. "But I hoped you'd want Charity. I followed you everywhere. I took pictures of you all the time. I had pictures of you doing all sorts of mundane things — walking your dog, trimming your bushes. And I posted them all to my website and wrote about you."

He remembered those photos all too clearly. A photo of himself tossing a stick for Blue in the backyard. She must have been taking photos, spying on him, from the woods. He wondered if she'd ever stopped, and a shiver of revulsion ran down his spine.

"If I'd ever gotten to know you—" he began, but she cut him off with a scornful laugh.

"If you'd bothered to read the e-mails I sent you'd have known me better than anyone else ever did. You never bothered. Don't pretend you care now."

Max decided to try another tack. "Look, Charity, I'm flattered that you like *Farthest Space* so much, but the truth is, I'm really a boring guy. I don't think you'd be all that interested in me if you got to know me."

She gave a threatening, feline smile. "I could have made your life much more interesting, Maxfield."

He didn't doubt that, he thought, remembering the bullwhip. Somehow he didn't think he wanted his life to be quite that interesting. "Uh, yeah, I bet you could have."

"I hated having to try to kill you, Maxfield."

He took that as a confirmation that she was the one who'd shot him at the convention. "Not as much as I hated having you try to kill me," he said.

Never piss off a woman who owns a bullwhip. Those were good words to live by. Unfortunately, living was looking less and less like something he was going to do for much longer. Maybe, he thought grimly, those words could be engraved on his headstone.

Charity looked at him for a long moment. "Come on upstairs, Maxfield. There's someone I want you to see."

The pounding of his heart accelerated. They had Drew, he was certain of it. The only question was, was she alive or dead? Lucas stepped behind him, pressing the muzzle of the gun right against the middle of his back, and Max went obediently up the stairs.

When she heard Max's voice downstairs, Drew made one last frantic effort to free herself of her bonds. They were slipping pretty freely on her wrists now, quite possibly because they were wet with blood. Her arms hurt like hell, but she no longer cared much. Based on the whips, chains, and masks scattered about this room, she guessed Charity had a dominatrix relationship with Lucas. By himself, she was pretty sure Lucas was too cowardly to kill someone, but Charity had clearly figured out how to manipulate him into doing her dirty work for her.

Frantic thoughts tumbled wildly together in her head. Charity had kidnapped her, and was probably going to kill her. Max would be next. She had to do something. The knot loosened marginally, and with a last wrenching effort she slipped her hands free. She reached down and fumbled desperately at the knot that held her ankles together, but her hands were numb with pain and restricted blood circulation, the knot was too tight, and at any rate, her feet felt too numb to support her weight. It would probably take quite a while for her blood circulation to return once she got the bonds off. In the meantime, she was effectively crippled.

Besides, she already heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She looked around swiftly for something she could use in defense. There was a heavy brass lamp perched on a table a few feet away from the bed, just out of her reach. She saw a small, missile-shaped, peach-colored object lying on the nightstand and grabbed it. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it would have to do. As the footsteps drew near the door, she fell back onto the bed with her hands behind her, hopefully disguising the fact that her hands were free.

The door opened, and Charity walked into the room. Just behind her came Max. She realized with alarm that Lucas was just behind him with his gun. Max looked at Drew, and his eyes blazed with relief, followed almost instantly by shocked concern. She guessed her extremely naked state was responsible for the latter.

She had never been happier in her life to see anyone than she was to see Max. For the first time she realized how important he was to her. He meant everything to her.

She couldn't bear to see him die.

She wished she could reassure him that they hadn't hurt her in any substantial way. But she guessed they were probably going to. She imagined that was why Charity had brought Max up here, to see the last act in her little drama unfold. She saw from Max's expression that he'd figured out the same thing.

They were going to hurt her. And then they were going to kill Max.

Raw, primal fear coursed through Drew, motivating her to act despite the numbness in her feet and the debilitating, aching pain in her hands and arms. She had to distract Lucas and Charity, had to stop them from shooting Max. Distraction was the only chance they had.

Jerking upright, she flung the small object as hard as she could. It struck Charity square in the nose, and she yelped as blood started to flow. Reflexively, Lucas started to turn toward Drew.

Which was a mistake. Max twisted around, caught Lucas' skinny arm in his big hand, and applied pressure. Drew heard Lucas' bones cracking under the stress, and the gun clattered to the floor. Then Max slammed his other fist into Lucas' face. Lucas fell backward, his head striking the wall heavily, and was still.

Drew saw Charity moving toward the gun. She yanked the gag out of her mouth. "Max!"

Max spun in Charity's direction. But before he could intercept her, a cool voice spoke from the doorway. "Hold still, Charity."

At the unexpected voice, Drew's head jerked up. She saw Tiffani standing at the door, Ken just behind her. And in Tiffani's hand was a small, lethal-looking pistol. Charity blinked in confusion, then stepped back. Max bent, retrieved Lucas' gun, and handed it to Ken.

"You'd better tie them up," Drew suggested.

"Let me check on this son of a bitch first." Max knelt down and put his fingers against Lucas' throat. In a moment he straightened up. "He's all right." He glared down at Lucas' still figure, rage still glimmering in the depths of his eyes. "Pity."

Drew had no doubt, from his stiff expression of anger, that he wouldn't have been in the least upset to discover he'd killed Lucas. For the first time she realized he was willing to go to any length to protect her. A small sensation of pleasure unfurled in her chest at this glimpse of just how much she meant to Max.

There was a coil of rope still lying next to the bed. Max hastily tied up Lucas and Charity, very tightly. Still out cold, Lucas didn't stir, but Charity glared at him.

"You'll regret this," she hissed.

"Not half as much as you will," Max said, tying a cloth over her mouth to shut her up. "I'm not the one going to jail, after all."

He turned and stared at Drew, and she saw the desperate anxiety in his eyes. "It's okay, Max," she said hastily. "They didn't hurt me."

"They didn't—" Max hesitated, as if what he'd imagined was too awful to be put into words.

"No. I'm fine."

"You're bleeding," he said harshly.

Drew looked down at her wrists, at the raw and bloody welts made by the bonds, and shrugged. "I'm okay. But do me a favor, and get these damn ropes off my ankles."

Max knelt next to Drew on the bed and yanked at her bonds until her feet were free. She fell against him, wrapping her arms around his neck, and felt him yank her against his chest tightly.

"I'm never going to let you go again," he whispered against her hair.

Behind them, Tiffani said with her typical Valley Girl inflection, "Oh, my God. What is this place?"

Drew looked around, seeing the various sex toys she'd noticed earlier. It looked like Lucas and Charity had been seriously into S & M games. At least she imagined that was what the bullwhip was for, since she couldn't think of a single other practical use for a bullwhip in the bedroom. Maybe she needed to read more women's magazines, she thought, and felt an almost irresistible urge to giggle hysterically.

She firmly controlled her reaction and looked at her sister over the solid wall of Max's shoulder. "I told you Lucas was into this stuff. Apparently he and Charity shared a common interest in it." She narrowed her eyes at Tiffani and did her best to look severe. "You should have listened to me, Tiff. I told you he was a loser."

Tiffani smiled serenely. "At least I never dated a cross-dresser."

Drew lifted her eyebrows questioningly, and Max interjected hastily, "She's not talking about me."

"I kind of figured," Drew said. "Although I have to admit you'd look just fabulous in a Bob Mackie dress."

"I see myself as more of a Christian Dior man."

"No accounting for taste." Drew slanted a curious look at Tiffani. "Are you talking about James, then?"

"Yeah," Tiffani said. "He's dead, Drew. Lucas killed him."

Drew blinked. "How come?"

"We're just guessing, but we figure Lucas was blackmailing him into giving him a place to stay," Ken said.

Max nodded. "Maybe Lucas figured out he was a cross-dresser when James was dating you. Anyway, I figure James was actually trying to warn you about all this last week, and Lucas found out and killed him."

"James was a cross-dresser," Drew repeated, stunned. "That's so weird. I never saw him wear anything but black turtlenecks and tweed jackets."

"Evidently he had more fashion sense than you gave him credit for," Max said dryly. He let Drew go, reluctantly, and stood up. He looked down at her seriously. "I think you saved my life, Drew."

"I don't think so," Drew said. "You guys planned this pretty well."

"We didn't plan anything," Max said, clearly annoyed. "I told Tiffani and Ken to stay clear and call the cops. I was going to handle this myself."

"That was a dumb idea," Tiffani said. "Ken and I agreed that we needed to follow you. It's called backup, Max. Even cops don't leave home without it. Anyway, I was the one with the gun."

"Well, I didn't know that, did I?" Max retorted. "You could have said so, you know. Where did you get that gun, anyway?"

"I work pretty late at the store sometimes, you know. So I got a concealed weapon permit. I figured a gun might come in handy sometime. Isn't it cute?"

"Cute," Max repeated, looking at the tiny pistol dubiously. Drew understood his reaction. Only Tiffani, she thought with bemusement, would describe a deadly weapon as cute.

"I was always careful to keep it where Alice couldn't get at it, and I never mentioned it to Drew, because I figured she'd worry." She smiled sunnily. "Don't look so shocked, guys. You look like I just turned into the Terminator or something."

"Do you even know how to use that thing?" Drew said skeptically.

"Sure. I'm not stupid, you know. I took a firearms safety class. And I took a target practice class in college, remember? I got pretty good at it."

Max stared at her a long moment, then he shook his head slowly, as if stunned. "Shirley Temple packing heat," he muttered. "What is the world coming to?"

"What?"

"Never mind." Max shook his head again. "Listen, Tiffani, I apologize for underestimating you. I'll never do it again, I swear." He smiled with the first flash of humor Drew had seen tonight, and amusement shimmered in his eyes. "I shouldn't have come here without a weapon. Good thing you and Drew were both armed."

Drew frowned. She wasn't sure what the object she'd grabbed was. "What did I throw at Charity, anyway? It was the only thing I could reach, but I didn't have time to figure out what it was."

She heard his deep, rolling laughter, a sound she'd been terribly afraid she'd never hear again, and thought it was the most wonderful sound she'd ever heard in her life. He walked back across the room,

picked the object up off the floor, and held it up gingerly between two fingers for her inspection.

"I'm not really an expert on this sort of thing," he said, still laughing, "but I'm pretty sure you brought down Charity with a vibrator."

The dark cloud of stress Drew had been operating under for the past several hours evaporated, and she giggled. Tiffani snorted with laughter too, and crossed the room to sit down next to her sister.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she said, more seriously.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Drew said, although the circulation was beginning to return to her feet, making it feel as though someone was stabbing at her toes with small, wickedly sharp knives.

"This whole mess is all my fault," Tiffani said. "If I had listened to you and not gotten involved with Lucas in the first place—"

"Then you wouldn't have Alice," Drew interrupted.

"Yeah," Tiffani said thoughtfully. "Yeah, you're right. I never thought of it that way."

"The cops are here," Ken said.

Max looked out the door, and Drew saw blue lights illuminate the strong planes of his face. He glanced over his shoulder at Charity, trussed and gagged in the corner like a Thanksgiving turkey. "Too bad Charity won't be able to report on all this. I can just imagine the story she could make of this situation." He looked back at Drew and grinned wickedly. "Drew Cooper, the vibrator vigilante."

Cringing at the thought of dealing with the cops, after all she'd been through tonight, Drew looked down to discover she was still stark naked. Glancing around the room, she asked, "So has anyone seen my clothes?"

Max picked up a hooker-red, crotchless teddy and waved it at her. "Is this yours?"

"Very funny," Drew said.

Chapter 34

There is nothing in the galaxy more important than love.

Sex, however, ranks an extremely close second.

Captain Steven T. McNeill, Farthest Space

"The cops said Lucas confessed he killed James because he was threatening to squeal," Max said later that evening in Drew's living room. "Lucas knew James had been trying to tell you what was going on, and he realized he wasn't going to be able to keep him quiet forever, no matter how much he blackmailed him." He looked at Drew's bent head, saw her unhappy expression, and patted her hand. "I know he meant something to you once, Drew. I'm sorry."

"It's not that," Drew said. She sighed. "Okay, maybe it is that, a little. I mean, I'm sorry James is dead. He was screwed up, but I don't think he was basically a terrible person. In fact, I'm starting to think our relationship fell apart because he was ashamed of what he was. He wanted to be a staid, boring professor, and he just couldn't manage it. I think he really did care for me, and he was becoming afraid I'd discover his secret. Maybe blaming me was easier than blaming himself."

"I think you're practicing psychiatry without a license," Max said gently. "James Barton was a jerk, pure and simple."

She lifted her head and smiled wryly. "Everything's simple to you, isn't it?"

"Maybe. But you do tend to overcomplicate things, you know."

"No kidding." Drew sighed, and her smile faded. "I wasn't really thinking about James just now, to tell you the truth. The reason I was getting depressed was because I think Lucas and I have more in common than I'd like."

"Huh?"

"It's just that—" Drew met his eyes squarely. "When Tiffani said Lucas had kept James in line by threatening to expose his secret, I realized I'd done exactly the same thing to Lucas. It isn't very pleasant to realize you've resorted to blackmail."

"There's a difference, Drew. You were trying to protect someone you loved. Lucas was just trying to protect his own ass."

"I guess I went a little overboard in protecting Tiffani."

"Maybe." Max pressed his lips together. "To tell you the truth, I think I was a little hasty in condemning you on that score." He glanced at her. "I guess I can understand your desire to protect Tiffani a little better now. Today I realized I'd do almost anything to protect you. I would have killed Lucas and Charity without a second thought if I'd had to."

Drew nodded. She lifted her eyes and gazed into his a long moment. When she'd needed Max, he'd been there for her. As far as she was concerned, he made the heroically swashbuckling Captain McNeill look like a wimp. "Thank you for saving me, Max."

"You didn't need saving. You were armed with a deadly weapon."

Drew laughed. "Stop it with the vibrator, Max."

He shook his head and became more serious. "You know that what you did was incredibly dumb,

right?"

"I thought it was pretty impressive," Drew said, affronted.

"Hell, yeah, it was impressive. None of McNeill's girlfriends could have done better. But it was still a stupid thing to do. You startled the hell out of Lucas. He—" He broke off, aware that he was breathing hard. "He was jerking his gun around to shoot you, just as a reflex. You know that, don't you?"

Drew bit her lip. "I realized that might happen," she admitted. "But I was certain that if I distracted Charity and Lucas for just a second, you'd be able to get away from Lucas. I trusted you, Max."

"It was a reckless thing to do, Drew."

"But if I hadn't done anything, there wasn't any doubt that Charity was going to have Lucas kill you. She really hated you, Max." She looked up at him, her eyes solemn. "I couldn't let that happen, Max. I couldn't let you die."

"Even so, you shouldn't have risked your life for me. I could have lost you today." He felt moisture on his cheeks and looked away from her steady gaze. "I couldn't stand to lose you, Drew. Please don't ever risk your life like that again."

She stared at him a long moment. "Max, you're crying."

"I spent the whole afternoon scared out of my wits," he said roughly. "I was sure you were dead. I thought—" His voice choked off, and he looked away. Drew touched his arm in wordless sympathy.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I've never felt so scared in my life, Drew. Not even when I had cancer. I'd rather face cancer treatments again than go through another day thinking you could be dead." His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I've never felt so alone in my life."

"It's all right, Max. I'm okay. And you're not alone. You've got me."

Slowly, he turned and faced her, aware that there were still tears streaking his face, but too desperately lonely to be embarrassed by his display of emotion. "That's what my mom told me," he said softly. "That's what she said at the church when she wanted to speak to me in private. That I wasn't alone. As long as I had you."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment, then slipped her arms around his neck and pressed her face against his shoulder. Slowly, he slid his arms around her waist, feeling the deep, aching emptiness inside of him ease a bit as he did so. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled, breathing in the reassuringly familiar scent of her.

He could feel her warmth, forming a golden circle around him like the light from a candle. A circle where he was no longer alone, where someone wanted him despite his flaws.

A circle where someone cared for him.

In the middle of the night Max awakened with a start, his heart pounding. In his dreams he'd seen Drew, tied and helpless, and Lucas aiming a gun at her, ready to kill her, while Charity laughed insanely in the shadows. Unable to prevent himself, he reached over to the other side of the bed and felt Drew, warm and full of life. She stirred.

"Mmm?"

"Never mind," he whispered. "I'm sorry I woke you."

She yawned and stretched. "Well, now that I'm awake—" She rolled over and pressed up next to him.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, finding the warmth of her body inexpressibly comforting.

She meant a great deal to him. And he could have lost her. The knowledge filled him with a bleak anguish he'd never known before. Yearning to be closer to her, he slid his tongue along her lips, parting them, probing inside. Deep inside.

More than he'd ever wanted anything, he wanted to be deep inside her body too. He wanted to be as close to her as was humanly possible, wanted to be part of her. But he controlled himself, reminding himself she'd been handled roughly today. She deserved to be treated with tenderness and restraint.

He ran his hands across her satiny skin, touching her everywhere, then buried his face against her shoulder and whispered her name. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, and her lips brushed the top of his head, as if he were a child in need of reassurance. Gently, her hands caressed him, as if she understood the dark fears that had tormented him all afternoon. As if she understood everything he felt, without any need for words. Some of the tension ebbed from his muscles as she touched him, softly, intimately.

He lifted his head and delved deep into her mouth again, kissing her with a wild intensity, desperate to express everything he felt, everything he'd kept bottled up inside himself for weeks. Things he'd been afraid he'd never have the chance to tell her. He caressed her everywhere, trying to convey how precious she was to him, how much she meant to him. How much he needed her.

His breath came in harsh, ragged gasps. He felt her shiver beneath his questing hands and knew she wanted him as badly as he wanted her. Unable to hold himself back a second longer, he slid inside her.

She was hot and wet and ready for him, and the agonizing intensity of the first thrust all but killed him with pleasure. He uttered a strangled, inarticulate cry against her mouth.

"Max," she whispered, twining her fingers in his hair. "Maxfield."

The sound of his name, murmured with unmistakable tenderness, wrenched a helpless response from him. He moved inside her, hard and fast, more urgently than he had intended, and heard her soft cries of pleasure, felt her twist and shudder beneath him, felt her muscles quiver over and over again with the strength of her climax.

He was completely overwhelmed by the force of his feelings for her. For the first time he admitted to himself that Drew meant more to him than he had ever imagined another human being could. He had no more uncertainties, no more questions. He knew how he felt, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

He loved her.

At the realization, an exquisite pleasure, an overpowering surge of liquid flame, exploded within him. The shattering, mind-blowing release ripped a long, drawn-out cry from his chest. Then, slowly, he collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily.

Afterward, he held her a long while, hearing her breathing slow and become more even. He felt her body, warm against his, felt her arm flung possessively across his chest, felt her long legs entwined with his. Suffused by an emotion deeper and more profound than any he had felt before, he tightened his arms around her and pressed his face into her hair.

"Drew," he said, quietly.

"Mmm?"

"I love you."

He waited a long moment, hoping, praying. His heart thudded painfully against his ribs. And then, at

last, she spoke, so softly he could scarcely hear her.

"I love you, Max."

His chest swelled with emotion, and he closed his eyes, filled with overwhelming gratitude. Thank God. Drew loved him.

It was all he had ever wanted.

Epilogue

Max's fingers, which had been racing along at his normal typing speed of somewhere over eighty words a minute, stilled on the keyboard. Blue clambered to his feet, stretched, and wagged his tail hopefully, having learned long ago that a pause in Max's typing after several hours of work usually meant a walk.

Before Max could get up to find Blue's leash, however, the door opened. Joni Mitchell's voice, singing "Court and Spark" on the stereo downstairs, drifted into the room as Drew stuck her head into the study. "Are you at a good stopping point?" she asked.

Max smiled at her. "Better than a good stopping point," he said. "I'm done."

"Really?" she said, surprised. "I didn't realize you were that close to the end."

"I got on a roll," he said. "The last few chapters just kind of came pouring out." He shot her a lascivious grin. "Maybe last night was kind of inspirational."

Drew blushed a bit. Most of their nights lately were inspirational, he thought, looking at her. She was as beautiful as ever, and in his opinion the gentle swell of her abdomen only enhanced her beauty. They'd been married six months ago. It had meant a lot to him that she'd been willing to marry him without knowing for sure if he could sire a baby.

To his surprised delight she'd gotten pregnant the first time they tried. The baby, however, was growing big enough to get in the way when they made love, compelling Max to try various new positions—something he found he no longer objected to in the least.

"So you can just send it off to your editor now?"

"I've got some revisions to make, but I don't think they'll take me too long. Anyway, I'm not starting them this afternoon." He looked at her hopefully. "I can think of something better to do."

"Forget it," she said.

Max did his best to look deprived and failed utterly. "Just like a woman," he said. "You put a ring on her finger and she doesn't want to do it more than three times a day."

"Uh-huh, you poor neglected thing. Get your mind out of bed, Max. We need to get dinner made."

"Dinner?" As usual when he was writing, mundane concerns like food were far from his consciousness. Sex, on the other hand, was never far from his mind. Not around Drew, anyway.

"Yes, dinner. Remember? Tiff, Ken, and Alice are coming over tonight."

"Actually, I forgot." He stood up and stretched, trying to bring his mind back to reality. "Okay, I'll grill the chicken if you'll make the salad."

"Don't you want to make the salad?"

"I'd like to keep my fingers, thanks. It'd be hard to type without them."

Drew glanced curiously at the monitor, which displayed the last few words of his novel. "Did your book turn out okay?"

He nodded. "It took longer than usual to write, but I think it's worth it."

He was grateful to have married a woman who understood the difficulties a writer faced and who didn't mind when he got out of bed at midnight to write a scene that had just popped into his head. Drew was extraordinarily patient about that kind of thing, being a writer herself. In fact, Drew had just completed

her fourth book for a small university press, a slim manuscript pithily entitled *Ulysses in Space: Literary and Mythological Allusions and Archetypes in Popular Science Fiction*. With a catchy title like that, he figured it was headed straight for the New York Times bestseller list. Hopefully his latest would get there too, now that the damned thing was finally finished.

All the upheaval in his life had delayed his book three months over deadline. He and Drew hadn't wanted a big wedding, and had just invited their immediate families and a few friends, including his four new stepsisters and Ken Harshaw, who was never far from Tiffani and Alice nowadays. He had lost two weeks of writing time when they went on their honeymoon to Hawaii, however—something he refused to be apologetic about, somewhat to his editor's annoyance.

He'd sold his old house, which was too big and too impersonal, and moved into Drew's house, which they had spent quite a bit of time redecorating more to their mutual taste, with less chintz and more big, manly leather chairs. Chairs a guy could sit in without getting in touch with his feminine side.

Then he and Drew had had to testify at Lucas' and Charity's trials, but to his satisfaction, they had both been convicted of a huge list of offenses that would keep them in jail for a very long time. Max had also had to fend off Channel 9's entire news team, who seemed determined to interview him every two days. They'd apparently all loathed Charity, and reported on her downfall with avid, barely suppressed glee.

All in all he thought it was a miracle his book had ever gotten finished.

Drew headed for the kitchen, and he followed behind her, observing the graceful sway of her hips—something six months of marriage hadn't dimmed his enthusiasm for in the least. He figured he'd still be admiring her rear end sixty years from now.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw the direction of his gaze, and amusement flickered in her eyes. "Watching me waddle?"

"You don't waddle," he said, more or less truthfully.

"Not yet, maybe. Wait a couple of months."

He laughed. "I can hardly wait."

She walked into the kitchen, pulled some carrots out of the refrigerator, and began slicing them. Blue sprawled at her feet, doing his imitation of a fuzzy throw rug. "So," she said, "do you think your editor will like your book?"

"I'm pretty sure she will, yeah. I think she'll even forgive me for turning it in late. It's pretty good—in fact, I think it's the best one I've written so far. My fans should like it, too. In the last chapter, Captain McNeill and his executive officer finally admit their feelings for one another."

Drew's eyes went wide. "Is that the ending for *Farthest Space*, then?"

"Of course not. They'll have plenty of other adventures, believe me." Max looked at her standing at the counter, her belly round with his child, and a warm feeling of contentment suffused him as he stood next to her and started the marinade for the chicken. After years of living alone, years of living a bleak, empty life in an empty house, he'd finally come home. He knew he'd never be lonely again.

"After everything they'd gone through together," he said, grinning, "I just figured they were finally entitled to a happy ending."

The End