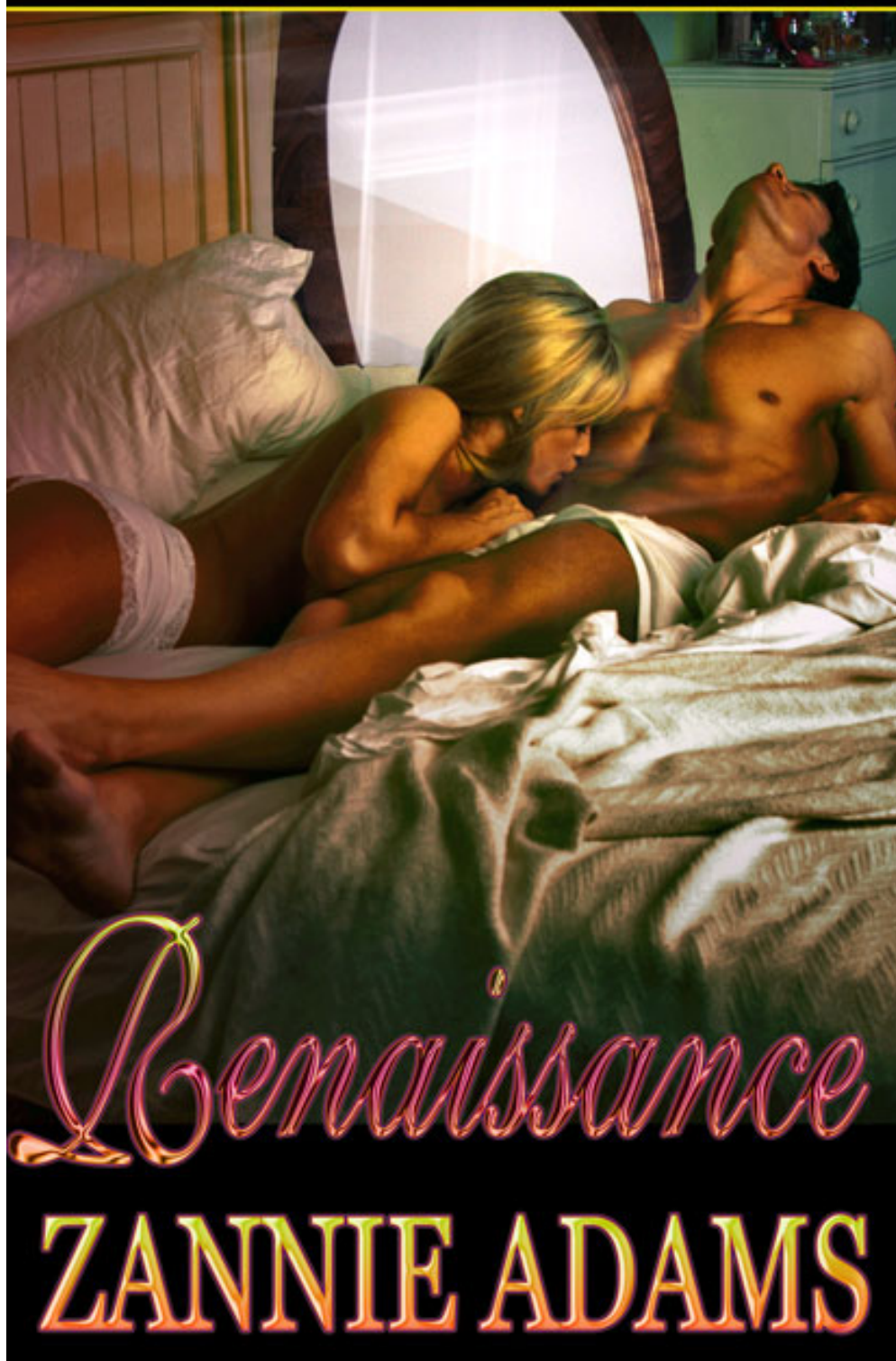


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



*Renaissance*

ZANNIE ADAMS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Renaissance

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# *RENAISSANCE*

**Zannie Adams**

*Dedication*

*For Stephanie.*

## Prologue

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me? Nothing like a little breaking and entering to spice up a Friday night.”

Cali’s tone was friendly and teasing, but she wasn’t as casual as she sounded. She really wanted her best friend, Jason, to come with her on this particular venture.

She was planning to break into the main offices of the Landon Industries plant because she needed verification of some information she’d discovered for a story she was writing for the *Blacksburg Leader* and she couldn’t think of another way to affirm her suspicions. She could easily do it herself, but it would be nice to have some company tonight.

Cali Ross was eighteen years old—she had just finished her senior year in high school—but she was already writing freelance for the local newspaper and she knew she was better at it than most of the real writers they had on staff. She’d outgrown her high-school newspaper last year and her ambition and initiative had been put to good use last summer in her internship at the *Blacksburg Leader*. Since then, the paper had accepted several different stories she’d written and would continue to do so, provided she had genuine news that the staff reporters hadn’t discovered themselves.

The story she was working on now could be really big, since the Landon Industries plant was the largest employer in town. All Cali needed to do now was verify that what she’d found out from another source was actually correct.

Thus the midnight trip to the plant, to break into the main offices. Cali had always been resourceful and creative, so she wasn’t concerned about getting into the building. But she would have liked to have Jason tag along—she didn’t see him as much, now that he’d found himself a girlfriend.

Cali wouldn’t have minded being his girlfriend, but he’d never been interested in her that way.

“You know I’m always up for an adventure,” Jason said from his end of the call. “But I don’t know about breaking into the plant. Kent is my friend and I’d feel kind of guilty about it.”

Cali rolled her eyes. Kent Landon was the son of Philip Landon, the billionaire who was the founder, owner and CEO of Landon Industries. Kent had been in Blacksburg for a year now, having moved there from Chicago, where the corporate headquarters of Landon Industries was located, to help his father with the supervision of the Blacksburg plant.

Cali supposed that Kent had made some efforts with the plant. But mostly he had been hanging out and indulging himself in various vices, which—as far as Cali was concerned—was all Kent Landon was good for.

“You hang out with him occasionally,” Cali corrected. “It’s not like he’s your best friend. He’s a lot older than us, for one thing and you have absolutely nothing in common. He only talks to you because he’s bored to tears, stuck in the middle of the cornfields.”

“Maybe so,” Jason allowed, sounding rather annoyed with her now. “But I don’t think he really has that many friends. And I don’t want it to seem like I’m going behind his back.”

Groaning, Cali sank down onto the bed in her room. “For God’s sake. It’s not like I’m going to steal anything or mess anything up at the plant. I just need to verify a couple of facts before I submit the story. You’re usually onboard with this sort of thing.”

It was true. Jason had been Cali’s companion on any number of similar escapades over the five years they’d been best friends. It was a small town and they both knew their way around, both openly and covertly. They’d always had fun helping each other with all kinds of projects. But recently Jason had been growing less and less interested in joining Cali in her harmless snoops.

Not for the first time, Cali wondered if Kent Landon’s jaded, spoiled lifestyle was influencing Jason in a negative way. Kent was well known for his expensive cars, wild parties and numerous flings with gorgeous brunettes. It was the life he’d grown up with and he certainly didn’t appear to be turning over a new leaf in Blacksburg.

Jason, on the other hand, was the son of a local farmer in Iowa. There was no way he’d ever be able to keep up with Kent’s kind of life. And Cali resented Kent for encouraging Jason to believe he needed to do so.

In fact, Cali was starting to resent Kent Landon for any number of reasons. Even though they were only casual acquaintances, she had begun to brood over his failings and defects quite a bit. Unfortunately, she saw him around town all the time—at the coffeehouse, at the diner, when she dropped by her father’s office at the plant—and she was always vaguely disgusted when she had to watch him charm his way into everyone’s good graces.

Kent was one of those slick, polished schmoozers she’d always hated.

He had never tried to charm Cali before. She was a lowly small-town girl, she was too young for him and, although she was reasonably attractive, she was blonde and curvy. Everyone knew Kent only liked brunettes who were built like models.

Jason had still been talking on the phone while Cali had been distracted by all of these reflections. He was again trying to explain why he would feel guilty about breaking into an office that Kent was responsible for.

“Kent is a jerk, Jason,” Cali interrupted bluntly. “He’s a spoiled, good-looking, rich boy who is used to always getting his way. He uses people to get what he wants. He fucks women once or twice and then blows them off by sending them jewelry—as if

they'd been bought and paid for. You know that as well as I do and please don't tell me you think it's all right. Plus, I'm sure you've heard all the rumors about the illicit dealings that Landon Industries is involved –"

"That's his *father*," Jason insisted. "Not Kent. He's really a good guy. You just don't know him and you're judging him by his reputation."

"I don't want to know him. His father is the most cold, arrogant ass on the face of the planet," Cali bit out. She'd met Philip Landon a couple of times, but most of her knowledge of the man came from her father's interaction with him. Cali knew enough from her father—who had worked at the Landon Industries plant for twenty years—to know that Philip Landon was manipulative and self-serving in all of his business dealings. And probably in his private dealings as well. "And his son will likely be just like him, whenever he gets over this rebellious phase and takes his father's place as tyrant of the corporate empire."

"Damn, Cali," Jason muttered. "When did you get so cynical?"

Cali felt like she'd been cynical all her life. Her mother had run out on her and her father when Cali had been four years old. Since then, all Cali had had was her father. He was loving and supportive, but he worked a lot, so Cali had been left on her own in ways that most kids weren't.

She'd managed just fine. She had her father, her friends and her ambition. Her independence and realistic perspective were actually assets. She certainly wasn't going to stick around Blacksburg, marry a local boy and have a bunch of kids. She was going to succeed in life and she knew what it took to succeed.

One of those things was having the guts to do some blatant snooping, if it was necessary for a big story.

With a sigh, Cali said, her voice less strident, "I know you like the guy, Jason, but I don't think he deserves your friendship."

"You don't know how his dad treats him. He's constantly bullying and belittling Kent. No wonder he's had a hard time. But I really think he's a decent guy."

"Whatever," Cali muttered. "So no chance of you joining me tonight?"

"Not tonight. Sorry."

With another resigned sigh, Cali hung up the phone.

It was fine. If her best friend was going to desert her, then she would do this by herself.

She was used to doing things by herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later, she snuck through a darkened hallway in the main building of the plant and headed directly for the last office on the right. She knew what she needed. Knew exactly where to look. Had no concerns about being caught or not succeeding in this investigation.

There was only one guard stationed on this side of the plant and he was watching late night television in the security cubicle. There was nothing top secret kept in these offices, so security was minimal and easily evaded.

Cali could have just borrowed her father's keys, since he worked in one of these offices every day. But employees used electronic key cards that probably logged every usage and Cali wasn't about to get her father in trouble.

So she'd found another way to get in—flirting with the guard and claiming that she'd left her purse in her father's office accidentally that afternoon but that she didn't want to let her dad know she was out so late tonight, so she couldn't ask him to let her in himself.

She *had* left her purse in her father's office. On purpose, of course.

And the guard, easily swayed by a convincing story, a glimpse of Cali's cleavage and a flip of her blonde hair, let her in with no problem.

She wouldn't be long. Then she would grab her purse, grin at the guard and leave with no one the wiser.

That was what she'd expected to happen, at least, as she pulled open the door of the back office.

She *hadn't* expected for Kent Landon to be in this particular office at almost midnight on a Friday night.

And she certainly hadn't expected for him to be fucking a beautiful brunette on the very desk that Cali was planning to search.

Cali was so shocked that she stood frozen in the doorway, staring at the half-naked, tangled bodies, which she could clearly see in profile from her vantage point.

The woman was leaning back on the surface of the desk, her shirt off and her small, firm breasts pulled out of the cups of her lace bra. Her long legs were wrapped around Kent's body and her arms were stretched back over her head, clutching at the far edge of the desk.

And Kent... Kent was still mostly dressed in a French blue dress shirt and black trousers. But his trousers had been pushed down his legs and Cali could see glimpses of his firm, trim ass through the shifting of his shirttails.

Cali had never had sex. She had never had a serious boyfriend. But she was hardly innocent or ignorant about sexual activity. In addition to all the basic education, she'd learned a lot from friends and had watched some soft-core porn on occasion.

But she had never experienced anything like this.

Her first instinct was to leave. To dart out of the room before she was seen.

But she couldn't seem to move her feet. She really, really wanted to, but she just couldn't seem to budge.

So then she wanted to close her eyes—to forget the carnal image that was now burned into her corneas—but she couldn't seem to do that either.



She'd never considered herself any sort of voyeur before, but she couldn't seem to do anything but stare.

Kent and the woman must not have noticed her yet, since they were so distracted by what they were doing. Kent's hands were bracing himself on the desk on either side of the brunette's body, his arms and his expression deeply tense.

His pelvis was pumping jerkily in a primitive rutting motion, as he thrust rapidly from his position between the woman's splayed thighs. He was panting so loudly that Cali could hear him from the doorway and his eyes were squeezed tightly shut.

"Yeah, baby," the woman gasped, grinding her pelvis against Kent's thrusting and digging her heels into his lower back. "Yeah, you're so good. You're so good. Fuck me, baby, fuck me."

Cali blinked. Astonished and horrified and darkly fascinated.

But, no matter how much she was screaming at herself to leave, she couldn't seem to turn away from the hot, tight expression on Kent's handsome face.

He was making a low kind of grunting sound now, in rhythm with his jerking hips. The muscles in his arms and legs seemed to be growing infinitely tenser, until it looked like he was almost shaking with coiled pressure.

He wore his dark hair very short. He always had and he was now known for that signature look. Cali could see a gleam of perspiration on his forehead, even in the low light of the room. She'd always thought he was good-looking—and had always sneered at how he used his looks to his own advantage—but she'd never experienced how attractive he was quite so viscerally before.

His neck twitched suddenly, tossing his head and he was almost baring his teeth from the tension as he drove forward—not just with his pelvis, but with his entire body—pushing against the moaning woman in his final, forceful thrusts.

Cali felt a deep, throbbing pressure, low in her belly, as she heard his rough grunts of release, as she saw a wash of intense pleasure transform his twisted face.

She was sick. Despicable. Getting turned on—more turned on than she could ever remember being—from...from *this*. From watching two people fucking, like she was some sort of creepy, peeping Tom.

Absolutely disgusted at herself, Cali took a step backward, willing her stiff movements to remain silent, so she wouldn't be caught in such an embarrassing situation.

But just as she was about to clear the doorway, Kent suddenly turned his head in her direction.

His blue-gray eyes locked on hers and they seemed as sharp and cool as usual, despite what he'd just been doing.

Cali choked, her mouth opening in a futile attempt to explain her presence here. No words came out.

What could she possibly say?

Now she wanted to run away more than ever, but her pride wouldn't let her any longer. She would not—*not*—make it appear as if Kent Landon had mortified or intimidated her.

Even though she'd just caught him fucking a nameless woman, his pants around his ankles and his very fine ass exposed to her view.

He must have been surprised by her presence. But years of hiding his true feelings had clearly paid off, since no shock, anger or awkwardness was reflected on his face. He arched one of his eyebrows at her, unnaturally composed in such a situation, as if he weren't embarrassed at all.

Cali randomly wondered how many times he'd been caught in such an act.

He'd been using a condom and now he moved a hand down to the base of his cock, to hold the condom in place as he pulled out of the brunette. If anything, he looked like he was amused.

Cali quickly looked away. Hated herself for blushing, but she couldn't seem to help it.

She'd never considered herself the kind of girl who blushed, no matter what the situation. Of course, she'd never imagined she'd ever be in a situation such as this.

When the woman, who was still sprawled half naked on the desk, saw Cali, she let out an indignant shriek and started fumbling to pull her clothes back in place. "What the fuck! Who are you? What sort of pervert—"

Cali was diligently not looking and she felt like she was about to melt into the floor. Plus, she was still a little aroused and she was praying that neither one of them would notice it.

Kent seemed to see everything, but surely he wouldn't see *that*.

"Oh, I'm sure it wasn't anything perverse that led the girl here," Kent drawled, turning away from her to dispose of the condom.

Cali bristled over being called a girl in such a tone, but she was hardly in the position to complain about semantics.

"She was probably in the middle of some kind of silly investigation," Kent continued, pulling up his pants and tucking his shirt in as he fastened the button and pulled up his zipper. He turned back toward her abruptly, fully dressed and totally in control. "And she thought she would break into the plant in pursuit of a story." His lip twitched slightly. "Right?"

And suddenly Cali's humiliation disappeared completely. A surge of fury swept over her and she clenched her hands to keep from clawing angry lines down Kent's handsome face.

He was always this way. Always. Smug and cool and heartless. And now he had the nerve to condescend to her, to taunt her—as if she were nothing but a child.

It wasn't like she had *wanted* to catch him in the middle of a fuck.

"I was just getting my purse," she gritted out through clenched teeth, glad she had a reasonable excuse and determined not to let even Kent Landon bully her. "I left it here this afternoon. Then I thought I heard a noise down the hall. I'm sorry I intruded on your...fun."

She let her eyes scan them dubiously on the last word, as if she were slightly bored and unimpressed by what she had seen.

Kent's eyebrows lifted and he looked amused again. But it wasn't a real, warm amusement, it was all part of the cold, arrogant persona. "Is that right?"

"I'll leave you both to your...amusements," she murmured, pleased with how unaffected she sounded. Then she casually turned away from them and paced down the quiet hall toward her father's office.

She was intensely pleased with how she'd handled it. She wasn't pleased with her momentary inability to do anything but stare at them and certainly wasn't pleased by the way her body had reacted to the sight of Kent, tense and hot and rutting like something primitive. But she was proud of herself for handling the resulting conversation the way she had.

She hadn't let Kent get the better of her. And that mattered to her a lot.

She swung into her father's office and grabbed the purse she'd let drop inconspicuously behind the side chair that afternoon. She'd have to leave and come back later. Obviously, she wasn't going to be able to get to the file drawer she needed, when there was a post-orgasmic brunette sprawled all over it.

Cali was about to leave her dad's office when someone moved into the doorway, blocking her way.

"What do you want?" she asked sharply, glaring at Kent and wanting nothing more than to never see the bastard again.

"I obviously know that you must have been trying to snoop through something in that office." He looked neither annoyed nor angry. She had opened her mouth to object, when he went on, "But it occurred to me that we might have similar interests."

Cali snorted. "I doubt it."

With a half-shrug, Kent explained, "You want a good story. I want to expose certain things about my father's business dealings."

She actually jerked in surprise. "What?"

Another lift of his eyebrows. "It's true. I have my own reasons. My father has always tried to put me in my place, which is why I ended up here, but I've gotten to the point where I'm no longer willing to accept it. He's a fool if he thinks he can push me around indefinitely. So it just occurred to me that you and I might benefit from a kind of partnership."

Despite herself, Cali's mind went immediately to erotic visions of Kent fucking with that primal intensity – but fucking *her* this time. "What kind of partnership?" she forced out, doing everything she could do to push those ridiculous images out of her mind.

She was eighteen years old. Recently graduated from high school.

There was no way Kent Landon would ever want to fuck her.

Obviously, that wasn't what he had in mind. He was watching her with a mild sort of interest. "I provide you with certain information and you write a story that would damage my father's reputation."

"You expect me to believe that you want to hurt your father's reputation, which might affect his business? Wouldn't that be counterproductive for you, since you're in line to inherit the whole thing?"

Kent met her eyes with an unrevealing expression. "You're assuming that I *want* to inherit. Maybe I want to achieve success on my own terms, rather than his."

Something about what he said and the way he said it struck a real chord with Cali. She understood him. Understood the sentiment and what might have driven him to say it.

And, for the first time in her life, she actually felt something like respect for Kent. Her belly clenched at the thought and, as she gazed at Kent with quiet intensity, she saw that he recognized her response.

A minor thing, but a kind of bonding nonetheless. Unexpected. Inexplicable. And almost thrilling.

"I'm not going to fill a story with lies," Cali insisted, feeling her heart start to flutter at the idea, at how such a story might establish the beginnings of her career. "No matter how much you want to get at your father."

"Not lies. Everything would be true. But you won't be able to get the information without my help." When he noticed her continued questioning look, he added, "It's a game we play, my father and I. And I'm ready to make a larger move."

She believed him. Didn't like him. But believed him.

And there was no way she was going to refuse what promised to be the juiciest story of her life.

She was in. Even without that brief moment of bonding, there had never really been any doubt.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next month, Cali worked with Kent Landon, more closely than she could have imagined. It wasn't just about his providing her with information. It was about deciding how much and in what form the information would be presented.

She spent more than one evening in his study. She didn't advertise her presence there to anyone else, of course, since it wouldn't have been good for either of their reputations and Kent didn't want to tip his father off about what he was doing.

Cali was pretty sure he'd picked her—a teenager who wasn't even a professional journalist—to make this play against his father even stronger. Philip Landon would be

exposed by someone who wasn't even in college yet. That fact would be even more mortifying to him. Cali didn't care why Kent had chosen her. She had the story. And she was starting to let herself believe that Jason's impressions of Kent weren't entirely wrong.

There seemed to be something...beneath his disinterested, arrogant surface. Something that was sensitive. Almost vulnerable.

Kent never shared it with her. He never talked about his family, his past or his feelings and they never discussed anything of a personal nature. But sometimes she could almost *feel* the true Kent—in the expression in his eyes or in the casual touch of his hand.

She knew he wasn't interested in her sexually, even though she sometimes fantasized about him taking her on a desk or a table in his study. She wasn't actually fool enough to believe such a thing would ever occur.

Kent didn't lust after her. He liked slender, exotic brunettes, not blondes of average height with rounded curves and big eyes. Most people considered Cali's wide, bright smile to be her best feature, but that wasn't the kind of thing that would appeal to someone like Kent. He didn't find her particularly attractive and didn't seem capable of having feelings deeper than lust for a woman.

But, despite all of this, she thought that maybe Kent was starting to like her.

She was wrong.

She wrote the story. It was published. Kent's play against his father was complete.

He got what he wanted from Cali and then promptly dismissed her from his life.

He called her up to thank her, but he'd been too distracted to talk long.

And that was it. When she saw him after that, he nodded or waved. Maybe said hi if she was lucky. They never had another real conversation.

Cali tried not to care. She'd kept trying to tell herself all along that she and Kent Landon would never share anything real. People used others. That was the way the world worked. She'd known it all her life.

And if she cried a few times, alone in her bed at night, hurt and disappointed that she'd been so meaningless to Kent, then no one would ever know it but her.

She got over it. It wasn't a lasting wound. And eventually the whole incident faded to the edges of her consciousness.

She went to college in Chicago and then began a life, far away from Blacksburg and the influence of Landon Industries.

Just as Cali was graduating from college, Philip Landon died of a heart attack. Which meant that the rivalry between father and son was irrelevant. Kent inherited billions and control of the entire corporation.

When she moved away from Chicago, she was absolutely certain she would never see Kent Landon again.

## Chapter One

*Twenty years later*

Cali stared around at her new apartment, cluttered with a few randomly placed pieces of furniture hidden among piles of moving boxes and wondered where her gray satin clutch might have ended up.

She'd been in such a hurry when she packed up her old place earlier that week that she hadn't been as organized as she should have been. Thus, so far she'd only managed to unpack her bedding, her coffeemaker and about a third of her clothes.

She was hot and exhausted and really didn't feel like unpacking. She wondered how long one could legitimately live out of an assortment of suitcases and cardboard boxes.

Just as she was starting to tear the packing tape off the box closest to her—one marked "random stuff"—there was a light tap on her door.

Blowing a few messy strands of hair out of her eyes, she hurried over to answer it. She already knew who it was. There wasn't another person in Chicago who would be paying her a visit the day after she moved back to the city.

When she swung open the door, her father was standing there grinning at her.

Cali grinned back. "Hey there. I didn't know you were going to stop by."

She held the door for Jim Ross as he slowly made his way over the threshold, moving rather awkwardly with a wheeled walker and a knee that hadn't yet healed.

Two weeks earlier, he'd had surgery on his right knee. Cali had flown in from her home in Seattle to be with him, although the surgery was fairly routine. Two months from now, he would have the same surgery on his other knee.

He was only in his late sixties, but he'd had multiplying orthopedic problems for the last ten years, back, hip, shoulder and, most recently, knees. Jim's body just seemed to be breaking down on him. Three days after his knee surgery, he'd fallen, damaging his left knee even further. It had made the recovery process slower than it should have been and he was still having some trouble getting around.

He wasn't in danger of dying anytime soon, but he wasn't the man he used to be. And Cali had lived halfway across the country for the last sixteen years—only seeing her father once or twice a year.

As she'd watched her father lying in the hospital bed after his surgery, she'd made a decision. He still had a number of years left of living, but she had been reminded of his mortality. Frightened by it.

They were basically the only family the other had.

She didn't want the remainder of his life to pass without her around to help him. So she'd flown back to Seattle, quit her job, made a quick trip back to Chicago to interview for a new position—which she was offered—then started packing up the life she'd made for herself in Washington.

It was a scarily spontaneous decision, after she'd put so much time and effort into her career at the largest newspaper in Seattle. And she'd had to accept a lower position and salary in order to find a job in Chicago immediately.

She was willing to accept that and was fairly satisfied with what she'd seen and heard about the city magazine where she'd just been hired.

The money wasn't that significant, since she'd been careful about savings and investments over the years. Her career—well, she still wanted one, but prominence and notoriety wasn't as important to her as it had once been.

So she'd moved back to Chicago—a city in which she'd sworn she'd never live after she'd graduated from college—just to be closer to her father.

Cali was thirty-eight-years-old and single. She could do what she wanted to do.

"I thought I'd come by to say hi," Jim explained, moving into the airy, main room of the apartment and propping himself up on one of the barstools in front of the granite island that separated the kitchen from the dining area. The apartment had an open floor plan, so—except for the bedroom and bathroom—it was all one large space.

The rent was ludicrously high, making her pay for the high ceilings, polished hardwood floors, large windows and downtown location. But Cali had needed to find a place fast and this building was within walking distance of work and less than a ten-minute drive from her father, even in traffic.

So she'd suck up the extravagant monthly payment—at least temporarily—and be happy she'd found as good a place as she had.

Cali sat down next to Jim, glad to be off her aching feet. It felt like she'd been unpacking all day, although you couldn't tell from the condition of the room. "I'm glad you did. What did you bring?" she asked, eyeing the bag he was holding.

"Dinner," Jim explained, pulling two meatball subs out of the paper bag with a pleased expression.

"It's only four-thirty."

Jim shrugged and started unwrapping one of the subs. "Isn't that dinnertime?" While Cali went to grab them a couple of soft drinks from the refrigerator, he continued, "Old folks like to eat early."

She gave him a half smile and pulled the paper off her sub. She hadn't had lunch, so she was starving. Didn't mind at all that she was eating supper before five o'clock. "You're not that old, Dad."

After he swallowed, he replied, "Just feel like it, I guess." His expression was both wistful and slightly sad.

Cali felt a little ache in her heart, one that almost rivaled the ache in her feet. Was really glad she'd made this decision, even though all of her friends in Seattle had thought she was crazy.

After they'd eaten, Jim complacently crumpled the sub wrapper into a tight ball. "Need any help unpacking?"

That was an understatement. She hadn't even unpacked her dinner plates. "Maybe tomorrow. I think I'll rest a little after I find what I need for tonight."

He looked confused for a moment before his face cleared. "Oh right. I'd nearly forgotten. You have to go to that stupid fundraiser."

Stupid was right. She had only worked one day at her new position, but she was still expected to go to the glitzy banquet this evening, one that her magazine was helping to sponsor. She'd tried to get out of it, by claiming moving hassles, but no slack was allowed.

Cali had to go. And she had to go without a date, since she didn't have any potential escorts in Chicago.

She'd had a couple of male friends in Seattle that she'd often hit up for events such as this. But she hadn't had any real dates – not even in Seattle.

It was just the way it was. Cali had had the normal romantic experiences in college, but hadn't found anyone serious. In her twenties, she had dated on and off until she fell in love with a corporate attorney, whom she'd been in a relationship with for four years. When that had fallen apart, she had been twenty-nine years old.

She'd gone a little crazy.

The last time she'd had sex was on her thirtieth birthday. She'd gone out with some friends, drunk too much, ended up sleeping with a complete stranger. It hadn't been the first time she'd had random sex, but for some reason that experience had left her feeling particularly icky.

After that night, Cali had sworn off casual sex. She had still been interested in having a romantic relationship with someone, but no one had turned up. She dated occasionally, usually when friends set her up, but it never became serious.

She didn't want to have lived through her thirties without sex, but it had just happened that way.

Cali didn't feel unnatural or freakish about it. She knew such a situation wasn't as rare as people wanted to think. She had been busy with her career and didn't have that many places to meet new people. Plus, there just weren't that many eligible men around. Those she was interested in weren't available or weren't interested in her.

Those who *were* interested in her just weren't that interesting.

Cali didn't expect anything to be different in Chicago. She was thirty-eight now, which might not be over the hill, but wasn't a prime age for attracting a wide range of men.



It was actually better now, though. At least for while, she could claim being new to the area as an excuse for not going out on Saturday nights.

She wasn't desperate yet. Wasn't yet ready to put an ad in the personals. She was happy with her career, had never really wanted children, was content with having a circle of friends.

But, still, it would be nice to have sex occasionally.

"Cali?" Jim prompted, leaning over to peer into her face.

Cali actually blushed, not enjoying the fact that she'd had that last thought in the presence of her father. "Sorry. Just zoned out. Yes, I have that fundraiser tonight. All I need to do before then is find a dress I can wear."

"I'm sure you'll look beautiful. Maybe there will be a man who actually has eyes in his head at the party, who will recognize what every other man seems to have missed. The entire male population must be crazy." His expression conveyed that bewildered disapproval he always expressed when he reflected on how no man had snatched up the prize his daughter was.

She was quickly nearing forty, but her father was convinced that the love of her life was still waiting for her.

It always made Cali feel kind of mushy. "Thanks, Dad. But I'm not expecting to find my Prince Charming at this particular ball. In fact, I'd much rather stay home and watch cooking shows on cable."

A strange expression flickered across face. "Landon will be there, won't he?"

Cali shifted on the bar stool. "Probably, since Landon Industries has been heavily involved in the fundraising efforts."

"He's single again, I believe."

Snorting, Cali said snidely, "Who can keep up after four or five marriages? And who cares anyway?" She rolled her eyes. "Surely you don't think he's the man for me."

"Unlikely, I know. But you were friends once, weren't you?"

She made a face. "We were never friends. We just knew each other in passing. That was a long time ago. I haven't seen him in twenty years, Dad. He probably won't even recognize me."

Sighing, her father acknowledged, "Maybe not. And I don't think he's the same young man we used to know."

Cali sneered. She'd heard a lot about Kent Landon over the past two decades and—although a lot of it was publicity from all the charitable efforts he engaged in and his increasing forays into politics—she wasn't convinced of the sincerity of Kent's good deeds.

She'd known Kent before and she had always been intuitive about human nature.

He had changed and not in a good way. Kent had once been sensitive, warm-hearted under the cool exterior and had the potential to make himself vulnerable. He wasn't anymore. Cali was sincere in saying she didn't care. She'd never been really

attracted to Kent, except for that bizarre grip of raw desire she'd experienced in catching him mid-fuck. Throughout the time she'd known him, she'd been more interested in Jason than him. Now, she had grown up, moved on, had other things to worry about besides her old high-school acquaintances. Kent was part of her history and she had no plans to speak to him tonight. In fact, she intended to avoid him completely. "I don't either," she said at last, finally responding to her father's last statement. "A Prince Charming he definitely isn't."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali came in through the main entrance of the very exclusive hotel and made her way back to the main ballroom, where tonight's fundraiser was being hosted. In the hallway, she caught a glimpse of herself in a large ornate mirror, so she took a moment to check out her appearance. From a distance, she looked particularly good. Her slate gray dress was expensive and well-tailored, the cut flattering and the silk slightly luminescent. Her figure was quite good, since she'd started working out regularly ten years ago—still curvy, but fit and well-molded. Her hair was shiny and pulled into a sleek updo, the scattered strands of gray taken care of by strategically placed highlights. All in all, she looked attractive and elegant and Cali was pleased she'd pulled the look off so well. Up close, the little lines beside her eyes and mouth were evident—not many, but just enough to prove her age. Overall, though, she thought she looked as good as someone in her late thirties could look without the aid of Botox or plastic surgery.

But, surrounded by gorgeous twenty-somethings, Cali was well aware that she'd have to rely on something other than her physical beauty if she wanted to attract any sort of attention in his crowd. She rolled her eyes, satisfied that at least her appearance wouldn't embarrass her. She was Cali Ross and it wasn't a bad person to be. Nodding resolutely, she continued on toward the ballroom.

When she stepped into the room—set up for a formal banquet—she really wished she had a date.

She was too mature now to always believe that everyone was watching her, but she still felt strangely self-conscious as she scanned the room, praying to find someone she knew.

There were several painful minutes, during which she stood alone or attempted to mingle casually in the crowd. A fake smile was plastered on her face, although inside she was screaming with the need for someone to talk to.

Her immediate supervisor came in just then with her husband, greeting Cali with warm enthusiasm and Cali sighed in a rush of relief. The seating for the banquet was assigned, so Cali wasn't worried about that—she could make her way through the small talk during the dinner, even with strangers. It was the mingling cocktail hour preceding the main event that had the potential to be so dreadful.

Cali chatted with the various people she was introduced to, once more feeling comfortable and competent. She'd done this many times before. Would doubtless have to do it again.

As she made small talk, she covertly watched her colleague and her husband. They were standing together, holding hands, their shoulders brushing against each other. Neither was as attractive as Cali was, but they seemed to be in love, seemed to be happy.

Sometimes Cali stared at couples, wondering in blunt bewilderment how they had gotten together. Apparently, it happened to so many people—you met someone, fell in love, decided to spend a lifetime together. It had just never happened to her.

Cali would wonder what they talked about, what their first kiss had been like, what they were like in bed together. She would watch them from a distance. It was just one of those things. Nothing was really wrong with her. But no one had ever fallen in love with her. Probably never would.

After about a half hour, she noticed that Kent had arrived.

Despite her resolve to have nothing to do with him, she couldn't help but eye him discreetly. Much about his appearance was familiar, arrogant posture, signature short dark hair, cool charisma radiating off him like a force. His dark suit was less trendy than he used to wear in his youth, but just as ludicrously expensive. And age had etched character into his features that Cali could recognize even from a distance.

Not for the first time, she privately grumbled over the fact that men aged so much more attractively than women.

Now that she had seen him, she was even more determined to avoid him. He seemed so aloof, so untouchable, like marble or ice. He was the center of the room, without even trying. He had a very young brunette on his arm—one who was almost certainly a model.

He was probably a white-collar criminal behind the benevolent surface and slick confidence and he was working the room like he was already a politician.

Kent just wasn't what Cali wanted in her life, despite their shared history from twenty-years ago.

Twenty years. Longer than she'd been alive when last she talked to him.

The thought made her feel old and tired, although she never really considered herself old.

Her feet were aching even more now in her very high heels and Cali wondered how long it would be before she could sit down.

Eventually, everyone took their seats and dinner was served. Cali wasn't hungry after the meatball sub she'd had with her father, so she only picked at her food. Tried not to peer around to catch another glimpse of Kent, who was seated in a much more prominent position far across the room.

After she ate, she excused herself to use the bathroom before the speeches. She wasn't sure how long they would last, but after two glasses of wine and a glass of water, Cali thought she'd better be safe.

She stared at her face in the bathroom mirror as she washed her hands. She still expected to see the lively teenager she used to be. Was almost startled by the strange grown-up who looked back at her.

On her way out of the restroom, she saw someone's back as he entered the men's room. Recognizing who it was instinctively, she missed the step down and twisted her ankle. "Fuck," she muttered involuntarily, not quite under her breath. She winced at the pain and caught herself with a hand on the wall. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Automatically, she darted her eyes back up to the door of the men's room. He should have been inside by now, but he wasn't. He was standing with the door propped open, peering at her over his shoulder.

Cali hated herself for flushing deep red. She was way too old to blush. But her embarrassment faded when she saw only cool curiosity on his face.

She had been correct about what she'd said to her father. Kent didn't recognize her at all.

Feeling irrationally resentful, she looked away and kept walking. Unfortunately, she was limping a little because her ankle still hurt and her heels were too high.

Now her whole evening had been ruined. Just because of that one moment. Kent had no reason to remember her and she looked a lot different now than she had in high school.

Twenty years was a long time. She'd be forty in two years. Kent was surrounded by the rich and powerful and could have the most beautiful women in the world.

Why on earth would he have recognized her?

But she felt exhausted and cranky now and she really didn't want to hear a bunch of boring, fake speeches. So when she noticed an empty side room off the hallway – holding two chairs and a sofa – she slipped inside, pulling the door shut behind her.

If anyone caught her, she would plead illness. No one would even realize she was missing anyway.

The only person here who really knew her at all was Kent.

And he hadn't had the courtesy to recognize her.

Cali scowled and took off her shoes. When she had been eighteen, the age of thirty-eight had seemed ancient and well beyond the borders of interest. But the truth was that Cali didn't feel all that much different now than she had then.

She still liked to take her shoes off and walk across thick carpets barefoot.

She wasn't quite barefoot this evening. She'd caved to convention and worn a pair of ridiculously expensive pantyhose – that conveniently had some tummy control, making her belly perfectly flat.

But the pantyhose were transparent enough to still allow her to feel the carpet beneath her feet. So Cali paced the small room, curling up her toes in the thick rug.

She sighed. Really wished she were home. In her apartment. Or, better yet, in Seattle. Hanging out with her friends. Long ago, she'd loved Chicago, but she no longer felt at home here. Didn't really want to be living here.

Wanted even less to be at a stuffy fundraiser, surrounded by stuffy people—the stuffiest of whom was an old acquaintance who no longer knew who she was.

For a moment, Cali didn't want to be the person she was.

"Did you hurt your ankle?" The voice was low, textured, rich—still familiar.

Cali jerked as she heard the first word. Her back was to the door now, but she knew who she'd see standing in the doorway.

She didn't turn around immediately. Took a few seconds to compose herself before she turned to face him.

He wasn't smiling when their eyes met. Just looking at her with vague interest.

"Not really," she managed to answer in a casual tone. "Just twisted it a little."

Kent stepped into the little room, eyeing her from top to bottom with an assessing look she knew was unconscious and automatic. "The first speaker is about to start."

"Oh," she murmured, pretending to straighten one thick strap of her cocktail dress. "Too bad." She had decided to skip out on the speeches and she wasn't going to let Kent pressure her back into suffering through them.

For the first time, Kent smiled. It wasn't a warm or an inviting smile—everything about him now seemed cool and businesslike. But at least the smile did seem to be a real reaction. "Indeed."

Then, to her absolute shock, he strolled over to one of the large chairs and sank into it. "I'm not particularly excited about hearing them either."

Cali had no idea what she was supposed to do. Had no idea why he was here. Why he was talking to her. But she was practiced now at keeping her composure no matter how awkward she felt. So she raised her eyebrows and drawled, "No one will notice that I'm missing. But your absence is sure to make an impression."

He shrugged slightly. "Who's going to lecture me about it?"

No one would. Kent Landon could do whatever he wanted.

Having no idea what else to do, Cali sat down in the chair across from him. Glanced at him uncertainly, not sure whether he wanted her company or not.

They sat in silence for a few minutes and Cali wondered if Kent had actually forgotten she was with him. He wasn't looking at her—just staring absently at the closed door.

Until finally he said, "I thought you'd left Chicago."

Cali gasped. There was no way she could disguise her surprise. "I didn't think you recognized me."

"I did. It just took me a minute. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Cali tightened her lips into a line and tried to catch her breath. She was off-stride now. Didn't want to be having this conversation. Wished she was anywhere else in the world.

"Well?" Kent prompted, in a slightly impatient tone that revealed he wasn't used to having to ask twice for information.

Swallowing, she responded, "I just moved back. A few days ago, in fact."

"You were in Seattle or somewhere like that?" Kent inquired, as if he were searching for very old information.

"How did you know that?"

Shrugging again—a practiced, graceful motion—Kent remarked, "Someone told me years ago. Jason or your father maybe."

It must have been years and years ago, if Jason had told him. She knew the two no longer even acknowledged the other's existence.

Cali didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything. Just sat looking at him, wondering if he'd always been this cold and impersonal or if it was something he had become since last she'd seen him.

They'd shared something once. Not friendship but something like understanding. It had disappeared after she'd completed the story he'd wanted her to write—as a gesture of defiance toward his father—but it had existed.

The spark in him that had matched the one in her was no longer in existence. Both of them knew it and their shared gaze now was quietly curious. Nothing more.

After a while, Kent asked, "Husband? Children?"

Cali shook her head. "Just me." She didn't need to ask the same question of Kent—she read about the varying saga of his personal life every week in the papers.

"Why did you move back?"

Cali wasn't deceived into thinking he really cared and she wasn't about to go into a detailed explanation of her father's condition or her decision to be closer to him, so she said bluntly, "Why not?"

He nodded, as if he accepted her unwillingness to share.

A few more minutes of silence, then Kent said randomly, "What happened to your shoes?"

Cali glanced down at her stockinged feet. "I took them off." She gestured to her heels on the other side of the room. "They were damned uncomfortable." Reaching down, she massaged the arch of one foot, easing the soreness a bit.

Kent's eyes had followed her hand and she saw as his gaze traveled up her leg, to where her skirt was hiked up slightly, revealing one thigh. Then his eyes made their way even higher, to the full cleavage exposed by her dress. Finally focused on her face.

Cali wasn't a child anymore and she'd known enough men to recognize lust when she saw it. The fire that smoldered briefly in his blue-gray eyes was unmistakable.

It had been fleeting, shocking, almost unbelievable. But it had been real.

To her surprise and horror, she felt her body reacting to that look and to the intensity that always seemed to be coiled up inside him.

She hadn't had sex in eight years, so she was used to dealing with physical frustration. And it had grown progressively worse as the years went on, as her body kept trying to tell her that her child-bearing years were becoming fewer.

Cali didn't want to bear any children, but her body wasn't aware of that.

That must be the explanation. Cali was just plain horny. Kent was an attractive man and talking to him had kindled up some intense feelings from her past and the memory of his fucking that brunette on the desk.

Which must be why she tensed and grew uncomfortably hot under the brief flash of lust in his gaze.

Why he'd be lusting after her when he could have all the supermodels he wanted was a mystery. But it just made the situation all the more exhilarating, turning her on even more.

Cali hated herself for the rush of excitement, since her mind knew that nothing could ever come of it. And because it seemed to be prompted by some instinctive belief that Kent was too good for her, that he had no reason to want her.

Which was nonsense. If anything, she was too good for Kent.

Kent leaned forward in his chair and reached out one hand. Ran a finger very slowly across the sensitive curve on the bottom of her foot.

Cali shuddered at his touch and felt tingles run down her spine.

His voice when he spoke was low and husky. "You've got a run in your stocking."

She grunted. Typical.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evidently, Landon Industries had a suite in this hotel, that was used to host business clients and out-of-town executives. The suite happened to be empty this evening, which normally would have meant nothing to Cali.

The only reason it mattered now was that Cali was on her way up to it.

With Kent.

And she still had no idea why.

Oh, she knew the fundamental reason why. They were going up to the suite to have sex. What she didn't know was why Kent wanted to, nor did she know why she'd accepted his invitation.

But she had. She was standing beside him in the elevator and they had almost reached the appropriate floor.

They'd chatted in that little room for almost an hour, not sharing anything deep or meaningful—mostly just catching up and killing time. The attraction had continued to kindle between them and both of them were aware of it. She wasn't sure where it had come from, but she wasn't about to deny its existence.

So when he'd finally mentioned the suite and suggested they go upstairs, Cali had found herself nodding in acquiescence.

She certainly wasn't in love with Kent. Wasn't even sure that she liked him anymore. He hadn't been particularly warm or charming with her. Except for the flashes of lust he'd been impersonal and distant during the conversation.

But she'd agreed to have sex with Kent Landon.

Part of it was purely sexual frustration. She wanted to have sex—Kent was attractive and he was offering it. Part of it was because she'd felt at a loose end all day, like she didn't know who she was or what she should do with herself. Part of it was curiosity, since she'd never dreamed she'd be in this situation after watching him have sex so many years ago. And part of it was simply because she could—he was Kent Landon and in a few hours she could say she'd had sex with him.

None of them were very good reasons, but it had been a long time since Cali had done something foolish. Why not now? Why not this?

She was an adult and she was allowed to do this without guilt or remorse. If she wanted to. Which apparently she did.

This was all the explanation she could come up with on the quiet ride up to the suite.

She could sense him beside her, even though they weren't touching. The sparks were growing between them, although it wasn't a blaze and didn't burn out of control. Neither of them was wild or voracious. In fact, when the elevator doors slid open, they both paced calmly toward the door of the suite.

Kent unlocked the door and allowed her to enter. Cali stepped in, taking in the elegant décor of the sitting room and the doors that led to the bedroom.

Silently, Kent closed and locked the door. Then led her into a room boasting an enormous, luxurious bed.

Cali wondered if she'd be offered champagne and caviar and be wooed out of her clothes.

She got her answer when Kent leaned toward her and kissed her smoothly, skillfully. Cali sucked in a breath through her nose and raised her hands to cling to his shoulders. His arms went around her as his tongue slipped into her mouth. Then, with one quick move, he unzipped her dress.

When she felt the cool air hit her bare back, Cali was suddenly nervous. It had been a long time for her and Kent was used to fucking twenty-year-olds. What the hell did he want with her?



She turned her face to the side, freeing her lips. Then tilted back her head as Kent's mouth moved down her throat. "Why are you doing this?"

He raised his head and met her eyes. She had no way of understanding his expression. "I'm not sure. Why are you?"

"I'm not sure either." Her fingers were still clutching his broad shoulders. His body was hard and warm and strong and she liked how it felt against her. It had been ages since she'd felt a man like this.

Narrowing his eyes, he murmured, "But you still want to?"

"I do."

She did. And told herself that it didn't really matter why.

He kissed her again and he knew exactly what he was doing. His tongue glided with enticing precision along the inside of her lips, the roof of her mouth, then slid along the fluttering of her tongue.

Cali was responding, becoming breathless and gradually aroused. His hands had found the gaping of her unzipped dress and were caressing her bare skin provocatively.

She suddenly remembered something and gently pulled her mouth away. It was one thing to do something spontaneous and somewhat foolish. It was another to do something utterly idiotic.

"We'll need a condom," she told him, her voice unnaturally wispy.

He blinked. "I'm not sure I have one."

She pulled away altogether. "We need one." She hadn't been on birth control for years and she wasn't prepared to just trust his word that he was perfectly healthy.

He stared at the floor for a few seconds, evidently thinking. "There might be some in the bathroom," he concluded, his hands dropping from her body as he turned to walk toward the open bathroom door.

Cali stood in the middle of the floor, feeling absolutely stupid. "Are there any?" she called out, after a minute.

"Yes," he replied, still not exiting the bathroom.

At this piece of information, Cali's heart started pounding again. Feeling awkward with her dress half on, Cali slipped it off until it slid down her body, puddling on the floor. She toed off her shoes, then pushed off her pantyhose, since they were never very sexy to remove.

Now she was just in her bra and panties and feeling very self-conscious. Her hands fumbled as she unpinned her hair and let it fall around her shoulders.

She thought her body was pretty good, but compared to a twenty-year-old's...

Cali walked over to the bed. Folded down the thick covers. Crawled into the bed and pulled the sheet up partway.

At least this way her backside would be effectively out of sight.

Kent reentered the bedroom. He'd taken off his jacket, tie, shoes and socks and his shirt was open and untucked. She didn't have time to observe him very closely, though, since he turned off all of the lights as he approached the bed.

In the dark, she could see only faintly as he rid himself of the rest of his clothes and got under the covers beside her.

Without speaking, he rolled over until he was above her. He kissed her again. Cali responded. Wound her arms around his neck and held on.

With no lights to illuminate details, his figure above her looked like a dark shadow. He trailed little kisses down her neck as he massaged her breasts through her bra. Then lifted her up a bit so he could unhook the clasps and pull it off her.

When he lowered his mouth to one nipple, Cali felt her arousal returning. Then strengthen. It felt good—really good. His lips were firm and supple and his tongue was skillful.

Cali arched beneath him, gasping wordlessly and starting to rock her hips. When Kent shifted his attention to her other breast, her fingers dug into the muscles of his back. She couldn't see him very well, but she could feel him. His back was smooth and toned and her hands slid down to the firm flesh of his butt. She stroked back up to his shoulders, feeling each dip and ridge and rippling curve of his body.

She'd never expected to feel him like this. Never even dreamed of it.

Kent's hands had been busy as well and he was now brushing his fingers along her inner thighs, since her legs had fallen open automatically. He hooked his fingers around the elastic of her panties and pulled them off, Cali bending up her legs to free them more easily.

When one of his hands returned to exploring, Cali felt his touch on the trimmed hair between her thighs. Then one finger was stroking a slow line across her flesh, opening her intimately. Then that finger dove even deeper. Sunk into her obvious arousal. Her wetness. Was inside her.

Cali sucked in a harsh breath and tilted her head back as that one slim finger stimulated her pulsing flesh—feeling so different from her own finger.

After having verified that she was ready, Kent removed his hand and pulled off her. Raising himself up, he reached toward the nightstand for the condom, tearing the packet open.

Her eyes had adjusted more to the dark, but she still couldn't see him very well. So Cali stretched an arm out and found his erection. Lightly brushed the hard length with the tips of her fingers.

Felt a jump in her chest when she heard Kent take a raspy breath in response. She removed her hand as he rolled on the condom. Then she parted her legs as he moved back over her.

He positioned himself between her thighs, supporting himself on his forearms, which were planted on either side of her shoulders. This caused his chest to brush

against her breasts with every move and Cali could feel his warm breath against her skin.

Edging a hand down to move his erection into position, Kent was audibly breathing faster as the head of his cock nudged against her entrance.

Cali relaxed her muscles and bent her knees, folding her legs up on either side of his hips. She made a breathless sound when she felt him entering her—felt his hard flesh slowly forcing its way into her wet channel.

At first, it was actually uncomfortable, since it had been so long since she had done this. Her inner muscles instinctively tightened in defense against the intrusion and she had to fight to keep her body relaxed.

Kent had stiffened above her and had straightened his arms, pulling his chest away from her. “God,” he gasped, his tense expression visible even in the dark. “How are you so tight?”

She flushed deeply, not sure how she felt about that question. But she wasn’t about to tell him that it was because she hadn’t had sex in eight years, so she murmured, “Are you complaining?”

Bending his elbows again and adjusting his arms, Kent lowered himself over her once more, the heat of his body like a heavy blanket. “No,” he replied hoarsely. “Oh, no, I’m not complaining.”

Then he started to thrust.

Cali choked on a sigh as his cock started moving inside her. It felt full and tight—almost too much so—but her body seemed to want it. He slid easily in and out of her—the wet suction, the steady shaking of the bed and their urgent inhales and exhales the only sound in the room.

The rich friction soon dissolved the mild discomfort and the little gasps she was making weren’t just from effort or nerves. It felt good in a way she hadn’t felt in a really long time and she felt like she might melt beneath his weight, his heat and his silent intensity.

His face had lowered until it was against her hair. She could feel his breath wafting damply against her ear. His shoulder was pressing down toward her lips and she mouthed it as her body insisted on responding to the sensations. Her hips were rocking up with every one of his thrusts—not wildly, but involuntarily.

Her hands were rubbing his smooth back, until one hand closed around the slightest bit of extra flesh on his side. She squeezed the soft flesh, amazed and thrilled that she had found a part of his body that wasn’t hard.

Kent grunted softly and began to drive into her more rapidly—his tempo accelerating into a short, choppy staccato. Cali was enjoying the little tingles that were generating from his pumping inside of her, but the pressure was building too slowly.

He hadn’t ever seemed urgent, but the steady rhythm of the first minutes was inevitably intensifying. Since she wasn’t sure that this motion alone would do it for her,

Cali squeezed one of her hands down between their bodies and found her clit. She rubbed at it, striving to coordinate her massage with their increasingly erratic motion.

The mingled texture of their breathing became louder and faster. She could feel her breasts bouncing when they weren't smashed up against his chest. Feel the flesh of her ass jiggling as she tried to match the pumping of his hips.

Rubbing her clit as urgently as she could, Cali felt the heavy pressure at her center sharpen. Kent's shoulder was wet with her saliva and she couldn't seem to stop clawing at his back and side with her free hand.

Her thigh and stomach muscles started to tighten automatically as she felt an orgasm approaching. She sucked in a frantic breath—feeling too hot, too tense, too urgent, too uncontrolled. Tossing her head back and forth on the pillow, she breathed out a series of silent pleas for release.

Kent raised his head until he was looking down on her, but Cali couldn't focus enough to observe his expression. He was panting though—she could hear him—and occasionally making soft grunts low in his throat.

He was driving into her rapidly now, their skin slapping together audibly as their bodies connected. Cali rubbed hard at her clit, felt the sensations cresting.

"Eh," she choked softly, the tense pressure in her abdomen finally reaching its limit. Her head jerked back and her mouth fell open. "Ah, ah, ah," was forced out of her as the pleasure finally peaked.

She climaxed hard and deep, her body quaking beneath Kent's weight, the shudders of sensations making her jerk and gasp.

Kent groaned roughly as her muscles clamped down around his cock. He pushed against the contractions, squeezed his eyes shut.

He kept thrusting, as Cali wheezed and shivered in the wake of her orgasm. Her channel had tightened around him and his thrusts weren't as slick or smooth as they had been initially.

Cali tried to watch his face as a sated languor washed over her body. She was still panting as much as he was, but he'd started to make harsh sounds of effort that sounded like "Uh" and "Ah."

She wasn't sure what she should do until he climaxed too, so she tightened her thighs around him and squeezed him with her inner muscles. This produced a raspy sound from his throat and Cali held onto him with both hands, trying to ease her body into his rocking.

She wouldn't have known what to expect from sex with Kent Landon, except the wild fucking she'd accidentally witnessed twenty years ago. He was in his mid-forties, but—had she had to guess—she never would have imagined him indulging in a quiet missionary fuck under the covers in the dark. She would have expected his interests to tend toward the shadier side of sex, something wilder, more risky, slightly perverse.

The truth was she knew very little about him, except that he was about to climax inside her.

After another minute of urgent thrusting, he ducked his head, his body so tense it was shaking.

Cali waited. Watched as he came.

He froze and bit his lip hard, as the rush of pleasure transformed his face. She could feel his cock swell and contract. Heard a word forced out of his throat that she couldn't recognize.

He fell on top of her afterward, but only momentarily. Then he shifted more of his weight to his arms until he was able to pull out of her completely.

Cali cringed at the sloppy, wet sound their bodies made as they disconnected. Squeezed her thighs together to ease the empty ache he'd left behind.

He rolled out of bed and went to dispose of the condom. Cali pulled the covers up to her neck and tried to get warm again.

Kent seemed to have taken all the heat in the room with him.

When he returned, he joined her under the covers. Looked at her mildly in the darkness. "You can stay the night if you want."

Cali almost grunted. Felt like someone had slapped her. He'd said the words as if he were being generous, as if he were granting her a privilege rarely offered.

How kind he was, to let her spend the night after fucking her.

"Thanks," she mumbled, mostly because she couldn't think of anything else to do. She wanted to jump out of bed and run away. Or maybe scratch his eyes out. But then he would know that she was upset and offended, know she hadn't been able to be quite as casual about this as he was.

And she was just too proud to let him see that.

So she rolled over, with her back to him. Curled in on herself and made herself relax. Ignored the raw ache in her throat.

She wasn't sure what Kent was thinking as they lay in the dark on different sides of the bed, but soon she heard him breathing slowly, deeply. Knew he'd gone to sleep.

It was a long time before she fell asleep, but eventually she did.

When she awoke, she was lying on her stomach with her cheek against the pillow. It must be morning, because there was now more light in the room. Turning her head, she saw that Kent was still sprawled out beside her. He was asleep on his back and the sheet had slipped down to his waist.

She flushed hotly, suddenly realizing with crystal clarity that she had had random sex with Kent Landon the night before and was now in bed beside his naked body.

It was almost unthinkable, unimaginable.

She was way too old for this kind of thing. And it just wasn't what she wanted.

Rolling over as unobtrusively as she could, she slid out of bed and hunted for her clothes. She wasn't going to have the awkward conversation that would occur when he woke up, so she would get out of there before it happened.

She found her panties beside the bed, yanked them on. Saw her dress on the floor and stepped into it, pulling it up to her hips. She couldn't find her bra. Figured it was still in the bed, probably far down under the sheets.

She'd leave it. No way could she get it back without waking Kent. She zipped up her dress, ignoring the fact that her nipples poked through the thin fabric ridiculously. Grabbed her pantyhose but didn't bother to put it on. Slid into her shoes. Grabbed her clutch. Hurried to the door of the suite.

She opened it softly. Stepped out into the hall, finally releasing her held breath.

Everybody did stupid things now and again, so she wasn't going to tear herself up over this.

Kent didn't really mean that much to her—a face from her past, a man she had fucked. This one-time encounter wouldn't have to have consequences spiraling out from last night.

She pushed her hair behind her ears as she waited for the elevator. Kent would go back to his brunettes. Cali would go back to her job and her father.

She squeezed around the slight soreness she could feel between her legs.

Nothing that had happened last night would have to matter. At all.

Not in the least little bit.

## Chapter Two

Cali sat in the elegant waiting area outside Kent Landon's corporate office and did her best not to fidget.

It was harder than one might expect. Sure, she was mature, a professional, socially adept and here strictly on business. But still...the last time she had seen Kent had been two months ago and they'd been lying in bed together naked.

She hadn't, as she'd briefly feared, received an expensive piece of jewelry from him the following week, as an offensive gesture in response to their one-night stand, but she also hadn't heard from Kent since.

Which was perfectly fine. She wasn't interested in becoming involved in his life. What had happened between them had just been one of those things. Casual sex. A random fuck. They'd both had a good time and neither wanted anything deeper.

But she was still sickeningly nervous as she waited to see him. Wished she never had to see him again.

When her magazine had assigned her to the story of an important local charity auction, Cali had been thrilled. She'd become less thrilled when she realized that the largest donation for the auction had come from Kent Landon—a rare and phenomenally expensive late medieval panel painting. No one in the art world had had the chance the really study the painting yet, since it had gone right from obscurity into Kent's personal collection.

But, in an astounding act of benevolence, Kent had donated the painting to the auction, which meant everyone who was anyone the world of art would have representatives at the auction to bid on the painting. Or at least to gaze at it lustfully from a distance.

It had changed the whole tenor of the event and Cali couldn't help but sneer cynically at how handily Kent had manipulated the fundraiser to serve the purposes of boosting his own reputation.

But despite all of this, she wouldn't have minded covering the auction for her magazine. Wasn't even particularly worried when her editor requested her to contact Kent and get at least one comment from him. Even if her editor hadn't made the suggestion, she would have done so on her own. She had fully expected to talk to one of his people and get a canned quote—the kind that was always given to mid-level journalists such as herself.

But that hadn't happened. She'd been granted an interview. A personal interview with Kent Landon. This kind of thing just didn't happen for random writers, so the only explanation for it was her previous acquaintance with Kent.

Cali tried to be happy that she was granted such a privilege, but mostly she felt kind of sick.

"Ms. Ross," the polished receptionist pronounced, in a cool, impersonal tone, after Cali had been waiting for six minutes.

Cali stood up. Brushed off her stylish brown pantsuit. Hoped everything was buttoned appropriately and her hair hadn't fallen down from the no-nonsense knot she'd clipped it into. This was business. Purely business.

And it didn't matter that her last encounter with Kent had led to a really good orgasm.

"Mr. Landon will see you now," the receptionist continued. She was as sleek and superficial as the women Kent always dated. Cali wondered if he had fucked the woman already or if he was saving her for later.

With a quick indrawn breath, Cali nodded wordlessly and made her way with schooled composure in the direction the receptionist had indicated and into Kent's office.

He was sitting behind his desk, scanning over a file that lay open before him. He looked busy, absolutely untouchable and a little bit tired.

She stood several feet away from the desk for a number of seconds before he bothered to look up. Hiding her irritation, she gave him a courteous smile. "Thank you for seeing me."

Her eyes were calm and polite. His were unreadable.

"Of course," he said, with a casual flip of his hand. "Have a seat."

She took the leather chair he'd gestured to and seated herself, pulling out a notepad and crossing her legs. She eyed him without expression, pleased that she wasn't revealing her discomfort in his presence.

When she didn't initiate conversation, Kent finally prompted, "So you're covering the auction?"

"I am. And your painting will certainly be the most newsworthy aspect of the auction."

He inclined his head. "So what can I do for you?"

There was something painfully amusing about this whole conversation. Both of them were acting like strangers, as if their only connection was the story she was covering.

Despite their pretense, the brutal reality hovered around them like a fog. They knew each other—intimately. Had shared a temporary bond back in Blacksburg. And had shared their bodies two months ago.

Kent was as handsome as he'd ever been—age only chiseling his features with more depth, with more character. But he had become ice cold and hard, like marble or steel. And Cali wondered how she'd ever felt anything for him, back in Blacksburg or in that bed two months ago.



His barriers were impenetrable and she wasn't inclined to try to break through them. He was an enigma and a somewhat compelling one, but he just wouldn't be worth the effort of unraveling.

She asked him about the painting and he told her the basic information, which she dutifully took note of. He didn't tell her anything she hadn't already found out from the preliminary research she'd done, but she paid careful attention and didn't interrupt his responses.

The whole interview was meaningless. Kent would never reveal to her anything he didn't want her to know. They were just going through the motions and she wasn't even trying very hard. There wasn't a mystery here. Just an old panel painting that Kent had offered in a great show of charity, intended to impress the gullible masses.

So when she finally ended the interview with her last question, something heavy filled her stomach—something that felt kind of like regret. She didn't know why it would be regret. There was nothing really to regret here. Kent was now the man he had become and Cali had grown up.

That left no room for friendship or bonding between them.

"How do you feel about the painting?" she asked.

His brows lowered slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...how do you feel about it?" It seemed an obvious question to her, but to clarify, she added, "Do you even like it?"

His lips twitched slightly and he appeared almost surprised. For the first time that day, he was really looking at her. "No one has ever asked me that before."

The heavy feeling in her belly clenched a little, but she didn't know why his last random comment should be important. After a moment during which she gave her easily impressed belly a firm lecture, she prompted, "Well, do you?"

He nodded briefly and gazed at a spot behind her left shoulder. "I do. It's a breathtaking work of art. And more powerful because of its significance."

She carefully wrote that quote down, visualizing exactly where she'd use it in her article. Pretended she hadn't been affected by the wistful look that had entered his eyes.

Pressing her lips together, she slid her pen back into her leather bag and shifted in preparation for leaving. Best to get out of here while she had avoided humiliating herself or doing something stupid—like trying to get beyond his barriers.

Then he asked out of the blue, "Would you like to see it?"

"What?"

"The painting," Kent explained, raising his eyebrows. "Would you like to see it?"

No one had seen it, except the handful of art experts Kent had called in to evaluate and reassess its legitimacy and value.

Her mouth dropped open.

Pulling herself together, Cali closed her mouth with a snap. "Of course," she said, trying not to reveal her excitement. "Do you have it here?"

"It's in the vault downstairs." Pushing his chair back from his desk and standing up, he walked around the desk. His suit was black and perfectly tailored and probably cost more than her father's truck. "Come. I'll show you."

She followed him silently out of the office, through the hall and into the elevator. She felt awkward as they stood next to one another as the doors slid closed—as if she was supposed to make small talk but didn't know what to say—so she watched the numbers light up on the display and held her tongue.

"How's your father?" Kent asked, with no prelude and no warning.

Too surprised to say anything but the truth, she answered, "Fine. I'm going to see him in the hospital this evening."

He gave a startled jerk of his head, the first uncalculated move she had seen him make all day. "In the hospital? Is he all right?"

"He had knee surgery yesterday. On his second knee. The first one he had done a couple of months ago. He's fine. Getting older, of course, but all of us are." She wished she hadn't made that last comment, since it was clichéd, unnecessary and a bit too revealing.

Kent didn't seem to notice the inanity of the remark. Like her, he just stared at the numbers get progressively smaller. "I always liked your father."

She had no idea how to respond to that. No idea even what to do with that piece of knowledge. So she remained silent and let out a relieved sigh when the doors slid open at last. Leaving the elevator, they made their way through security and finally accessed the large vault.

When it swung open, one of the guards brought the painting out and set it on a stand for them to view easily.

Kent was watching her face as Cali took her first look at it.

Her mouth dropped open for the second time as she stared at the work of art before her.

It was a panel painting by Giotto, one that, until a few years ago, had been thought to be lost to obscurity. Rumored to be the last work the Italian artist had painted, it was one of the few examples of his late work still in existence.

Cali had known all this going into the interview. Had done the appropriate amount of background reading on Giotto, as well as Gothic art and the early Italian Renaissance. She could never pass as an art expert, but she knew enough now to be stunned by what she saw.

She lost her breath as she gazed at the painting. A portrait.

"Tell me," Kent demanded, in a soft, rough voice—one that resurrected memories of long-past moments in Blacksburg. "Tell me your immediate reaction."

Her eyes had flown to his face at the first word he'd spoken in that raw, intimate voice. Trying to banish the remembered feelings, she blinked a few times before she answered. "It's not religious. It's not a religious subject." She turned again to stare at the portrait. "Is it?"

"No," Kent replied, a faint note of awe in his voice as he too shifted to focus on the painting. "It's not religious."

Even Cali knew that medieval art—and nearly everything Giotto ever painted—was Christian in content and purpose.

But not this. It wasn't a beautiful picture. Just showed an oldish man in dark clothes. But the portrait was extremely realistic, even more realistic than Giotto's earlier work—which had always been noted for moving artistic technique away from the flat, static images of the Middle Ages.

"Who is it?" she asked, feeling kind of silly for being so overcome by nothing more than an old painting.

Glancing over at Kent's face, she saw a kind of delight enter his blue-gray eyes as he studied the portrait. Then he gave her an indirect half-smile.

She gasped. "No way," she breathed, her eyes widening involuntarily. "It's *him*? It's a painting of him? A self-portrait?"

There was no disguising the smile on Kent's face as he nodded his affirmation. "A self-portrait."

"But..." Cali stammered, turning to stare again at the plain looking man in the picture. "But medieval artists didn't do that, even those as late as Giotto. They would only hide their images in crowd scenes and things like that. Wouldn't they?" She looked at Kent, hoping for a clarification. "Medieval artists didn't do individual portraits of themselves."

He smiled again, his obvious excitement and quiet pride in the piece of art causing an involuntary shiver to run down Cali's spine. "I know."

"My God!" Shaking her head roughly, she began, "But..."

Kent interrupted, cutting off her next objection. "You're working from the assumptions and generalizations you've been taught, but they just don't hold up. Everybody thinks of the Renaissance as a movement that was entirely new. A rebirth, the word means." He shook his head and grew more intense, warming up to his argument. "But the Renaissance wasn't about birth. It wasn't about youth, newness or beginnings."

He locked eyes with her, wouldn't let her look away. She felt dazed, mesmerized by his urgency. "The Renaissance was about maturity, was about growing up, about finally growing into threads of wisdom that had always been there. It wasn't a rebirth at all. It was the inevitable culmination of centuries' worth of thought and learning."

Cali couldn't speak. Had no idea what she could say in response.

He didn't seem to want a response. Gestured at the painting, causing them both to turn again to study it. "*This is the embodiment of that idea,*" he concluded, wonder and conviction in his voice. "This painting. Giotto has always been considered a transitional artist, blurring the lines between periods of art, but this painting drives the point home. It should be classified as a late medieval work, but it could have been painted by a master of the High Renaissance. By Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci."

Cali fought the urge to laugh at herself. She had never been so excited by a piece of art in all of her life.

When she finally wrenched her eyes away from the portrait, she caught a very particular look on Kent's face as he continued to gaze at the painting. There was nothing cold or distant in his expression now – it was warm and vibrant and thrilling.

It thrilled her.

"You love this painting," she murmured, without thinking through the wisdom of the words.

He darted his eyes over to her face, looking almost embarrassed at being found out. "I do. I love it."

She was confused all of sudden, as if things had somehow gone all topsy-turvy. There was no reason for it, but she was abruptly flushed and disoriented. "And yet you're giving it away," she remarked, doing her best to sound dry and natural.

Something suddenly became clear to her as she covertly eyed Kent's face. And she realized the source of her unexpected confusion. Kent was more genuinely passionate about this painting than he'd been about anything in years. His love for it had broken through his hard, cold defenses, revealing the man who existed beneath them.

And it was that man that attracted Cali. Who had always attracted Cali. And for the first time during this interview, she felt her body reacting to his physical presence.

Despite herself, she wanted to tap into that passion, that intensity. Wanted it directed toward her. Felt her intimate muscles clench as she realized that she wanted him inside her again.

What a freak she was, she thought wryly. Turned on because of a piece of fourteenth-century art.

She turned away. Took a deep breath. Managed to force back this ridiculous lust. She was an adult – not a teenager to be led around by her hormones.

Lust was manageable and unavoidable and she wasn't fool enough to really want Kent Landon as a part of her life.

He hadn't appeared to notice anything was amiss. He wasn't even really looking at her. "Yes," he said, responding to her earlier comment. "I'm giving it away, even though I love it. The sacrifice is what makes it a charitable gesture."

And, of course, it was all about the gesture for Kent. All about how this would infinitely boost his reputation. His love for the painting – his passion – didn't matter nearly as much as his calculated, manipulative plans.

It was like he was two different people. The real man—the one she'd known briefly in Blacksburg—was trapped and suffocated by the cold, scheming tyrant who controlled the whole person.

He looked over at her suddenly. Appeared to notice something in her expression. "What is it?"

She shook her head roughly and schooled her expression. "Nothing," she improvised. "It's just that I'm so used to seeing your professional and political self that it's hard to remember that you're also an intelligent man who gets excited about things like art and history."

That had sounded convincing and was part of the truth. The only part of her feelings she could share.

He made an amused sound. "Everyone has more sides to themselves than they reveal to the world." With a slanting look at her, he added softly, "Even you, I'd imagine."

Cali willed herself not to blush—she was way too old to be doing that—but she couldn't quite meet his eyes. Turning away from him, she started to leave the room. "Thank you for showing this to me," she said, by way of farewell.

When she reached the door, he stopped her with an unexpected question. "Do you regret it?"

She jerked to a stop, still facing the door, her heart suddenly drumming painfully. "What?"

"The last time we saw each other, we had sex," Kent explained, as if she had somehow forgotten that little fact. "I was asking if you regretted it."

She swallowed hard and turned around. Kept her face casual and unconcerned. "No, I don't regret it. I enjoyed myself."

He blinked once, his eyes fixed on her face with a strange concentration. "You enjoyed yourself?"

"Yes," she affirmed, pitching her voice to sound mildly impatient. Her confidence rose as Kent appeared slightly uncertain. "It was good sex. I enjoyed it. Didn't you?"

Nodding, he still didn't look quite as in control as he normally was. "I did. I just never expected you to be so casual about something like this."

There could have been a bite to those words, but he didn't appear to be insulting her. She shrugged. "Why shouldn't I be? We both knew what it was going into it. I assure you—I had no delusions about that night being the beginning of a great love affair." She was pleased with her cool, cynical tone. Convinced that she sounded nonchalant, as if none of this was important to her.

It wasn't *really* important, but she wasn't quite as casual about it as she sounded. She could still remember—in minute detail—what it had felt like when he'd twirled her breasts with his tongue, when his flesh had moved inside her, when she'd come in shudders and spasms beneath him.

His brow lowered as he watched her from across the room. "You left before I woke up that morning."

She felt a strange lump in her throat, remembering her panicked resistance to hearing Kent affirm how meaningless their encounter had been. "I had somewhere to be," she said mildly, hoping the lie was convincing.

He tightened his lips and she still had no way of reading his face. Wished she knew what was going on behind his lovely eyes and inexplicable expression. "You..." Then he shook his head and appeared to rephrase his comment. "I wouldn't have imagined you were the kind of person to have casual sex."

She wondered if that was intended to wound. From another person's mouth, she would have taken the statement as offensive. But from Kent she just wasn't sure. Keeping her voice cool, she inquired, "Then why did you ask me up to the suite? If you didn't think I would say yes?"

"Because I wanted you. Why did you say yes?"

Her answer was just as matter-of-fact as his was. "Because *I* wanted *you*." Sighing, she added, "Neither one of us is a child, Kent. Both of us know how the world works. It happened, but it doesn't have to mean anything." Her voice held a note of bitterness that she wished wasn't there. But she couldn't help but remember the careless cruelty in his words to her afterward – a cruelty he probably hadn't even recognized.

When he nodded in response to her words, she turned away, pleased she had made it through this discussion with her pride and dignity intact. She was a grown-up now and she could keep her composure, even during an encounter like this one.

She started to leave again. But was once more stopped by his voice.

"I still have your bra."

Her composure instantly evaporated. And she almost giggled nervously at the incongruity of Kent saying those words to her. "You do?"

"Yes. You left it in the bed. I thought about sending it over to you, but I thought that might seem a bit...callous. What should I do with it?"

She chuckled out loud then, a strange mingling of amusement, nerves and bitterness. Said over her shoulder as she left. "Send it to me, if you want. Or throw it away. Or wear it under your five-thousand dollar suits for all I care. It just doesn't matter to me, Kent."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Cali sank into the chair next to her father's bed in the small, stark hospital room. He was asleep, so she didn't wake him up. Just sat silently and stared at him.

He had come through the second surgery with no problem, so it was just a matter of time and rehabilitation for him to become fully mobile again. But he looked so old sleeping in the hospital bed. So pale. So weak.

He'd always been so strong. Seeing him like this was somehow heartbreaking.

She fought the lump in her throat and leaned her head against the wall. Sat watching him for ten minutes until he finally opened his eyes.

"Cali," he said, his voice rising in pleasure to see her. "You should have woken me up."

She grinned, straightening in the uncomfortable chair. "Why? You need your sleep and I was in no hurry. How are you feeling?"

He smiled in response, but looked worn and tired despite his efforts. "Great. The physical therapist worked me hard this afternoon."

They chatted idly about what he had done that day and Cali was able to forget all about her troubling encounter with Kent, until Jim started asking about her day. "How was the interview?"

"Fine. Kent showed me the painting. It's really going to cause quite a stir."

His forehead wrinkled. "How is he?"

"That's exactly what he asked about you."

Jim looked thoughtful for a moment. Then prodded, "You didn't answer my question."

"You know, Dad, I don't really know how Kent is. He's changed so much. I thought I knew him back in Blacksburg, but that person is almost unrecognizable now." She thought about the brief glimpse of the real Kent she'd caught as he'd talked passionately about the painting. But then she forced that image away, since it wasn't good for the stability of her insides.

Instead, she concentrated on what she knew to be true. "He's so cold now. So hard. So unyielding and manipulative. Everything he does is political and he never reveals his real feelings or thoughts."

"That's just defensive. That's just the persona he's put on. It was there in a lesser degree even in Blacksburg—it has just become more impenetrable now."

"Yeah," she replied softly. "I suppose. But there comes a point where it's impossible to distinguish between the persona and the real person."

Jim shook his head, still looking at her strangely. "You'll always be able to tell with Kent."

"Dad? What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged and gave her an innocent smile. "Nothing. I just mean that you've always seemed to understand Kent."

Then, preposterously, her father continued, "Is there a spark there, do you think?"

Her jaw fell open. "What?" she demanded. When he didn't repeat the question, she added, "You've got to be crazy, Dad. Are you actually trying to get me together with Kent?"

"Maybe not. But you could do worse. Wouldn't it be something if my daughter became the richest woman in the city?"

She rolled her eyes. "You don't mean that. You don't care about money that much and you definitely wouldn't want me to marry a man who didn't love me."

"Of course not," Jim said, his brow furrowing. "I was, of course, assuming he would fall in love with you first."

She groaned. "Please."

"Well, why shouldn't he fall in love with you?"

Shaking her head at him, she said patiently. "Kent could have any woman in the world."

Jim grinned irrepressibly. "But Kent always wants the best. And you're the best there is."

She caved under the sentiment and affection that was palpable in her father's eyes. "Thanks, Dad. But I think you're a little biased. And I thought you'd decided Kent wasn't good enough for me."

"He might not be. But I'm rethinking things now. And I'm wondering if, underneath the cold surface, he might still be the generous, sensitive boy we used to know. I've had my problems with the Landons, but Kent...I always thought there was potential there."

Part of her wanted to laugh at her father referring to Kent Landon as a boy and the other part wanted to cry at how far removed Kent was now from that boy. "It's irrelevant, Dad. And we'll never get to know. I had one interview with him. We're hardly friends. I'll likely never talk to him again."

A tiny little voice inside her started mourning at the possibility that this was true.

But Cali ruthlessly stifled that little voice. Stomped it into the ground.

Leaning back in her chair, Cali decided it was time to change the subject. "One day, Dad, you're going to have to give up on trying to marry me off."

"I don't see why I'll ever have to give up," Jim countered obstinately. "I want you to be happy. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing's wrong with that," Cali assured him. "But I *am* happy. I'm very happy. I don't need a man to fulfill me." It was true. The insecure teenager she had been in Blacksburg thrilled at how true her words were.

"I know," Jim allowed, shifting his leg uncomfortably. "But someone might be out there for you and I don't care how hopeless you think it is." He looked wistful all of a sudden. "I know you're content as you are and I know you have a good life. But I can't help but wish you had someone to spend your life with. I don't like to think of you alone...after I..."

Cali gulped. "Dad," she whispered, her throat aching painfully. "Don't you dare say it."

His face twisted briefly. "I won't. But I do think about it sometimes."



Sometimes Cali thought about it too. Couldn't bear to imagine the time when her family would consist of only one. Would consist of only her.

Her eyes burning a little, she made herself say cheerfully, "Anyway, I won't be alone. I have plenty of friends."

"Friends are good," Jim said, looking optimistic again. "But a husband wouldn't be bad either."

Cali groaned. "Dad you've got to give it up. I'm perfectly happy as I am. Of course, I wouldn't say no to a date now and then and I'm sure I'd be glad if I ever do fall in love—provided the idiot loves me back." She reflected on this for a moment. "And honestly, once in a while, I might cry a little bit over the fact that I've been passed over in the romance department. But I've got plenty of wonderful things in my life. And the lack of a love life hardly tops the list of the things that make me cry."

Jim's face sobered suddenly. "What does top the list?"

"Let's see," she began, trying to keep her voice light. But she couldn't seem to lie to her father today, so the truth came out, no matter how painful it was to say. "The thing that makes me cry the most," she admitted, her throat threatening to close up as the poignant reality hit her like a wave, "is the idea that you won't always be...won't always be around to be the most wonderful thing in my life."

She locked eyes with her father through the sudden tears in her eyes and her shoulders shook slightly as she choked on a little sob. Her father, her family—getting older, getting weaker, one day wouldn't be here at all.

Jim made a rough noise in his throat and wiped impatiently at one eye. "Damn it, Cali," he grumbled, clearly overcome by her words and her obvious emotion.

"I know," she choked out, rubbing at the tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry." She leaned over and hunted through her bag until she found a crumpled napkin she could use to mop at her face. "I didn't mean to."

"You're supposed to be cheering me up," he complained, although she could hear the tenderness in his voice. "I'm not on my deathbed you know. Just look at us. It's ridiculous."

"Pathetic," she agreed, getting control of herself and smiling at him. "We can't tell anyone we succumbed to this kind of hackneyed sentiment."

He chuckled in response and they moved away from the raw emotion into their typical, affectionate humor.

They spent the rest of the time chatting about inconsequential things and they remained several feet apart the whole time. They had never been the kind of family who'd been really touchy—they didn't spend much time hugging or holding hands.

They didn't have to. They understood each other perfectly. And she could feel her father's love for her even as they joked about the ballgame on TV.

After a while, Jim got a phone call and while he talked Cali let her mind wander back to her interview with Kent.

It was easy to say that she didn't want Kent in her life, but it was harder to deal with all these lingering feelings. Kent wasn't just a man to her and he certainly wasn't a stranger.

There was definitely some kind of spark between them as her father had alluded to. It would be nice if Cali could explain it all away as physical attraction but it had always been more than just that. She thought—hoped—that her body's response to him was primarily physical, but she was honest enough with herself to admit that she was drawn to him in deeper ways as well.

Drawn to the real man—not the man he showed to the world—which made everything so much more complicated since she wasn't sure how much of the real man was left under the cold, polished surface.

Even in Blacksburg, there had been something between them. Some kind of intimate knowledge that went beyond attraction. And the truth was that it was this knowledge, more than his handsome appearance and erotic intensity, that created the hot rush of feeling in her chest. In her body.

"What are you thinking about?" Jim asked, hanging up the phone.

Cali felt uncomfortably warm, but she smiled. "I was just thinking about Kent."

A kind of gleeful interest ignited on Jim's face. "Really? How interesting."

Cali laughed. "Don't get excited. I was just thinking about the interview. Not planning our honeymoon."

"Too bad. I suppose I should be glad that my daughter is strong-willed enough to avoid having her head turned by a smooth-talking billionaire who always has an underlying agenda and multiple purposes for everything he does. But still...I'm pretty sure if Kent loves something, he loves it all the way."

Cali thought about what her father had just said. Realized how true it was. Then pictured Kent's passionate face as he gazed at the Giotto painting.

She gasped and sat up ramrod straight in her chair. Realized something she should have recognized immediately.

Kent loved that painting. And there was no way that he would ever let it go.

\* \* \* \* \*

After considering the situation for a week, Cali arrived at only two likely possibilities. Either Kent was going to donate a forgery to be sold at the auction or he was going to buy back the painting himself.

She was hoping he wouldn't go with a forgery, since there would be no way for her to prove it. And she thought the second option was the more likely anyway. By buying the painting back, he could retain the painting while still significantly boosting his reputation in the city. He could give the false impression of sacrificial generosity without really sacrificing anything that was important to him.

Donating the painting would be a much larger gesture than donating any amount of money, so Kent might not mind the monetary price he would have to pay. On the other hand, donating a forgery seemed so cheap, as if it emotionally devalued the original and Cali thought Kent might feel the same way.

If he was buying it back, Cali had a chance of unraveling the mystery.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two weeks after her interview with Kent, Cali stood quietly with the rest of the reporters in the back of an enormous, crowded auction room. From her limited vantage point she did her best to study the scene. Most of the proceedings went quickly and uneventfully and—though she made sure she kept notes to use in her article—she was woefully uninterested in the majority of the auction.

Kent's painting wouldn't be auctioned until the end. That event was what more than half of the people were here to witness or participate in. That was what everyone cared about.

Cali had done her homework diligently and had brushed up as much as she could on the relevant art scene. She'd learned enough to know that a substantial percentage of art collectors preferred to remain anonymous, so she could very likely not know who ultimately walked away with the Giotto.

The thought wasn't encouraging. There was a very good possibility that at the end of the auction she would neither know if the painting was genuine nor know who actually bought it.

Cali was out of her depth here and she knew it.

Looking around the room, she recognized or guessed at a number of the potential buyers in the room from the inquiries she'd made. Many private collectors, however, weren't here in person, but had instead sent representatives with cell phones.

Since the auction was ostensibly local, phone bids weren't permitted. So everyone who wanted a chance at the painting had to make a personal appearance or send an actual body to do the bidding for them.

If Kent was going to secretly bid on the painting, he must have a representative here too. Unfortunately Cali had no idea how to locate that person.

The tension in the air increased as one by one the other items up for bid were bought. Finally, there was nothing left but the Giotto painting.

Feeling ridiculously anxious Cali moved as far forward as she could to get a better view. Unfortunately, she couldn't get far, since the reporters had to stand clustered in a back corner.

As soon as she'd entered the room, she'd located Kent near the front. He was prominently positioned and looking as attractive and in control as ever. As befitted his role as chief philanthropist, he'd given the welcome at the beginning of the auction and now he said a few more words in preparation for the bidding on the Giotto to begin.

He graciously explained that it was hard to part with a painting that meant so much to him, but the charitable cause was worth the sacrifice.

Cali snorted cynically when she heard this. Kent was his cool, unflappable self, sophisticated, suave, polished, heartless. He displayed no genuine feelings at all and Cali decided she was justified in her negative opinion of him.

Just then, he looked in her direction. She was almost certain that he was staring right at her, although it was hard to see his eyes distinctly from the other side of the room.

Cali froze and stared back at him. Wondered what his look might be saying.

Apparently, it wasn't saying anything. Because, without altering his expression, he casually glanced away from her, as if she wasn't really worth noticing.

She wasn't sure what she had expected, but she felt anger rising in her throat at being so blatantly dismissed.

Of course, he had every right to dismiss her, but that didn't mean she had to like it.

Cali felt her heart pounding as the bidding on the painting began. Scanning the room, she tried to identify whether any of the bidders might have been working for Kent.

The scene was really hard to follow. The bidding was fast and quiet—the auctioneer a professional and not one to make a loud show. Potential buyers used numbered paddles to make their bids and paddles seemed to be popping up in rapid succession all over the room. Cali kept up as best she could and didn't worry too much about her ignorance until bidder after bidder dropped out, unable to afford what was quickly becoming an astounding amount of money.

If Kent wanted to buy his painting back, his representative wouldn't drop out.

Soon it was down to only two or three bidders. The price was too steep for most museum budgets and private dealers, so Cali was pretty sure the remaining bidders were ridiculously wealthy private art collectors. One collector was present and bidding on the painting himself. The two other bidders she didn't recognize and assumed they were merely representatives of the real buyers.

Both bidders were talking quietly on their cell phones as they raised their paddles, giving the impression that they were being given instructions on the other end of the call. One was a middle-aged, overweight man. The other was a young brunette woman, polished, efficient, gorgeous.

Cali locked her eyes onto the woman. Intuitively knew that the woman would end up winning the bidding.

She did. The final price was shockingly high and it was announced that a collector who preferred to remain anonymous had bought the painting.

This kind of thing happened all the time at art auctions, so it was absolutely no proof that Kent had bought his painting back. The woman had ostensibly been

receiving instructions on her cell phone and she obviously wasn't talking to Kent—who had been in plain view the entire time.

Cali knew. Her eyes had been darting over to Kent constantly. And he hadn't revealed any reaction to the proceedings at all.

The auction was now over, so the scene dispersed into chaos. Knowing that she wouldn't be the only reporter who might try to track down the real buyer of the painting, Cali backed off and watched from a distance as the brunette conversed with the officiators of the auction.

Cali wasn't going to bother following the woman. If Kent was involved, there was no way that the woman would do something as obvious as meet with him.

Not even bothering to lift an eyebrow as the brunette left the building, Cali waited until Kent appeared in the lobby, schmoozing with various Chicago bigwigs.

Then she quietly walked the two blocks to where her car was parked and drove it around to the front of the building, just in time to see Kent's driver pick him up.

Obviously, Kent didn't have the painting with him and the piece of art was almost certainly on its way to parts unknown, where it would safely be hidden until all the interest in it died down. But she remembered Kent's face as he gazed at the portrait and she had a feeling that he wouldn't want it to be shipped to some secret hideaway until he had seen for himself that it was safe.

So when Kent's driver pulled away from the curb, Cali tailed the car. She stayed as far back as she could and was able to follow from a distance until Kent was dropped off in front of Landon Industries corporate headquarters.

Sighing in irritation, Cali circled the block until she found a strategic parking place and there she sat for three hours while Kent did God-knew-what in his office.

Cali was cursing under her breath and starting to think she was wasting her time when she saw Kent's driver pull back up in front of the office building.

She craned her neck and saw Kent stride purposefully out the door and then get into the car.

Relieved, Cali waited until the car was at the end of the block before she too pulled away from the curb.

She was so worried about being spotted that she actually lost Kent's car a couple of times in traffic. But she found it again both times—once at a stoplight and once by sheer luck—so she was able to discreetly follow him until they reached the outskirts of town, entering a district that was made up mostly of warehouses and run-down factories.

There, she got caught by a long red light and was too far back to see which way Kent's car turned.

Swearing loudly now and slamming her palms on her steering wheel, she snatched up her cell phone and dialed the number of a friend she'd recently made in the Zoning Department. Was soon informed that only one warehouse in this area was owned by Landon Industries.

Cali quickly navigated the streets and noticed Kent's car waiting outside the address her friend had mentioned.

It seemed too easy—he must not be worried about anyone following him because he hadn't been particularly covert—but she wasn't going to complain about his arrogant assumptions of superiority.

She circled around to the back, so her car wouldn't look suspicious. Parked as conveniently as she could. Checked to make sure she had her cell phone, pepper spray and appropriate identification and then ducked out of her car and into the alley at the back of the warehouse.

She very much wished she was wearing her jeans and walking shoes, but she was still dressed for the auction—in a straight gray skirt and leather pumps. Fortunately, her one gesture at rebellion had been to forego the pantyhose, so her legs were bare beneath her skirt.

When she noticed that a huge loading dock door was wide open and no one was around outside, she shrugged and slipped into the warehouse through the large opening.

She immediately heard voices, so she scuttled quickly into a dark corner behind a stack of boxes, where she could peek out and see what was happening.

The first thing she saw was what looked like an armored truck and there were several men standing around it. From their appearance, she guessed that they worked for some sort of private security firm.

As she watched, two men lifted a box from the truck and then placed it on the floor.

Kent wasn't in sight, but he must be there somewhere. She was patting herself on the back for a snooping job well done, when her belly clenched spasmodically. She heard a familiar voice say, "It's not a particularly complicated procedure. Is there some reason it's taking so long to load it onto the van?"

Kent. She couldn't see him, but that was definitely his voice.

She felt a familiar thrill rush through her, she had been right, everything had fallen out exactly as she'd predicted and she was here to witness it.

As she peered around the pile of boxes to see a little bit more of what was happening, she tried to sort through her feelings, trying to decide if she was relieved that he'd loved the painting enough to keep it or annoyed that he'd deceived the world as he had.

And then she gave a startled yelp of shock.

Because a rough hand grabbed her arm and dragged her forward from the dark corner she'd been hiding in.

"Mr. Landon," the man called out, pulling her arm painfully as he led her toward the group of men. "We appear to have an uninvited guest."

Kent had been standing on the other side of the truck, so she hadn't been able to see him from her previous position. But as she got closer, he stepped forward, turning to look at her intently.

She should have known it had been too easy. This wasn't a life or death situation, so he hadn't pulled out all the stops, but Kent would never be sloppy about anything.

Here she was, thirty-eight years old and caught spying on Kent Landon.

Of course, she had been intending to confront Kent about what she discovered. But she would have much preferred to have done it on her own terms and not be dragged out to see him in the middle of the warehouse, surrounded by a number of armed and decidedly unfriendly men.

"What are you doing here?" Kent asked. He eyed her as if she were a messy child who he was certain would pester him.

She was getting a little nervous now. She didn't know Kent very well anymore and she was quite sure he wasn't above engaging in illegal behavior. Not that she thought he would actually hurt her, but still—she should have worked harder at being stealthy.

Making sure to not let her anxiety show, she replied, "Following through on a suspicion."

A cold kind of knowledge entered Kent's eyes. "And was your suspicion correct?"

"It was. It wasn't a particularly difficult guess."

Their eyes met and they shared a sharp look of understanding.

Looking away from her, he glanced at one of the men and made a small gesture toward a minivan that was parked behind the armored truck.

Two of the men began to move the box to the minivan.

Cali assumed the minivan was more secure than most vehicles of its kind. Otherwise, Kent wouldn't be trusting his loved piece of art to its care. The door of the minivan swung shut. Then the engine started to run as a man moved into the front seat and turned the key in the ignition.

"So you guessed that I bought my own painting. Very impressive. What are you planning to do with your knowledge?" Kent eyed her with vague distaste.

She gazed at him calmly, feeling more in stride now. It didn't really matter that this encounter wasn't on her terms, she could handle it with confidence just the same. "I haven't decided yet."

Enlightenment dawned on Kent's face. "I see." He paused, glanced around the warehouse, then said, "Come with me. We should discuss this in private."

Cali followed him obediently, feeling a surreal kind of wonder as she walked behind him toward a small, enclosed office in the front of the warehouse. Kent immediately shut the door and then the blinds on both of the windows.

He was still wearing his flashy black suit from the auction, making Cali feel a little underdressed in her long skirt and bare legs.

She raised her eyebrows in expectation. "Well?"

He sighed. "Yes, I bought my own painting. Yes, I'd prefer to keep it a secret. Yes, you know about it now, which makes things rather more complicated."

"It would be a little embarrassing, wouldn't it? If it got out that you weren't quite as charitably sacrificial as you'd like people to think?"

Shrugging, Kent replied, "A little embarrassing. But I did *pay* for the painting, providing a huge amount of money for local charities."

"But that's not point." Cali had had the same thought, but she didn't really feel like giving Kent the benefit of a doubt at the moment.

There were always so many purposes to everything Kent did and this was no different. He was a schemer, a manipulator. He used people at his will. And he did it all with a slick, charismatic façade, hiding the cold steel behind his actions.

"The *gesture* is the point," she went on matter-of-factly. She knew Kent and wanted him to know just how well she knew him. "Giving money is easy. You want the city to think that you gave up so much more than money. You want them to think you gave up this treasure for them. But you didn't."

He didn't try to argue and she desperately wished she could provoke some sort of genuine response in him. But all he did was ask, "How did you figure it out? I hadn't thought anyone would even suspect."

She wasn't going to tell him the whole saga, so she gave him the easy answer. "I saw your face when you looked at the painting, remember? You would never let that painting go willingly."

He seemed to accept this as valid. He looked a little tired, but completely composed, as he asked, "So what do you want in order to keep quiet about this?"

"What makes you think I want anything?" Her heart was drumming rapidly and she was excruciatingly aware that she was alone with Kent in this little room, with only a couple of desks and a computer for company. She could feel that nameless intensity rise again in the air between them, but for all she knew she was the only one who felt it.

Kent appeared to be completely unaffected by her.

"We wouldn't be talking if you didn't want something," he said, a hint of impatience in his voice. She would have been happy about frustrating him, but she knew it was an impersonal kind of frustration. He simply wanted to deal with this problem and move on. "If you didn't want to deal, you would have scampered off to write your little article and expose my deception to the world. What do you want?"

Cali bit back a scowl at his saying she would "scamper" in such a condescending way. "I don't want anything..." Before he could voice the automatic objection, she completed the sentence, "Yet."

Very briefly, she saw knowledge, understanding and something almost like admiration pass over his face. "I see. Save it for a rainy day."



"Exactly," she said, sounding more in control than she felt. She wondered what would happen if she just reached over and shook him. Would that break his flinty composure at all? Could he really be as cold and unfeeling as he acted? Was there nothing about her that could ever break through his barriers? And why the hell did she care anyway? "I might need some help one day in the future and it can't hurt to have Kent Landon owe me a favor."

He thought about this for a moment, staring at a spot just over her shoulder. "All right. Agreed. I owe you a favor and you keep what you know about this situation secret. But, before you come to collect, make sure the favor is equivalent to the secret you have on me. It might be embarrassing and it would counteract the gesture's intended benefit, but revealing the truth in this wouldn't do me irreparable damage." He met her eyes evenly. "So don't push your luck."

"Agreed. Whatever favor I ask will be in proportion to this secret."

She had no idea what kind of favor she would want from Kent in the future, but there might be any number of things that came up.

She easily could have written some kind of exposé revealing what Kent had done, but after the initial stir, such a relatively harmless offense wouldn't have made a significant dent in her career or in Kent's reputation. In fact, he would probably just spin the story to emphasize the millions of dollars he'd surreptitiously given to charity.

This way, at least she might gain something from the situation.

Kent raised his eyebrows, looking as unflappable as ever. "Very well, then. I'm sure you'll let me know when you want to call in your marker."

So it was settled. As simple as that. Cali Ross had just blackmailed Kent Landon.

And was apparently going to get away with it.

She wasn't a fool. Knew it would never be this easy if she had known something that could seriously harm him.

Kent was standing in front of her—about a foot away—looking handsome and wary and completely untouchable.

And it just made Cali mad. She remembered vividly how his face had transformed as he gazed on the painting. Knew he was capable of feeling things deeply. Was overwhelmingly compelled to prove it to herself.

She wondered what would happen if she just shrieked at the top of her lungs. Would he react then? Look something other than perfectly in control?

Probably not. He'd probably just arch an eyebrow and suggest a good psychiatrist.

Cali felt a kind of coiled tension tighten in her chest, but she couldn't really identify if it was anger or annoyance or frustration.

It was the strangest sensation and stranger because it suddenly took over her body.

And then she was touching him. Grabbing on to the lapels of his suit jacket and pulling him close to her. Without taking the time to process why she was doing it, she slid her hands to the back of his neck and pressed his face down toward hers.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a tense whisper, his features tightening but still revealing nothing.

She leaned forward, pressing her breasts up against his chest. His body was just as hard and warm as last time—in such contrast to his slick, cold appearance—and her body reacted in expectation. "What does it look like?" she murmured, skimming her lips across his and waiting to see if he'd respond.

He closed his eyes briefly and she was so close that she could see the flicker of his thick eyelashes. "Why?"

She had absolutely no idea why—only that she had to do something to crack the icy surface around the real man and this was the only thing she could think of.

She tried the kiss again, this time sliding her tongue along the line of his lower lip. "Why not?" she countered, caressing his short, dark hair with her fingertips. "We could do this in lieu of a handshake, to seal our agreement." Smiling a little against his mouth, she added, "I enjoyed last time. Didn't you?"

She wasn't nearly as confident as she sounded. Her heart was pounding and her fingers were trembling slightly. She must be crazy. Kent fucked movie stars, models and European royalty. And she was coming on to him like some horny...

She must be absolutely crazy. Was about to pull away and try to figure out what kind of early midlife crisis she was going through.

But he was answering, "Yes. I enjoyed it." And then he was kissing her back.

Making a surprised grunt as his lips pressed down on hers, Cali darted out her tongue and fluttered it against his. His arms had gone around her and he pushed her back until her butt connected with the table behind her. Losing the momentum of the kiss, Cali let her head fall back, dislodging her lips from his.

She sucked in a deep breath of air, trying to decide whether this was really what she wanted to do.

His lips had lowered to her neck and he nibbled a line down to her collarbone. "Are you sure about this?"

She would like to think the extra texture in his voice was caused by an overwhelming need for her, but she had a feeling it was just his typical sex-voice, one he could turn on at will. His hands were skilled and certain, massaging her hips and reaching up to remove the clip she'd used to secure her hair. There was still no emotion except growing lust in his eyes when he glanced up at her. "Yes," she replied. "Are you?"

He didn't answer. Just raised his face and kissed her again.

As his lips moved against hers, she opened her mouth slightly. He slid his tongue between her lips and she used the tip of her tongue to trace along his. She could hear his breathing accelerate to match hers and her face flushed deeply as she felt his heat against her skin. His fingers had combed through her loosened hair and now he fisted

his hand, holding it against her scalp. With his other hand, he started fumbling with the buttons on her white blouse.

Cali drew her mouth away and turned her head to the side, experiencing a small panic attack as she remembered what bra she was wearing. It was her most comfortable one, which meant it was old and worn—full-coverage in plain white nylon, without any trim or lace. Definitely not a bra for having sex.

Taking advantage of the expanse of neck she'd exposed to him with the turn of her head, Kent lowered his face again and teased at her pulse point with his tongue.

Cali bit her lower lip as his teeth grazed over her heartbeat.

Kent had managed to open her blouse and was now cupping her breasts over her bra. Not appearing to notice the unsexiness of the undergarment or the little tear on the left cup, Kent thumbed her nipples through the fabric until they tightened into hard peaks.

Gasping a little, Cali stared down at his hands on her breasts, feeling the corresponding tugs below her belly for each twirl and flick on her nipples. Then she arched back and reached down to grab at the edge of the table when he pulled one of her breasts out of her bra and bent over to take it in his mouth.

She closed her eyes as he sucked and fluttered his tongue. Tried to steady her breathing by exhaling through her mouth.

After a minute, she released the table and clutched at his shoulders, drawing him back up. The sensations were becoming too intense and she felt like she was losing control. He was wearing too many clothes and they were really in the way. Tugging at his tie, she tried to loosen it until he reached up and helped her pull it off.

While Kent returned to caressing her breasts, Cali yanked on his shirt, untucking it from his pants. Instead of bothering to remove his jacket or fiddle with all the buttons on his shirt, she simply slid her hands under the shirttails so she could touch his bare belly and back. His skin was smooth and warm and she reached around his body until she was stroking the rippled ridge of his backbone.

He made a breathless, wordless sound and grasped at her hips. Lifted her slightly so that she was perched on the edge of the table. In the near silence, she heard the crinkling from the few sheets of stray paper she'd sat on.

Kent got his hands on the hem of her skirt and started pushing it up. Bracing herself with her hands on the table, she lifted her hips until he could bunch up the skirt enough for her to spread open her legs.

She tried not to look at her bare thighs as she pulled Kent in between her legs by tugging on his lapels. He moved into position willingly, stroking the flesh of her thighs until he hooked his fingers around the waistband of her panties.

Skimming her hand down to the front of his pants, she found the hard bulge there. He grunted and closed his eyes again as she pressed her hand into it.

"Do you..." she began, as he started to pull her panties off.

He nodded and finished removing her panties. Then reached into his back pocket to pull out a condom.

Relieved – and trying very hard not to imagine what he'd been planning to do with that condom later tonight – she adjusted herself on the table until she was more secure.

Then, as he tore open the condom packet, she unbuckled his belt, unfastened his pants and pushed the fabric of his clothing down to free his erection.

Last time, they'd had sex in the dark, so she hadn't seen much of his body. Staring down at it, she tried to come to terms with the fact that she was holding Kent's cock in one of her hands.

He leaned forward, tilted up her chin until she was no longer looking down at him and then kissed her again, tugging gently on her lower lip.

Cali closed her eyes and tried to figure out what he might be thinking. Couldn't come up with anything. And then was distracted from her ponderings. Because Kent had rolled on the condom and was checking to see if she was wet enough.

She was plenty aroused, so her body was ready for him. She sucked in a harsh breath as he fingered her delicately. Spread her legs a little more as he lined up his cock at her entrance.

She made a strange, soft whimper as he pushed his hard flesh inside of her all the way.

"Fuck," Kent breathed when he was fully sheathed inside her. She couldn't see his face, but his body was tense and his breath was warm on her ear.

Trying to adjust to the tight pressure of having him in her body again, Cali breathed slowly and relaxed her muscles, easing her legs around him loosely. She twined one arm around his neck and used the other to balance herself on the table.

Instead of immediately thrusting, Kent rocked his pelvis into hers, causing his cock to move very slightly inside her. She inhaled sharply at the tingling little sensations spiraling out from where their flesh was connected. Tried to mirror his motion with her hips as much as she could without falling off the table.

Soon the slight friction become exquisitely frustrating and Cali began panting from both the stimulation and the need for more. She moved her hand from his neck to his ass and she squeezed the firm muscles there demandingly.

Recognizing her silent instructions, Kent began to thrust for real. Pulled his pelvis back and drove it forward, his cock sliding easily in her wet channel. He repeated the move – again and then again – and when she caught a glimpse of his face, she saw that his eyes were tightly closed.

Cali swallowed a moan of pleasure at the more intense friction. Arched her neck back and let her lips fall open as her breathing quickened and her legs tightened around him with each of his thrusts.

Kent was now panting as much as she was. One of his arms was around her back, gripping her tightly, while the other was hooked under her thigh. Through her half-

closed eyes she could finally see his expression clearly and it was strained and intense and unreadable.

His rhythmic motion was becoming more urgent, so Cali moved her free hand from his ass to her own body, her knuckles brushing against the base of his cock as it pumped into her. She massaged her clit clumsily, trying to build up the momentum of her growing orgasm.

Making another soft grunt, Kent opened his eyes, freed one of his hands and squeezed it between their bodies. Nudged her hand out of the way. "I've got it," he said thickly, as both of them stared down at where his slick erection was sliding in and out of her and where now he was rubbing her clit.

Cali whimpered at the resulting sensations and moved her hand away. She would have rather taken care of things herself, like she always had in the past. Now she felt off-balance and out of control and she leaned backward, bracing herself with both hands behind her on the table. Needed to pull her upper body away from him in order to manage the rapidly coiling pressure at her center.

Kent pulled her toward him once more, his other arm tightening around her and pressing her chest up against his. His face was slightly damp and rigidly controlled and he was gasping out wordless sounds of effort.

She was too far gone now to draw back again, so she trusted her balance to Kent's strength and wrapped both of her arms around him. One of her hands edged back under his shirt and jacket and she found and squeezed the soft flesh on his side that she remembered from last time.

Her control was lost somewhere between his rapid thrusts and the pressure of his fingers on her clit. She was wheezing now and making tiny, helpless noises in her throat as her pleasure began to reach its peak. Her mouth was at the level of his shoulder and, to smother the silly sounds, she closed her mouth over the fabric of his jacket and the solidity underneath it. Bit down on his shoulder. Loosened and tightened her hand on his side in a series of hard little squeezes. Felt her eyes burning as her body began to quake.

Kent made a hoarse sound and jerked his hips. He lost the coordination between his cock and his fingers on her clit, but at this point it didn't matter. Cali was already falling into her climax.

Kent came just before she did, burying his face in her hair and choking on an incoherent word. As his cock was pulsing inside her, Cali came as well, clawing at the flesh of his side and clamping her teeth down over his shoulder to stifle the frantic sound of her release.

Shuddering, she clung to him after the waves of pleasure faded. Tried to take in enough air. She could feel his hot, damp breath in her hair, against her scalp and his arm was still clutching at her bruisingly.

Neither moved or said anything for a minute and—now that the urgency had passed—Cali realized she had once again fucked Kent Landon and had no rational reason for having done so.

When the silence stretched out brutally, Cali released her desperate grip on his body. Drew back, forcing Kent to remove his arms.

He pulled his chest away from her, allowing her to finally see the expression in his eyes as he watched her. They were masked. He was still completely unknowable.

Instinctively, she pushed at his hips, trying to get his softening cock out of her body.

“Hold on.” He reached down to where they were still connected. “Let me get the condom.” He held it carefully as he pulled out of her.

She hated the sound. Hated how her body felt raw and empty at his withdrawal. Hated her own stupidity, for doing this again.

It hadn’t been casual, no matter what she pretended. She had wanted to break through his barriers, wanted to find the real man underneath the cold surface. Maybe it was the just the challenge or maybe she was starting to fantasize about feelings that could never be.

But she wanted to reach him somehow. Wanted to mean something.

But she hadn’t. Maybe at one point in the past she could have done so—she’d never been blind to the indefinable connection between them—but Kent was now too deeply entrenched in his persona. His real self might emerge for a fourteenth-century painting, but it would never emerge for Cali. No matter how much she fucked him.

She slid off the table until she was standing on wobbly knees, tottering a little on the heels she was still wearing. She pushed down her now wrinkled skirt. Returned her breast to the cup of her bra and hurriedly buttoned up her blouse.

Forcing herself to meet Kent’s eyes, just in case she might catch any glimpse of genuine feeling, she felt a sinking sensation in her chest. Saw nothing at all in his gaze.

Recognized Kent was totally unreachable.

Swallowing hard over a lump in her throat, she willed herself to be reasonable. She’d made a mistake. It happened. They’d had great sex. It just hadn’t meant anything.

And she wasn’t going to do this again.

He was standing silently and watching her and she fought a blush of self-consciousness. She reached out to grab her panties from where Kent had absentmindedly stuck them in his pocket and then she stuffed them in her bag.

After clearing her throat, she said casually, “I’ll let you know when I need the favor.”

Kent nodded. He hadn’t begun to redress himself or even dispose of the condom. “You know how to find me.”

Cali turned around and strode out of the room, every step she took reminding her that Kent had fucked her only moments before. She hurried out of the building and

toward her car. Decided that she had now experienced her stupid quotient for the entire year. If she'd been able to have a good time with Kent and then forget about it, it would be different.

But clearly she wasn't. And she should have known better. She'd had random sex in her twenties and found out then that she wasn't cut out for it.

Blinking rapidly, she got back into her car and slammed the door. Couldn't help but remember Kent's last words to her. They had been dry and matter-of-fact, nothing deep or significant in their purpose.

But, despite her best efforts, when she remembered them now, they made Cali's belly sink heavily.

Because his words weren't true. Would never be true. She had no idea how to find him.

## Chapter Three

"You really didn't have to come all this way to visit me," Cali said, as she carried two new bottles of beer over to the couch. "I'm planning to make it up to Seattle in another month or two to see everyone."

"I know," Alice Shaw replied, accepting her bottle of beer. "But I've missed you and it's been years since I've been to Chicago."

Cali smiled at the woman who had been her best friend for almost twenty years. They had first become acquainted in college and had been roommates for the three semesters before they'd graduated. Alice was part of the reason why Cali had ended up moving to Seattle to begin with and she had been the hardest thing for Cali to leave behind.

Cali lowered herself onto the opposite end of the couch and pulled up her legs until they were folded beneath her. She'd expected to spend a quiet weekend catching up on work, but then Alice had shown up out of the blue this afternoon and her weekend plans changed completely.

"So," Alice began, taking a swallow of her beer with an expression that made it clear she was getting down to business. "We've talked enough about me. Let's get back to you. You fucked this guy a month and a half ago and have been heartbroken ever since."

Cali made an outraged noise in her throat. "I have *not* been heartbroken! I haven't even been brooding about it."

"Then why was it the first thing you told me about?"

"Because it was the most memorable thing to happen to me since I moved here," Cali explained, leaning back against the couch and looking at her friend with a mixture of frustration and fond indulgence. "And it seemed noteworthy. Finally getting laid again after an eight-year dry spell. But maybe you aren't interested in hearing any more."

"Oh, no!" Alice objected. "Spill it. All the dirty details. In fact, the dirtier, the better."

Cali chuckled and thought how nice it was to have her friend around again. She'd made several friends in Chicago already, but they were all...new. It wasn't the same as having someone around who knew you so completely.

"So," Alice continued, moving smoothly into gossip mode, "you weren't heartbroken about this turning into just a one-night stand?"



"Two-night stand," Cali corrected, "there were just a couple of months between the two nights. And no, I wasn't heartbroken. I'm not in love with him and am not in danger of falling in love him."

"Then why was it so upsetting? Was it just the random sex thing? Did it feel icky and demeaning?"

Cali shook her head. "No. The sex itself was good and it didn't really feel icky. It was just... I don't know. I was upset because it was empty."

"Ah ha!" Alice responded, as if she'd just discovered something important. "You wanted the sex to be meaningful. He *does* mean something to you."

Making a face, Cali tried to reply honestly. "Not exactly. I mean, yes, he does mean something, I guess. I told you we have a kind of history. But we've never really been friends or anything, so it's not like I'm expecting us to be soul mates."

Alice's expression was the one she wore when she was deep in research mode at the library. "But you said you fucked him the second time because you wanted to break through to his real self."

Cali nodded. Silently waited for Alice to continue.

"But you hadn't seen him in twenty years. What did you expect? That he'd spill his guts and share all his deepest secrets? Are you that good in bed?"

Her feelings for Kent were so frustratingly vague and it was so incredibly hard to put them into words. "Of course not," Cali objected. "I'm not a teenager anymore, you know. I never thought the sex would lead to something like that. I just wanted... I don't know... A genuine reaction."

Alice cocked an eyebrow. "What kind of reaction? Him to cry out 'Yeah, baby', when he came?"

Cali laughed appreciatively and tossed a throw pillow over at her friend. "Even that would be better than I got. But I mean I wanted to see that he was really a person and not just the suave machine he pretends to be." Cali sighed and realized how foolish she'd been. "It's stupid, I know and I knew better than to expect it. But I wanted to see that I—my presence—could get to him in some way."

Alice furrowed her brow and thought for a moment. "So that's what it all comes down to. It's not really about his being a real person. It's about wanting to get under his skin."

Shrugging, Cali had to admit that this was a fair assessment.

"Because you have the hots for him," Alice added, grinning widely. Alice was prominent in the academic world and the most educated, intelligent person Cali knew. But she also had the quirkiest way with words.

"Yes, I have the hots for him, if you're talking about physical attraction. And the hots, by the way, go both ways—since for some reason he has the hots for me too. Why else would we have ended up fucking twice for no good reason? I was just hoping to see if there might be more than that between us. It was like a challenge—he was so

untouchable that I had to see if I could touch him." At the sudden glint in Alice's eyes, Cali muttered, "Get your mind out of the gutter. You know what I mean."

"I know. You've always been like that, wanting to do everything you weren't allowed to do. Why should doing this guy be any different?"

Cali tried to suppress the giggle—really she did—but she wasn't entirely successful.

"So you really aren't too broken up about this?"

Alice's eyes were suddenly concerned and Cali felt a warm feeling in her chest. "I'm not. I'll admit, I was upset immediately afterward. You know how that feels—when you're through fucking a guy and are bombarded with this realization that what you've just done was totally empty." She paused for a few seconds, trying to get her thoughts together. "And I was kind of panicked too, because I realized how quickly I *could* start to have real feelings for him."

Alice nodded in understanding. "It's a common mistake—thinking you can fuck your way into a man's heart."

Cali winced. "Yeah. That kind of mistake might be understandable in a teenager, but I really should know better than that." She took a sip of beer. "Though I wasn't thinking it would turn into some fairy-tale love. I'm not sure I'd even want that if it happened. I just wanted—"

"To get under his skin," Alice finished for her. "And don't beat yourself up too much for your stupidity. I don't care how old you are—some things just don't change."

"Yeah."

They sat in meditative silence for a few minutes. Then Alice asked, "So have you seen him since?"

"Nope. And I'm not planning to. I've now recovered my sanity and self-respect and I'm not going to do that to myself again. He can go on being Mr. Cool-As-Ice Business-God. I'm through trying to melt him."

"Who is this guy, anyway?"

Swallowing hard, Cali hedged, "Just some rich asshole."

"Cali." The one word was low and drawn out unnaturally long.

Cali sighed. "Fine. It's Kent Landon. *Kent Landon*. I was stupid enough to think that I could get to Kent Landon. Happy now?"

Alice choked. She had a literal coughing fit that lasted so long Cali actually started to get worried.

Pounding her friend on the back, Cali eyed her nervously. "You all right?"

Finally, Alice recovered. Then exclaimed, "You fucked Kent Landon? Why didn't you tell me before? Girl, he's hot!"

"I know," Cali acknowledged mournfully.

"Did you get any expensive parting gifts? Doesn't he have a reputation for being excessively generous with former flames?"

"He does. But apparently I didn't even rate that, which is just as well. I don't think he considers me a flame. He probably considers me a...fuck. That's certainly what he was to me."

Alice snickered. "But seriously, I'm wondering if that's really a good sign."

Cali eyed her suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it might be a good sign that he treats you differently from all his other women." She sat and mulled on this while Cali got up to get a bowl of trail mix from the kitchen. When she returned, Alice continued, "I think you'd better give me more details."

"Oh, no. I'm not going into who touched whom where and what we did with our various body parts."

"Party pooper," Alice muttered with a scowl. "But you have to at least tell me what he said. Did he admire your tits? Call you darling? Look into your eyes and vow eternal devotion?"

Cali gave the final question the eye-rolling it deserved. "He said fuck."

"What?"

Nodding, Cali repeated, "He said fuck. That's all he said. As soon as he had...gotten it in...he said fuck."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"How did he say it?" Alice pursued. "Did he sound annoyed? Was he shouting? Was it like he had just remembered he hadn't turned off his coffeemaker?"

Cali couldn't help but laugh. "No. Stop being stupid. He said it kind of softly—in a long, throaty whisper. Like this..." She mimicked the way Kent had said the word, "Fuck."

"Hmm." A gleam sparkled in Alice's dark eyes. "Very interesting. Sounds like he was really liking it. He didn't say anything else?"

She started to shake her head, but then blushed hotly, remembering what else Kent had said.

"Oh, no," Alice demanded. "Huh-uh. You've got to tell me now. Spill it. He talked about how fine your ass is, didn't he?"

"No. And my ass isn't that fine. He just...God, do we have to do this?" At Alice's stony gaze, Cali relented. "Fine. I had reached down to...take care of things with my hand while we were going at it and then he pushed my hand aside and said...'I've got it'."

Alice's jaw dropped open. And then she inquired in malicious delight, "And did he...have it?"

Cali raised her eyebrows, no longer even blushing. "He did."

Clapping her hands and leaning back against the couch, Alice howled with laughter.

Waiting as patiently as she could and trying not to chuckle herself, Cali finally asked, "Are you finished?"

Alice wheezed a little more. "That's priceless. And I really have to reconsider this. But I'm now thinking all of this is very encouraging."

Cali looked up at the ceiling as if she were praying for patience.

"I mean it. He doesn't treat you like all his other women. And the man went out of his way to make sure he got you off. Sounds like the beginnings of true love to me."

The only appropriate response to this was a snort.

"Well, there's no reason to assume the worst. Why shouldn't it be true love?"

Cali had thought Alice was being sarcastic, but now she wasn't entirely sure. "Are you serious? I'm telling you, the man felt nothing. Besides...Kent Landon? And me? You think that's a likely scenario?"

Alice looked momentarily sober. "Remember who you're talking to? I'm a thirty-nine-year-old black woman with a PhD in Anthropology and I've been married for five years to a thirty-one-year-old, white soccer coach. Love isn't about likely scenarios."

Cali smiled at her friend. "You're right, of course. I hate it when you're right. But still...you didn't see how cold his eyes were."

"Eyes aren't as easy to read as we'd like to think."

They sat in thoughtful silence for a while.

"So why did it end so badly?" Alice continued at last. "What happened when it was over?"

Cali frowned. She had successfully distanced herself from her brief emotional turmoil, but thinking about the aftermath still wasn't an entirely pleasant experience. "I just got dressed and left."

"But what did he say afterward?"

Recalling the scene as accurately as she could, Cali admitted, "He didn't say anything at first. I was getting dressed and said something about...oh, no, that's not right. He said something about the condom first."

Alice rubbed her hands together. "Now, finally, we get to the nitty-gritty details I was so looking forward to."

Cali tried to look haughty. "If you must know, I had just realized how empty and stupid it was and I was trying to get him out of me and he told me to hold on until he got the condom."

"You what?"

Wrinkling her forehead, Cali explained, "I didn't anything. Aren't you listening? *He* said —"

Alice shook her head, interrupting Cali's words. "No. Before that. You said you were trying to get him out of you. What did you do?"

Feeling off-stride all of sudden, Cali muttered, "I don't know. Just sort of pushed him away."

Alice slammed her beer bottle down on the side table with such force that Cali jumped. "You idiot! You're all upset about the man being cold to you, but—as soon as you've fucked him—you push him away in disgust. Cali, that's harsh."

"It wasn't in disgust," Cali objected, feeling a wave of confusion wash over her. "I was just... I mean, he looked like... I mean, I just had to get away." She was stammering and sounded like a fool, but she suddenly *felt* like a fool.

But she meant nothing to Kent—absolutely nothing—so surely he wouldn't believe she had been cold and heartless to *him*. She hadn't been able to get through to him at all. There was no way that she could have hurt him.

Yet she felt depressed and kind of nauseous all of a sudden.

"This is getting way too complicated," Alice said more gently. "We better start over from the beginning. Tell me about the first time you saw him."

Cali didn't know whether Alice meant the first time in Blacksburg or the first time four months ago, but either option was out of the question. Reliving it over and over again was not the way to move on. "Do we have to rehash the whole thing again? It could take all night."

Alice had been studying her expression and finally relented. "All right. Maybe later. But I think you've been even stupider than I thought."

Cali didn't even want to think about it. "Can we please change the subject now? I might have some other news, you know."

"Do you? You told me about your dad and your job. Any other men on the horizon?"

"You know, there might be more to my life than men." She let those words of wisdom sink in before she added, "But, now that you mention it, I do have a date next Friday night."

Alice choked again. "And you're just now telling me? Spill it. Who is he? What does he do? And how's the sex?"

There was no reason to expect Alice to ever really change and Cali chuckled resignedly. "We haven't even come close to having sex. He's my neighbor, as a matter of fact. We've been chatting on and off for a couple of months now. And then a few weeks ago he came over to borrow some coffee. And then as the days went on, he kept needing to borrow all kinds of things, eggs, bread, milk, wine."

"Wine?"

Giggling, Cali replied, "Yep. He said he was out of wine. Anyway, it became a joke. Both of us knew he was just coming over to see me. We've been hanging out a lot, but next Friday is our first real date."

"Sounds interesting," Alice murmured. "What does this mooch do?"

"He's a lawyer."

Alice moaned. "Not another one. Why do you keep trying to date them? Wasn't Bryce enough for you?"

"Aaron is nothing like Bryce. And he's not your typical lawyer either. He mostly handles legal work for environmental causes."

"Hmm. Sounds more promising. How old is he?"

"Around my age. And wait until you see him. He's gorgeous in a laid-back kind of way. One of those scruffy, outdoorsy men, with great arms and lovely dark hair."

"Doesn't sound like your type at all. You've always gone for slick business types."

Narrowing her eyes, Cali said slowly, "And clearly they've never worked out for me. I'm trying something new. And I'm kind of excited about it. In fact, when I think about Aaron, I actually start to feel a little melty."

"All right," Alice relented. "Melty is promising. I'll be excited too. Although it's all sounding too good to be true. A do-gooder with a good job, gorgeous head of hair and great body. Are you sure he's not gay?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for letting me borrow the pizza," Aaron said, with warm amusement in his tone, as he got up from her couch to finally leave.

Cali chuckled appreciatively. They'd gone out to dinner and a movie the night before and had had a surprisingly good time. Aaron was attractive and intelligent and good-hearted and Cali was still waiting to discover the negative qualities that must be underlying all the casual perfection.

Then he'd happened to stop by to say hello this evening just when she'd ordered a pizza. His borrowing things from her was a standing joke at this point, so—seeing the open pizza box on the table—he'd blandly inquired if she happened to have any pizza he could borrow.

So they'd camped out on the couch, eating pizza and drinking the red wine he'd gone and brought over from his place. And now, three and half hours later, he was finally getting up to leave.

They'd kissed last night after he'd dropped her off at her door, but nothing too deep or lingering. Cali wanted to take it slowly, having no desire to have any more random sex, but they both seemed to have enjoyed the kiss.

She walked with him to the door of her apartment now and he leaned over and took her lower lip between both of his. Tugged it a little and then teased it with his tongue.

Knowing a good kisser when she came upon one, Cali opened her mouth to him and deepened the kiss.

When she realized she was really getting into it Cali forced herself to draw back. She didn't know Aaron very well yet and this had the potential for a real relationship. She was definitely going to take it slowly.

They were both breathing heavily when their mouths parted and she recognized the hot look in Aaron's eyes for what it was.

"Have a good night," he told her, gently pushing her hair back from her flushed face.

"You too. Thanks for bringing over the wine."

He turned to leave and started to open the door.

Feeling the giddy thrill of the beginnings of a crush, Cali slid her hand up until it was massaging his shoulder. "You're a really good kisser, you know."

He chuckled warmly. Turned his head and smiled down into her eyes as he swung the door open all the way. "You too." He ran a hand through his hair, which was slightly ruffled from her fingers.

She was definitely feeling melty when they both turned back toward the open doorway.

Aaron had been about to step into the hallway and walk the few steps to his own apartment. But, instead, both he and Cali froze in surprise.

Kent was standing in the hallway in front of her door, wearing an expensive business suit and looking cool and attractive.

He eyed them both silently, raising his eyebrows in a look of arrogant inquiry.

Cali released a startled grunt and dropped her hand from Aaron's shoulder.

She had no idea what Kent was doing there, but she wasn't feeling melty anymore.

## Chapter Four

"Oh, excuse me," Aaron said, halting the step he'd been about to take into the hallway, although clearly Kent was the one in the way. "Were you here to see Cali?"

Cali blinked a couple of times and swallowed hard, feeling like she'd suddenly left her body and was watching herself from a distance. But the scene she watched was like a foreign film without subtitles, things looked vaguely familiar but she had no idea how to follow the action.

"I was," Kent replied dryly, arching one eyebrow now and blandly scanning Aaron from his thick dark hair to his worn leather shoes.

And then both men were just standing there staring at each other, with intent gazes that clearly implied they were sizing each other up.

Cali cleared her throat and took a step forward, trying to force down her ridiculous confusion. It was just the surprise, that was all. Kent had no business being here and she felt like she'd been momentarily stunned from a blow to the head. "Kent," she finally said, forcing out the only word she could think of.

Kent shifted his gaze over to her, with a characteristic look of superior disinterest. "Good evening."

"Hi." She supposed she was stuck making the introductions, although it was the last thing in the world she wanted to do. "Kent Landon, Aaron Cole," she said, hoping the men wouldn't drag out the encounter.

Aaron politely stuck out his hand and Kent very slowly reached to shake it. Aaron glanced back over to Cali. "I'm sorry I kept you so long. I didn't realize you were expecting company."

Cali felt so hot that she thought she might melt, but in a very different way than before. Hoping she wasn't flushing too obviously, Cali made herself get it together.

She was thirty-eight years old. She was certainly capable of handling something like this. It was hardly a big deal. At most, just a little awkward. And it really should only be awkward for *her*, since she was the only one who knew the whole story.

Smiling and meeting Aaron's eyes, she suddenly recognized his expression. He looked a little uncertain and wary, as if he were looking to her for an explanation.

Their relationship was still at the very beginning stages, so of course he wouldn't assume that she wasn't seeing other men. And that might be exactly what this looked like.

Which meant her first priority here was to assure him that Kent wasn't competition.

Kent's presence here was completely incomprehensible, but she wasn't going to let it interfere with her developing romance with Aaron.



"Oh, no," she said, focused only on Aaron. "I *wasn't* expecting anyone. Kent is a...friend from a long time ago who just dropped by." She put a hand on Aaron's arm, trying to ignore the way she could feel Kent watching them. "You weren't keeping me from anything. I had a wonderful evening."

Aaron's smile became open and sincere again. "Me too. I'll talk to you tomorrow." Then he turned to Kent with a decidedly more friendly demeanor. "It was nice to meet you. I was just on my way out."

Kent nodded coolly. "Since you were walking out the door, I assumed as much." He stepped aside slowly to allow Aaron to exit the apartment.

Aaron's eyes narrowed slightly, as if Kent's arrogance had annoyed him, but he just grinned once more at Cali and strode through the hall and down to his own apartment.

Kent and Cali stood watching him until he entered his place and then closed the door behind him.

Cali swallowed again, feeling a little more composed now that Aaron was safely out of sight. At least she'd managed to not mess up things with him, so now she could try to tackle having Kent standing in her doorway late on a Sunday evening.

She eyed him, raising her brows and trying to sustain as cool an expression as his was. "Well?" she prompted, determined not to make a fool of herself and therefore planning to rely on very brief statements.

Kent turned his head toward the direction of Aaron's apartment. "He seems decent enough, in a bland, wholesome way," he drawled, as if she'd been asking for his opinion on Aaron's qualities. Then he shifted slightly from one foot to the other, in a subtle gesture that she was sure was aimed at reminding her that he was still standing outside her door.

Instead of inviting him in, she just glared at him. She still had no idea why Kent was here, but she was absolutely not going to ask him into her otherwise empty apartment at ten o'clock at night.

Knowing a challenge when she was faced with one, Cali began, "Aaron is —"

Kent raised one hand in a dismissive gesture, cutting off her words. "Let me assure you, I have absolutely no interest in him."

His words were so cold and insincere that they felt like a slap in the face. His abrupt interruption had completely changed the mood between them and she felt an absurd pang in her chest at the knowledge that he couldn't even be bothered to banter with her anymore.

Shaking her head roughly, she pushed all of those thoughts and feelings aside. Whatever their past, Kent was no longer a significant part of her life. And it was eminently better that way. "Why exactly are you here?" she asked, suddenly wondering if her attempt at blackmail was about to come back and bite her in the ass. She could think of no other reason why he might be there.

"I was in the neighborhood." A familiar spark of irony glinted in his blue-gray eyes and he smoothly lifted his voice at the end of the statement, turning it into a wry question.

Cali was hard pressed not to chuckle at the clever shift in mood. Forcing herself not to soften, she eyed him skeptically. "Uh huh."

His lips quirked. "As clichéd and predictable as it sounds, I actually *was* in the neighborhood." He met her eyes again and now there was something deep and utterly incomprehensible in his gaze. "And I thought you might want to see something."

She was stunned. Had no idea how to understand any of this. Wished her pulse wasn't fluttering quite so much.

This was not going to be good for the mature distance she'd put between herself and what had happened with Kent. But there was no way that she could part ways with him now...not without knowing what this was about.

"See what?" she asked, tightening one hand into a fist. She was fairly sure that she appeared more nonchalant than she felt.

"Take a walk with me," Kent suggested, with a graceful little lift of his hand.

"It's after ten."

Shrugging slightly, he explained, "We're going less than a mile."

Thinking it over quickly, Cali came to a few decisions. She still had no idea what was going on, but she was starting to feel more secure. She wasn't about to get swept up in lust or need and there didn't seem to be anything dangerously sexual in his invitation. Instead, he appeared to be making some sort of genuine gesture and it would be foolish of her to slam the door in his face.

He'd never intentionally hurt her and this might provide some good closure.

"All right," she agreed. "Let me get my shoes on."

Kent stayed in the doorway while she walked over to put on her shoes and then pick up her keys. She felt calm and relatively comfortable as she joined him again and they left the apartment.

They didn't talk much on the short walk down the city sidewalks. It was a mild night and they both seemed to be affected by the weather, saturated with a strangely tranquil mood of acceptance.

She didn't feel any deep bond or connection to him through the quiet walk, but she also didn't feel the riotous confusion she'd come to associate with his presence.

All in all, it wasn't too bad.

They walked several blocks. Cali's apartment building was relatively expensive, but it wasn't far from less privileged areas. They walked toward the border between two very different neighborhoods, until Cali was starting to wonder where the hell they were going.

Then Kent stopped in front of a construction site. Cali had noticed a run-down building being torn down in that lot recently, but she didn't know what was being built

in its place. It was a large lot, big enough for a downtown hotel or apartment building. The construction had just begun, so basically the foundation was all that was in place.

She turned to look at Kent questioningly.

"They're moving the Children's Clinic to this site once the building is constructed," Kent explained, looking out at the lot cluttered with construction gear. "It will be three times as large as their previous facility and will have up-to-date medical equipment and a larger staff." He glanced over at her. Added, "The Children's Clinic provides health care for needy children in..."

"I know what it is," Cali interrupted, suddenly feeling goose bumps break out on her arm. She stared at Kent. He was still masked with his impersonal, professional façade, but something important was happening here. "Why are you showing me this?"

Shifting his eyes back to the construction site, he said softly, "Because the building project is being funded by the money with which I bought back my Giotto."

Cali experienced a vague dizziness at his mild words. Had to stop herself from reaching out to grab onto Kent's arm for support.

It shouldn't matter to her. She'd always known that the enormous amount of money Kent had forked over for the painting would be used for a good cause. It didn't change the fact that Kent's gesture was self-serving, manipulative and deceptive.

But something about seeing—in this very tangible way—what Kent had single-handedly done for the city and for all the under-served children whose families weren't privileged with health insurance, made Cali's chest ache deeply. Strangely.

The cynical side of herself wanted to snort at the idea that this would change her perception of him, but the rest of herself was powerfully moved.

But none of this explained why they were here. "Why are you showing me this?" she breathed, looking back at Kent. She'd expected to see something softer or more open in his face, but he still looked blank and distant.

He met her eyes again. "I thought you might be interested in seeing it."

Then he turned, as if he would leave.

A voice inside Cali screamed in outrage and she suddenly couldn't take this anymore.

She grabbed his arm, forcing him to stay where he was. "Kent," she demanded. "What the hell is going on? Why did you bring me here?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I just told you. I thought you might be interested—"

Shaking her head impatiently, she persisted, "Don't give me that crap. We're not friends and we haven't spoken in six weeks. Why did you show up on my door? What is this about?"

There was an unexpected flicker of real emotion in his eyes, somewhere between amusement, surprise and confusion. "I don't really know. I was down here looking at the progress and I knew you didn't live very far away." He paused for a beat. "So I just

stopped by, thinking you might be interested. Why do you think it means something significant?"

Now he was watching her as if he really wanted to know the answer to his question and Cali felt another wave of heat rush through her. Because the truth was...there very likely *wasn't* any real significance to his stopping by.

It just *felt* significant to her.

Trying to be reasonable, she smiled at him. "You're right. But it *is* kind of strange. Our interaction over the last few months hasn't been exactly...normal and my impression was that you weren't intending to speak to me again until I decided to ask for my favor."

Kent's eyes widened in obvious surprise. "I wasn't intending to speak to you before then. I wasn't even sure you'd be willing to see me tonight. I had assumed, from the way we parted last time that you weren't interested in continuing our...acquaintance."

Cali snorted. "Acquaintance. Is that what you call it when you fuck someone two times?"

He blinked and Cali was abruptly aware that her fingers were still closed around his forearm.

Dropping her hand, she swallowed and decided it was time to cut through all the bullshit. They seemed to be speaking two different languages and she was absolutely sick of it.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that to sound harsh. I'm just really confused by this...thing between us. We had sex. Twice. Maybe we should just get it out on the table. It happened. So what exactly do you want from me now?"

A hot look ignited in his eyes as he watched her and Cali's body tingled in an automatic response. But she looked away quickly. The attraction was obviously still there, but she wasn't going to indulge it. She didn't want another casual sexual encounter with Kent and she was going to make sure it didn't happen.

Kent obviously understood why she broke off the gaze because his expression cooled down to its normal blankness. "I just wanted to show you the site for the new clinic."

Sighing, Cali almost groaned in frustration. Why, oh why, was this so complicated? Determined to make a few things clearer—if only for her own sanity—she summoned up her courage and began, "Kent, just so we're on the same page, I don't want to have sex with you again."

Before she could go on and further explain, he said stiffly, "Yes. I understand that. That was the impression I received after both of our encounters."

Thinking back to what Alice had said about how she'd inadvertently treated Kent, Cali was suddenly aware that Kent's feelings might really have been hurt by what she'd done. He wasn't just being cold at the moment. He was being defensive.

So she hurried on in a rush. "It's not because I didn't enjoy them. I did." And then, ridiculously, she flushed a little at the memory of how it had felt when he'd been inside her. "But you were right when you said I'm not really a person who does well having casual sex."

"Understood." His hands were now casually stuck in his pockets, but he still didn't look very casual.

Hoping she wasn't making more of a mess of this, Cali went on, "And I hope you weren't...I mean, I'm sorry for how I acted after the second time. I hope you didn't think I was pushing you away in disgust...or anything." She felt kind of embarrassed. It was so hard to do this without presuming too much or revealing too much.

Kent's face softened almost imperceptibly. Then he cocked one eyebrow. "So you're saying you *weren't* disgusted by me?"

And she realized that he was actually teasing her.

Feeling the absurd urge to giggle, Cali gave him an ironic half-smile. "Yeah, well, I guess you know I wasn't disgusted. As I said, the sex was really good. But I ended it badly and I'm sorry for that."

He nodded again.

When he didn't respond in words, Cali felt lost again. It seemed like they had communicated—at least a little bit—but he was giving her no clue about where he wanted to go from here.

So she figured she'd just explain where *she* wanted to go. "But just because we won't have sex again doesn't mean that I want you completely cut out of my life. We do have a strange kind of connection." Realizing what she'd just said and what it implied, she added quickly, "Because of our history and everything. I'm not expecting to be good friends or anything like that, but maybe we could at least say hi now and then."

There. That hadn't been too bad. A little rushed and inelegant, but it had been clear and forthright and she was glad she had said it.

"I wouldn't be opposed to that."

The words were so dry and understated that Cali wasn't sure whether he was really interested in her suggestion or if he was merely being polite.

But it was better than nothing. She'd done her part and that was all she could do.

So she started walking back in the direction of her apartment, ready to have this unsettling conversation over and crawl into her cozy bed so she could rehearse and mull over everything that had been said.

Kent fell into step with her. He didn't speak for several blocks and Cali thought he must have retreated back behind the safety of his impenetrable barriers.

Then, "How's your father? Has he recovered from his second knee surgery?"

Cali was surprised he even remembered the random comment she'd made two months ago. "Yeah," she replied, feeling foolishly gratified at the question. "He's doing

really well. He doesn't use the walker anymore and he's getting around a lot better than he did before the surgery."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. But it's only to be expected. He never did let anything keep him down."

Eyeing Kent out of the corner of her eye, Cali caught the most shocking expression on his face. It was only there for a second, but she was almost sure she recognized it. She'd certainly felt it many times herself.

For that brief moment, Kent had looked vulnerable, nostalgic, almost lonely.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she burst out, "You should see him for yourself." Gulping when she realized she was committed to what she'd started, she carried on, "His birthday is on Friday and I was going to make him a quiet dinner at my apartment, but you're welcome to join us." When she saw Kent staring at her strangely, she added weakly, "If you want."

And now his mouth had dropped open just a little.

Horried that she'd just made a complete fool of herself by asking Kent Landon to come to her father's birthday party, Cali tried to rectify matters. "No big deal if you can't or if you don't want to. I'm sure that's not at the top of your list of fun things to do on a Friday night. You could just say hi to him some other time."

"This Friday?" Kent asked, looking so completely untouchable that Cali knew for sure she was an idiot.

"Yeah, but I'm sure you already have plans. Don't worry about it." She bit her lip and told herself she wasn't going to speak again without thinking. No more spontaneous outbursts from her.

"I was just trying to remember my schedule. I don't think I'm doing anything important this Friday." Kent elevated his eyebrows. "Unless that was your way of trying to take back the invitation."

"No. I just thought..." She decided she'd shut up about that now. "I'm sure my dad would love to see you. Please come if you can."

"I think I will. What time?"

"Six o'clock." Her mouth quirked involuntarily. "My dad likes to eat early."

He almost returned her smile.

Feeling ridiculously giddy, Cali tried to calm herself down. Nothing had really changed. Kent was still nearly as closed off as ever. But at least maybe they'd be able to get over the strangeness of their last encounters. And Cali could get over feeling so sick about it.

All Cali wanted was closure. And this seemed an excellent way to achieve it.

Which was, of course, why she was feeling so giddy.

\* \* \* \* \*

A couple of days later, Cali was on her way back from work. Running late, as usual. And feeling rushed because her father was supposed to stop by to help her rearrange the furniture in her bedroom.

She'd prefer he not do anything quite so physical yet, but it would hurt his feelings too much to turn him down, so she just planned to make sure none of the moving was too strenuous.

Waiting impatiently as the elevator made its way up to the floor of her apartment, she rushed out as soon as the doors slid open.

Her father was waiting in front of her door. But he wasn't waiting alone.

Aaron was standing with him and the two men seemed to be having a very friendly discussion.

Feeling a strange, unsettled sensation in her belly, Cali approached them. "Hey there."

"Hi," Jim said with a grin. "I should have known you'd be running late. But your friend here was kind enough to keep me company."

Cali turned toward Aaron and then pulled herself to a stop. They usually kissed when they greeted now, but she wasn't sure she wanted to do so in front of her father's curious eyes.

Aaron chuckled. Then leaned over to give her a tame kiss on the cheek. "Your father was keeping me entertained by telling me stories from your childhood."

"Dad," Cali said slowly, an edge of warning in her tone.

Jim gave her a bland, innocent look. "Nothing embarrassing."

"Did you really use to serenade the neighborhood by singing commercial jingles on the front step in your underwear?" Aaron asked, clearly trying to keep his expression sober.

"Dad!" Cali repeated, this time in an extended whine.

Jim laughed heartily and Cali forgot her embarrassment at the warm feelings her father's laughter evoked in her.

"Maybe *one* embarrassing thing," Jim admitted. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought Aaron might want to join us on my birthday Friday evening. He said he didn't have plans but that we should check with you first."

Cali blinked. Was taken so off guard that all she could say was, "Of course he can join us." She forced herself to smile at Aaron, even though her stomach had started to churn. "We'd love to have you."

Aaron and Jim continued talking while Cali stood stiffly and tried to figure out what had just happened. Of course, she wouldn't mind having Aaron at her father's birthday. She loved being around him and was thrilled that her father seemed to like him. But...

She hadn't yet gotten around to telling her father that she'd already invited Kent.

Eventually, Aaron left and she and Jim went into her apartment.

While her father made himself comfortable, Cali went into her bedroom to change clothes.

She stared at herself in the mirror. Blonde hair. Large, greenish eyes. Flushed cheeks. Full lips. Same as always.

So why did it feel like her head was about to explode?

On Friday night, just three days away, she was going to have to cook her father's birthday dinner. And somehow juggle having three men as guests, her father, Aaron and Kent.

She spoke aloud to the image in the mirror. "Shit!"



## Chapter Five

"So when do your boyfriends arrive?"

"Dad," Cali complained, leaning over to peer into the oven to make sure her lasagna wasn't getting too brown. "Neither one of them is my boyfriend."

"Hmm." Jim was sitting on a barstool on the opposite side of the granite-topped island and was watching as she busied herself preparing for dinner.

Cali didn't like the sound of that "hmm". Clearing her throat and straightening up to face him, she said, "Listen to me. Don't get any ideas. Aaron and I have only been out a few times and Kent and I have never gone out at all."

She and Kent had fucked, but she figured she'd leave that little detail out of this conversation.

Jim grinned. "Hmm."

She scowled at her father and turned back to finish making the salad. "Would you like to explain what you mean by that?"

"I'm just impressed that after only a few months here you've managed to round up two eligible admirers. And you told me you'd probably never find someone."

Cali groaned as she chopped up a tomato. "Would you stop it with that? There might be some potential with Aaron, but Kent is the furthest thing from an admirer of mine."

"Then why exactly is he coming to my birthday party?"

She turned back to look at him. Her father was still smiling slyly and his wrinkled face looked alert and well rested. She couldn't help but smile back at him, absurdly gratified to see him so happy and healthy. "He's coming to see you," she explained, in a gentler tone.

Jim snorted. "Sure he is. Kent Landon is going to spend his Friday night at a birthday party because he wants to visit an old man."

"He does. He said he always liked you." She pulled out the bottle of wine she'd chosen and handed it to her father to uncork.

"Perhaps." Jim agreed, picking up the corkscrew and starting on the bottle. "But I'm pretty sure I'm not the major attraction this party has to offer."

She shook her head at her father's fond delusions. "You've not even met the man in twenty years. You know very little about him anymore. Why would you presume that he has any interest in me?"

"Common sense. I'd never thought that I would consider a Landon for my daughter, but Kent—if you get past all the superficial crap in his life—Kent might be different."

Cali groaned again and gave up the argument. "Well, think what you'd like. But, just so we're clear, my interests in this little gathering are not directed toward Kent. So don't try to meddle and hopelessly confuse matters. You and I are both too old for you to try to play matchmaker."

"I'll be good," Jim promised, pulling out the cork from the wine bottle.

Her stomach tightened with a faint kind of dread. His tone hadn't been particularly comforting.

Cali poured her father a glass of red wine and then poured herself one as well. Decided she needed a head start on the alcohol, since her belly was already fluttering anxiously.

Kent and Aaron. Both of them. Set to arrive in less than ten minutes.

For years, Cali's Friday nights had typically consisted of watching movies at home or hanging out with her friends. Now, suddenly, this had happened.

It was like some sort of malicious cosmic joke.

"So tell me again why you invited Kent in the first place?"

Cali was trying to sort through her menu in her mind to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything. The meal was simple and her father's favorite, lasagna, salad, rolls, wine, birthday cake. She had no delusions about her culinary skills or the choice in food impressing Kent, but there was no way she could pretend to be gourmet. And she didn't even want to.

It was her father's party, so he was the one she wanted to please. Kent would have to take what he got.

"What?" she mumbled, realizing her father had asked her something. After a few seconds, the question finally registered with her. "Oh. I told you. He was asking about you and it was just a spontaneous invitation. I'm not even sure how it happened."

Jim narrowed his eyes as he studied her. "I find it odd that you'd even consider such an invitation if he means so little to you."

"I never said that he means so little to me. He *does* mean something to me. We'll always have that intense history. I'd like him to be a friend. I'm just saying that he's not a romantic possibility."

It was true. She wasn't even thinking about Kent like that anymore. While she sometimes still stayed awake in bed and recalled having sex with him, she had absolutely no hopes for the future. She was a mature, practical woman, she had no use for fairytales. And she certainly wasn't going to let a couple of one-night stands mess up her emotional stability.

Yes, she and Kent had a connection. Yes, they also had a real chemistry. And, yes, in a different situation, something more might have come of it.

But this was the real world and this was twenty years past Blacksburg. Both of them were who they were. They had become different people and the barriers were now insurmountable.

He just wasn't what she wanted in her life.

With Aaron, on the other hand, there were no such barriers. He was eligible in every way and Cali was starting to get very excited about the possibilities. Just thinking about his handsome, laughing face gave her delicious shivers.

Maybe thirty-eight wasn't too old for a romance after all.

"So *why* did you invite him to my party?"

"Dad," Cali objected. "I just told you."

Jim just gave her an impatient look.

"Fine," she relented. Her belly flipped a little as she remembered their conversation in front of the construction site—as she visualized Kent's face—but she admitted honestly, "I guess, for a moment, as we were talking, I thought he looked kind of..." She swallowed, feeling inexplicably uncomfortable, "Lonely."

Her father didn't respond immediately. Then he nodded and said, "He probably *is* lonely."

Shaking her head roughly, Cali rid her mind of the memory of that very brief flash of vulnerability in Kent's polished, impenetrable exterior. "Either way, a nice simple meal with no expectations or manipulation will probably do him good."

"Right." Jim slanted her a teasing look. "So which one of these guys did you get all gussied up for?"

Cali could actually feel herself flushing just a little bit. Felt like a teenager again, as she glanced down at her outfit. She *had* dressed with care tonight, wearing a stretchy, wine-colored top that flattered her figure and black pants that de-emphasized her butt.

Glancing over at her father, she noticed that he was chuckling quietly. But, refusing to become as flustered as he wanted her to be, she said fondly, "Obviously, I got gussied up for you, Dad."

Before her father could finish his skeptical snort in response, Kent called up to her apartment and she had to buzz him in. Before Kent made it upstairs, Aaron was knocking on the door.

The next several minutes were scattered and rather confusing, with the arrivals, appropriate greetings, the beginnings of small talk, distribution of wineglasses and the acceptance of hostess gifts. Aaron had brought over another bottle of wine, while Kent presented her with a package of ludicrously expensive coffee beans that actually made her squeak in delight, since she could never afford to buy it for herself.

She managed to get through the initial minutes smoothly, despite feeling mildly rushed as she tried to make her guests comfortable and handle the final preparations for dinner.

Not to mention deal with the shock of seeing Kent in something other than a business suit.

Looking cool and urban in black and gray, he was wearing what had been standard attire for him in Blacksburg, trousers and a dress shirt. For some reason, seeing him dressed like that and not in the armor of his costly suits, made Cali both slightly nostalgic and a little bit rattled.

Aaron, on the other hand, was in khakis and, when the greetings died down, he moved over to give Cali a quick peck on the lips.

Determined not to extend the potentially awkward mingling time, she handed Aaron the large salad bowl and asked him to bring it over to the table. She was planning to get everyone around the table as quickly as possible, since, in her experience, conversation typically became more natural and comfortable once people were actually eating a meal.

She was pulling the lasagna out of the oven when she felt Kent hovering behind her. Uncomfortably aware that her ass was sticking out as she bent over to pull out the dish, she straightened up as quickly as she could. Managed to avoid bumping her head as she stood up.

Kent was far too attractive, holding his glass of wine and giving her an amused, ironic look.

Having no idea how to read his expression, she set the pan of lasagna down and put the rolls into the oven to warm. Trying to make casual conversation, she said wryly, "Pretty strange, isn't it, to be at a birthday party for a man you haven't seen in twenty years?"

He lifted his eyebrows slightly. "It's certainly not my typical Friday night function."

Cali glanced into the dining area at Aaron, who was chatting pleasantly with Jim. "I know I told you that it was just going to be me and my father," she began, feeling compelled to explain even though she wasn't sure Kent even cared. "But he invited Aaron after I'd already invited you. I hope you don't mind."

Kent shrugged. "Why would I mind? I'm here to see your father, aren't I?"

Something about the way he said that made her belly clench, but she couldn't quite identify why.

Sighing, Cali decided she was going to ignore any future charitable impulses she had where Kent was concerned. "Right."

She handed Kent a couple of trivets and asked him to carry them to the table. Then, she carried the lasagna in herself.

Finally, they were all appropriately settled at Cali's round dining room table. She didn't actually have a dining room, since her apartment had an open floor plan, but the table was positioned under the chandelier, between the living area and the kitchen island.

She served out the lasagna and reflected on how strange these everyday activities felt when Kent was sitting across from her. If it had just been her father and Aaron, then everything would have been perfectly natural. Aaron seemed to fit into her world—seemed to belong here, eating homemade lasagna at six-thirty on a Friday evening.

Kent, on the other hand, definitely did not fit in. Not that he was awkward—he was interacting with his characteristic, natural ease—but his presence felt woefully incongruous. So much so that Cali kept glancing over at him, wondering what the handsome, suave billionaire was doing at her dining room table. Eating with one of her forks.

It was just so...wrong.

She tried to concentrate on the conversation, which was led primarily by Kent. He was asking her father about what Jim had been doing since leaving Blacksburg. Soon, the two were having an enthusiastic conversation and Cali was unexpectedly happy to see her father having such a good time.

She glanced over at Aaron wryly. Caught him watching her quietly. And when she smiled at him, he moved a hand over to cover hers on the table.

Cali felt rather mushy at the sweet gesture and oozed happily for a few moments. But then she noticed something strange in Aaron's eyes. Something she couldn't quite place but that looked an awful lot like regret. The inexplicable look distracted her a bit from her mushiness.

And then she accidentally caught Kent's eye—he had evidently noticed the silent bit of byplay between her and Aaron—and her mushiness dissipated completely.

She got flustered again, but she effectively managed to hide it. Her discomfort was inevitable, she supposed. She was sitting across from a powerful man she'd had sex with twice and she was sitting in between her father and another man, one she was currently dating.

If any situation were going to fluster you, this one would.

But overall the dinner seemed to be going well. Conversation was friendly and not stilted at all. The lasagna and salad had turned out well. Her father seemed to be having a very good time. And there didn't appear to be any tension between Kent and Aaron.

She couldn't have asked for anything more. Actually started to enjoy herself.

But then Kent shifted his focus to Aaron.

It was really her father's fault. Evidently wanting to make sure that Aaron remained a part of the conversation, Jim asked him politely, "So where did you go to school?"

A perfectly innocuous question. Or should have been.

Aaron answered, as open and forthright as ever. Chatted a little bit about his college experiences. But then Kent asked him a follow-up question. And one question led to another. And then another.

And then, before Cali could figure out how it had happened, Kent was practically interrogating Aaron, grilling him about everything from the first girl he'd dated to how

he'd handled his last case. Kent did it all with elegant, detached ease, so subtly that Aaron didn't even recognize what was happening.

But Cali sure as hell did.

Soon, she was flabbergasted and annoyed. Jim, who'd initially been participating and listening with interest, was now clearly trying to suppress a grin.

Aaron appeared neither angry nor offended and was just trying to keep up with Kent's inquisition. To Cali's infinite relief, he evidently didn't have anything to hide or be ashamed of. His life history was interesting, impressive, but basically normal and not once could Cali see him trying to hedge as he answered Kent's intrusive questions.

"You said you dated that teacher a couple of years ago," Kent continued, his bland expression conveying nothing but polite interest in Aaron's background. "So whom have you dated since then?"

And Cali decided this had gone far enough.

"Kent," she objected, trying not to look as irritated as she felt. "Give him a break. Aaron might not want to spill his guts this early in the evening."

"Certainly not without another glass of wine," Jim said, skillfully stepping into the breach. "Why don't I open the bottle you brought, Aaron?" Then he pushed back his chair to get the wine bottle and corkscrew from the kitchen island.

Cali was momentarily distracted by watching her father move around so easily and with so little pain. It had been such a long time since she'd seen him walk without a limp.

A little ache of tenderness swelled up in her chest and she smiled at her dad fondly as he came back to the table and uncorked the bottle.

He gave her a decidedly suspicious look and started to refill their glasses.

Cali looked away from Jim at last and found Kent watching her. Had no idea how to interpret his almost wistful expression, but was a little embarrassed at being caught indulging in sentiment.

"By all means," Kent continued, shifting his eyes away from her and moving deftly back into their previous conversation. "If Aaron doesn't feel comfortable talking about all the women in his past..."

Cali made a gurgling sound of protest, but Aaron laughed agreeably. "Wow. You make me sound like a player or something. I actually haven't dated much in the last year or so. Before then, I was in a relationship that lasted a year, but it ended badly."

"Ah!" Kent breathed, as if he'd just been enlightened. "It ended badly."

Nothing in the words was rude or confrontational, but something about the way he said it made Cali suck in her breath indignantly.

She came very close to kicking Kent in the shin.

Instead, she murmured, "While we're on the subject, Kent, why don't you tell us about the women *you* date? It's been so long since we've been able to catch up."

Jim almost choked on his bite of salad.

Kent cocked one eyebrow, obviously recognizing a challenge when he heard one. "Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Anyone special in *your* life?"

Easing the rim of his glass between his supple lips, Kent took a slow sip of wine. Said with exaggerated pensiveness, "Not at the moment, I'm afraid."

"That's too bad," she continued, making her voice as silky as possible. She was about to make a dripping comment about his failed marriages, but decided that would just be too mean. He was being a bit of a jerk, but she wasn't sure he deserved that kind of retaliation. Instead, she asked, "What happened to end *your* last relationship?"

He met her eyes evenly and for a moment Cali forgot anyone else was in the room. "She ran out on me."

It felt like her chest might burst open. She jerked her eyes away from the shared gaze. Had no way of knowing to whom Kent was referring just now, but could have sworn he was talking about *her*.

Not that they had been in a relationship. But she certainly had run out on him.

Aaron, who had no idea of the undercurrents, said sympathetically, "That's too bad. The same thing happened to me."

Cali blinked rapidly, trying to come to terms with the fact that Aaron and Kent might be about to bond over the heartless women who had left them.

It was so, so wrong.

And that was when she remembered. Jumping out of her seat abruptly, she rushed toward the kitchen. "I'm burning the rolls," she called out, by way of explanation. It didn't smell like anything was burning, but they were almost certainly more than overdone.

"Shit," she said to herself as she pulled the tray out of the oven. "Shit. Shit. Shit." She'd thought she'd had everything under control. At least, she'd thought she'd competently handled the basics of the meal.

But she always forgot the damned bread.

Holding the tray of rolls with a hot pad in one hand, she turned away from the oven.

Saw Kent looming about a foot away from her.

Dropped the tray and watched the hot, very browned rolls tumble all over the floor.

"Damn it," she bit out, dropping the hot pad in disgust.

Kent looked at her quizzically. "Did I startle you?"

"Yes, damn it," she grumbled, getting down onto her knees to start picking up the rolls. She wasn't at all pleased about being on her knees in front of Kent, but she could hardly leave the food on the floor. "You scared the hell out of me."

To her astonishment, Kent lowered himself to the floor beside her. Reached out to help her retrieve the scattered rolls. "My apologies. I was just making sure you didn't need any help." He studied her face intently. "Why are you so flustered?"

"Because you're acting like an ass," she hissed out, forgetting discretion or courtesy in her confusion and her annoyance with him. She shook her fingers a little to cool them down after she dropped one roll back onto the tray.

He arched an eyebrow. "I'm an ass because I accidentally startled you by standing in the kitchen?"

"Don't be dense. Leave Aaron alone."

His lips quirked. "Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"You know very well what it means," she huffed, making sure her voice didn't carry over to the table. Since they were both on the floor, they were hidden by the island, but she could hear her father and Aaron carrying on with the conversation. "I'm trying to make a good impression on him and you're mucking it up on purpose."

Kent chuckled. "Now why would I do that? I was just trying to get to know him."

He was obviously lying. Obviously having a very good time at her expense. In another situation, Cali would have enjoyed the witty give and take between them. But this was not an appropriate time for such banter. And she wasn't happy about it at all.

"You were not! So stop."

He gave her another half-smile. It wasn't his real smile, not his open smile that she almost never saw. Instead, it was his smug, social smile, but it was definitely better than his flinty coldness. "Right."

She was pretty sure that she couldn't believe him.

He picked up a couple more of the cooling rolls and she couldn't help but notice that he did so—of course—with the same smooth grace he did everything else.

It suddenly occurred to her that they were both on their knees on the hardwood floor next to her dishwasher. Something about their position felt so intimate and domestic that she felt a wave of heat wash over her.

This was Kent and he was supposed to fit neatly into a nice, little, glittering compartment in her mind, rich, influential, professional, ruthless, icy, unfeeling, untouchable.

He wasn't supposed to be on the floor of her kitchen.

Too rattled to look over at him again, she noticed one more roll that had ended up in a corner. She leaned forward onto one hand and then stretched out the other hand to grab it.

Kent had apparently had the same idea. Because he too was on his hands and knees. And he too had reached out to get the roll.

Cali's hand closed around the roll and then Kent's hand closed around hers.



Their faces were very close together now and Cali forgot all about their undignified positions. Something about the way Kent's hand felt over hers made her vividly recall all the ways that he'd touched her before.

A smoldering heat ignited out from the contact of their hands and Cali could feel it rippling out throughout her body. She still wanted him. Really wanted him. Dear God, she still wanted to feel his body moving against her.

Knowing she was deeply flushed, she stared at their clasped hands. Finally got up enough courage to raise her eyes to Kent's face and then desperately wished that she hadn't.

He was gazing at her intensely, a hot look in his eyes that she remembered very well. He was obviously feeling it too. This attraction hadn't gone away. Cali felt tingles in certain parts of her body that made her want to whimper.

Frozen in position, she lowered her eyes back to the floor, painfully aware of the amount of cleavage she was revealing to him by leaning over onto her hands this way. But she couldn't seem to get up.

She took a gasping breath. Made herself think rationally. Yes, there was some definite lust between them, but that was all it would ever be. They'd been down this road before and she didn't want to revisit it. She was no longer young enough to think that lust was uncontrollable, so she forced her body to settle down by making herself visualize Kent with that brunette he'd been fucking when she'd caught him in the plant back in Blacksburg.

And that effectively threw cold water over her desire.

"Kent," she whispered, as his fingers tightened over her hand.

"Yes?"

She got shudders from how warm and husky his voice sounded, but she made herself ignore them. "Kent, this roll is still kind of hot."

Kent grunted very softly and pulled his hand off hers.

With what she thought was impressive composure, she stood up and put the tray of overdone rolls on the counter. Stuck her very hot hand under the faucet. Swallowed hard and turned back around to find that Kent had stood up as well and was quietly returning to the table.

She supposed he felt rejected now. Obviously, he had been interested in their having another night together, but Cali just couldn't want that.

For one thing, it was just too risky—since she would undoubtedly start to develop real feelings, but this thing between them would almost certainly never get beyond sex. And, even if it somehow did, Kent just wasn't a good choice for her. Yes, he could be charming and flirtatious and seductive, but that persona was just as superficial as his cold reserve. He'd gone too far into the calculated mask of his life and he just wasn't going to come out of it. Maybe in brief, vague flickers, but not in any meaningful way.

Anyway, she knew how complex and dubious Kent's life was. At this point in her own life, she didn't want to mess with any of that.

So she shook her head roughly and dispelled the remaining confusion. After all, there wasn't anything to be confused about here.

Before she went back to join the rest of them, she took a moment to make sure she wasn't feeling any lingering desire. No way would she go back to the table with her father and Aaron if there were any traces at all.

She couldn't believe she'd actually gotten so hot for Kent, so close to where her father was sitting.

It was so, so, so wrong.

When she returned to the table, Jim and Aaron were talking about her. And, unfortunately, they were in the middle of a long conversation. It didn't take long to figure out that Aaron had been asking for stories about her and Jim had been happy to provide them.

Preparing herself for even more embarrassment, Cali tried to act casual. But she positioned herself so that she could stomp on her dad's foot if he started to say something too humiliating.

"So you knew her in high school?" Aaron asked, following up on one of Jim's comments and turning to look at Kent.

Kent nodded and gave Cali a speaking, indirect look. "I did." With no effort at all, he had shed the brief intensity of the kitchen and had returned to his charming arrogance. "That is, she was in high school and I was heading up the Landon Industries plant in Blacksburg."

Aaron furrowed his brow. "So you hung out with high schoolers?"

Cali snorted.

Kent gave Aaron a chilly look. "We were hardly best friends. It was a small town and I eventually became acquainted with just about everyone, including various students in the high school."

Well, that was nice. Kent had just thoughtlessly dismissed his entire history with Cali. Not to mention with Jason, who was supposed to have been his friend back then.

"What were you like in high school?" Aaron asked, turning to her and smiling affectionately, in a way that made crinkles appear next to his eyes.

She shrugged and smiled back at him. "About like I am now. Maybe a little bit more ambitious and...reckless."

"So you aren't reckless anymore?" Kent inquired, giving her an innocently questioning look. "Have you stopped breaking and entering?"

Cali rolled her eyes. Since Kent knew very well that she still occasionally ended up in places she wasn't supposed to be—warehouses, for instance—she assumed he was just being snotty because he wasn't going to get laid tonight. "Most of the time," she murmured, giving Aaron a teasing flutter of her eyebrows.

Aaron chuckled appreciatively. "So you broke into some place when you were in Blacksburg?"

At this, Jim burst out laughing. And Kent gave a very undignified snort.

"I broke into all kinds of places," Cali replied, valiantly trying to retain her dignity, despite being the subject of such hilarity. "Businesses, apartments, offices..." Her voice trailed off, as she remembered something very particular.

"Did you ever get caught?" Aaron asked, watching her with warm amusement.

"Occasionally."

"And occasionally she got into trouble," Jim added, giving Cali a fond pat on the shoulder. "But she was always good at taking care of herself."

Cali really wanted the attention to be focused on something other than her. Everyone was staring at her and she noticed something strange in Kent's eyes.

Wondered if the allusion to her breaking into offices had conjured up the same memory in him that it had in her. Wondered how he felt about the time they'd spent together afterward, working on that article about his father.

Since everyone was now done with their meals, she decided it was time for the birthday cake. So, grateful for the diversion, she got up to put on a pot of coffee and bring out the cake.

"Time for the presents," she called out, as she carried the small, chocolate cake she'd made over to the table. "You know, you guys didn't have to bring him anything."

"Speak for yourself," Jim complained, looking as pleased as a boy at the prospect of his gifts.

"Like we'd come to a birthday party without a gift." Aaron handed a wrapped package down the table toward her father.

Kent had brought her father a present too and Cali was dying to know what it was.

They decided to forego singing the Happy Birthday song, which Cali was absurdly happy about. She wasn't sure she would have been able to handle the sight of Kent Landon singing to her father.

Jim opened Aaron's present first and Cali was secretly pleased that Aaron had done so well in picking out a very appropriate book on baseball for her father. Evidently, in their last conversation, Aaron had discovered Jim's obsession with the game. The gift was just right – thoughtful but not too intimate.

Kent handed Jim the present he'd brought. "I had no idea what you'd even be interested in anymore. But I had one of my people dig this up and thought you might like to have it."

Cali was about to be slightly offended that Kent had pawned the gift-getting off on one of his staff. But then she saw what was inside the package.

It was a photograph, one that Cali vaguely remembered had been taken at one of the annual Landon Industries picnics in Blacksburg, of a much younger, laughing Jim standing in front of a tree and a grinning, fifteen-year-old Cali giving her father a hug.

Kent had put the picture in a simple, but very expensive frame and Jim sat for a minute just staring at it.

Shifting a little in his chair, Kent added, "I didn't think you'd have a copy of it, since it was taken by a Landon Industries photographer."

Still, Jim said nothing. Gazed at the image in the photograph, with something deep and tender in his eyes.

Seeing that her father was about to get choked up, Cali thought she'd intervene. "Dad?" she said, giving him a gentle nudge. "Kent will think that you don't like it."

"Not like it?" Jim repeated in a hushed voice. He gently touched the glass, as if he were stroking the image of his daughter's face. "Look at her. It seems so long ago now."

Kent was looking uncharacteristically awkward at the dramatic reception his gift had earned. Knowing she needed to break the tension, Cali quipped, "Well, it wasn't *that* long ago." She peered at the photo, feeling the same nostalgic pull to which her father had responded but managing to suppress it. "But I don't know what was happening with my hair."

That dry remark produced the relieved chuckle she'd been hoping for and soon Cali was able to hand her father the gift she'd bought him. It was a fancy walking stick that he absolutely adored, just as she'd known he would.

They moved into the living room with their coffee and had pleasant conversation for another couple of hours. They avoided any topics that were too personal or too unpredictable and, for a while, Cali forgot how strange the situation was supposed to be and managed to really enjoy herself.

Eventually, Jim yawned and announced that it was time for him to be getting home. Since this was the universal signal for the dinner party to be over, everyone rose and started the slow process of getting ready to leave.

As they were carrying empty coffee mugs into the kitchen, Aaron murmured to Cali, "I need to talk to you afterward, if that's all right."

Something about the subdued quality of his voice made Cali's gut start to sink. "Of course," she replied, looking up at him with wide eyes. His face had taken on the almost regretful quality that she had caught a glimpse of earlier.

She didn't know what was going to happen, but she knew for sure it wouldn't be good.

Managing to push the foreboding aside for a few minutes, she helped her father collect his loot and walked with him to the door. "Happy birthday, Dad," she said, leaning over to give him a hug.

His arms went around her tightly and he whispered something that sounded like "Thanks."

Feeling oddly sentimental, she pulled away with her eyes burning just a little. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

With another goodbye, he made his way down the hall toward the elevator and Cali turned back into her apartment. Aaron was still in the kitchen putting dishes in the sink and Kent had ostensibly been looking over the pictures displayed on her mantle.

But she could see that he had been watching her. It was that same quiet, incomprehensible look and it made Cali feel inexplicably self-conscious.

She couldn't imagine what would be so fascinating about watching her say goodbye to her father. Unless...unless she had been right before. Perhaps Kent really was lonely. He had no real family anymore. Probably very few friends.

Maybe he felt as strange witnessing these domestic moments as she felt having him here.

Cali didn't at all like the flood of tenderness that filled her at the realization. Kent wasn't a lost little boy. He was a grown man who had chosen a certain kind of life for himself. She was not – not! – going to feel sorry for him.

Both he and Aaron wandered over toward the door where she was standing. There was a brief, tense moment that felt almost like a standoff, with neither of them willing to leave first.

Cali was perfectly able to take care of this little stalemate. Putting a hand on Kent's arm, she said warmly, "Aaron's going to stay and help me with the dishes, but I'm so glad you could come, Kent."

Kent gave a small inclination of his head. "Thank you for having me. It was good to catch up with your father." He glanced coolly over at Aaron, who had idly returned to the kitchen. "Thank you for your hospitality."

No sign of the lost little boy or the smug charmer now. He was all impersonal courtesy. Almost chilly in his politeness.

She knew why. She had rejected him again. Made it clear that he was to leave before Aaron did.

She knew very well that Kent was for some reason still interested in pursuing a sexual relationship with her. If she hadn't known before now, his behavior this evening had certainly made it clear. He hadn't made any actual advances, but in both subtle and unsubtle ways, he'd been treating Aaron as a rival. Plus, there was that moment in the kitchen.

It seemed clear he still wanted her. And Kent wasn't used to not getting what he wanted.

Right now, he wasn't exactly pouting, but he had definitely retreated behind his cold defenses.

He had, however, made the gesture of actually coming to this little get-together, which he certainly didn't have to do. And her father had so enjoyed talking to him and would for weeks now get to brag about having Kent Landon at his birthday.

So Cali felt no resentment over Kent's shuttered expression. Just smiled and put a light hand on his chest as he turned to leave. "Thanks so much for giving my dad that

picture," she murmured, remembering her father's face when he'd stared at it. "I hope you were able to see how much it meant to him."

He nodded again, his eyes slightly less empty. "I'm glad I was able to find it for him." Kent's gaze flickered once more over to Aaron in the kitchen. "So...enjoy the rest of your evening."

His comment reminded her once again of the unpleasant something that Aaron had to tell her. Furrowing her brow, she gave Kent a distracted farewell and showed him out of the apartment.

When she closed the door again, Aaron had refilled their coffee cups and brought them over to the sofa. Cali went to join him, sitting a little closer to him than was absolutely necessary.

She wasn't going to waste any time about this, since her belly was already flipping around. "What is it?" she asked, in a low voice.

Aaron made a face and took a deep breath. Said, "I've been working for a little while now on preparation for a potential lawsuit. It's really complicated but basically involves a chemical plant and a number of vaguely related illnesses in the area."

"Oh," Cali said stupidly. This wasn't at all the information she was expecting, but it sounded much less worrisome than any of the things she had imagined. "I didn't think you handled those kinds of cases."

"I usually don't," he acknowledged, shifting against the sofa cushions. "But this one has been shuffled around from law firm to law firm for a variety of different reasons. They can't seem to keep good representation, but, if anyone deserves it, they do. So, since I have more flexibility than a lot of lawyers who might still be interested in the case—"

She picked up his hand and squeezed it. "Of course, you're going to do it. But why..."

Aaron met her gaze deeply and there was no denying the force of regret in his eyes. "It's in Florida. And it's going to be a long process and involve a lot of research and fieldwork on my part. For a while, it will be too much to keep flying back and forth. Since the other things I'm going to be working on can be done from anywhere, I figured I'd just stay in Florida for a while."

And finally Cali realized what he was telling her. Felt her chest start to ache at the revelation. "How long?"

"I don't know. Several months."

Cali let out a gust of air and closed her eyes. "Shit."

She should have known this thing with Aaron was too good to be true.

"I know," Aaron agreed glumly. "It seems a little unfair for me to have met you right before I have to leave, but I don't think we're far enough along in our—"

"We're not. There's not enough here for us to try to keep something going for that long."

Aaron was silent. Just sat beside her with a pained look on his face.

Slumping against him, Cali sighed, "This really sucks."

"I know. It definitely sucks." Aaron put an arm around her. "But let's not be too melodramatic. I'll be back eventually and if both of us are still available, we could try to pick this up again."

"Yeah," she acknowledged, perking up just a little. "That's true. And maybe we could still email or something."

"True. But I think we should agree to there being no strings attached. Otherwise, it will be too complicated and someone might get hurt."

"Agreed."

Cali looked at him. He was so handsome and endearing and smart and good-hearted. And several months was a really long time. Some woman in Florida would snatch him up in a heartbeat. With some sort of unnerving intuition, Cali somehow knew he wouldn't be unattached when he returned.

She could see it all happening, although there was no logical reason to assume it. But she just knew this was the end of any future with Aaron.

"Anyway," he continued, "I somehow doubt you'll still be available when I come back. With my very formidable competition already waiting in the wings and all."

"What?" Cali gasped. When Aaron just elevated his eyebrows, she went on, "You mean Kent? I assure you that Kent is no competition."

"Isn't he?" Aaron's expression wasn't resentful or affronted. Mostly just sad and slightly curious. "He was certainly acting that way. If he were just an old friend, I could understand him grilling me in an attempt to tease you. But I was also picking up some definite territorial vibes."

Cali swallowed hard. Had been stupid enough to think Aaron hadn't noticed. "He might be...interested in something superficial and temporary with me," she said carefully, feeling the need to explain but not wanting to go into too much detail. "But that's all. And that's not something I'm interested in."

Aaron's head was tilted back against the cushion and he was studying her face intently. "You don't have to lie to me, you know."

"I'm not," Cali insisted honestly, trying to put into words all the things she'd been mulling over for the last two months. "I'm not saying that nothing about him appeals to me. But, at this point in my life, I don't want the kind of baggage and complication that a relationship with someone like him would bring with it." She grinned at Aaron ruefully. "Besides, you know his reputation, don't you? There's no way he's interested in a real relationship with me."

Aaron smiled. "And that's what you want."

"I'd rather not have anything than have something that's not real."

They talked a little bit longer, but both of them felt kind of down. So soon Aaron got up to leave.

He kissed her softly on the side of the mouth before he left. "It's a shame our timing was so lousy."

Cali chuckled and shook her head. "I'm telling you—it's the story of my life."

When he left, she flopped back down on the sofa and brooded over her almost-relationship with Aaron. Feeling a little bit sorry for herself, she fought against the ache in her throat.

She'd been so close. Nearly had exactly the kind of man she was looking for. One who fit into her life, wanted what she wanted and really seemed to appreciate her.

But he was leaving before anything had even started.

And the man who didn't fit into her world at all—who could only bring her heartache and confusion—wouldn't seem to drop out of her life completely. Kept lingering around the outskirts like a headache she couldn't quite shake.

The situation—the whole of her life—was way more than ironic.

It was so, so, so, so wrong.



## Chapter Six

"Mr. Landon will see you now."

Cali stood up from a chair in the waiting area outside of Kent's office and smoothed out her skirt, hoping she still looked presentable.

She was about to interview Kent again, for another story in the magazine she wrote for, this time it was a follow-up to her story about the auction, in which she looked into the various ways the money raised at the auction was being used.

Honestly, her article didn't absolutely require an interview with Kent and she hadn't known what to expect when she'd called up and asked for a quote from him for the article. The woman she'd spoken to had taken her name, number and request and then had called her back within the hour to schedule a personal interview with Kent.

So here she was again. Walking into his office.

It had been three weeks since her father's birthday and she hadn't spoken to Kent during that time. She hadn't had any idea what would happen after that rather bizarre evening, but she was a little disappointed that he hadn't even called to thank her for having him over.

It still felt like there were loose ends between them and she really wanted to wrap them up. Plus, something inside her wanted to be closer to Kent—get to know him as a friend and as a person. And she was pretty sure that Kent could use a friend too.

This interview was, of course, just business. But maybe there would also be the opportunity to see if any kind of friendship was possible between them.

Kent smiled and greeted her politely as she entered his office. His expression was cool and impersonal, but he did at least stand up and move out from behind his desk.

He was handsome and infinitely sophisticated as he told her that it was nice to see her again. Then he gestured to one of the lush leather chairs positioned in front of the wall of windows and he lowered himself into the chair next to her.

It was a good sign, she thought, that he hadn't remained hidden behind his desk. But they didn't even exchange small talk before she was forced to launch into the interview, asking him some predictable questions about the new Children's Clinic facility. The building that was being paid for with the money from the painting he had donated.

It was also his money that had bought the painting, but only the two of them knew it.

He answered every question with smooth, accomplished ease. Nothing interesting or personal was said by either one of them and it could have been an interview between two strangers.

When she'd asked her last question, she leaned back in her chair and looked at him almost wistfully. This renewed distance between them was partly her fault for rejecting his sexual advances at the birthday party. But it still made her feel kind of achy.

She so wished that she could connect to him in a way that wasn't purely physical.

Silently, he watched her with slightly elevated eyebrows. He wasn't rude. Wasn't offensive. Was just...blank. Revealing absolutely nothing.

She got a sad kind of clench in her belly at this realization, but she didn't regret her decision to refuse his wordless advances before.

Casual sex just wasn't what she wanted.

Standing up in preparation to leave, she turned to look out the floor-to-ceiling windows for a moment. She might as well accept it. Clearly, Kent wasn't interested in anything but sex with her. The only times he responded warmly to her was when sex entered the picture.

She'd had a plan before the interview started, but now the plan was looking less and less feasible.

But, still, she could vividly recall that lost, lonely look on Kent's face. She'd only caught it a few times, but it had seemed so real.

With that expression in mind, she bolstered her courage and spoke, keeping her voice idle and not looking over at him. "You know, they just got that special exhibit of Italian Renaissance paintings at the Chicago Museum of Art."

She was still too nervous to look at him, but she managed to keep her voice calm and her posture natural.

"I know," he said simply, revealing nothing in his tone.

Swallowing hard, Cali continued, "I haven't seen it yet, but I guess you probably were at the big opening."

He must have stood up because his voice was now coming from closer behind her. "I was invited, but I didn't go. I haven't seen the exhibit yet."

She almost chickened out then. He must know where she was going with this by now, but he was offering her no help at all. Staring at the cityscape from her vantage point in front of the window, she forced herself to go on. "Well, I was planning to go tomorrow afternoon."

It was true. She'd been planning to go on Saturday afternoon, with or without Kent. This truth didn't make any of this encounter easier to get through.

Kent was standing beside her now, so she turned her head to look at his face. He was peering at her from under raised eyebrows.

Rushing on and having to turn once more away from his quizzical expression, she finished her invitation, "So I thought, if you want, maybe you could go with me."

She felt a quick wave of heat flush her cheeks—wondering if she'd sounded as stupid as she thought—but she hoped that, other than her pink cheeks, she didn't look too awkward or embarrassed.

Darting her eyes back over to Kent, she saw that he was staring at her intently. He finally breathed, "Why?"

Feeling more comfortable now that the invitation was on the table, she shrugged and said lightly, "Why not? I don't have many friends yet in town and it's nice to have someone to go with—especially someone who knows and appreciates art." She turned around until she was facing him. "So, do you want to go?"

Before she knew how or why it had happened, Kent had her backed up against the smooth, cool surface of the window. His suddenly intense face was just inches from hers and she could feel his breath faintly against her skin. "What are you asking, Cali?"

Her cheeks were now blazing with heat and she felt her body involuntarily respond to his closeness and to the sound of his husky voice. Gulping, she managed to say, "Not that, Kent." It was difficult to think with the length of his body almost pressing into her, but she tried to get her mind to work. "As I said before, I'm not interested in casual sex. That's not why I'm asking."

He narrowed his eyes slightly and moved almost imperceptibly, but the adjustment caused her breasts to brush lightly against his chest. "So why *are* you asking? What are you expecting out of this?" His textured voice and the faint stimulation on her nipples caused a shudder to develop deep in her spine.

Sucking in a deep breath, Cali said, "Nothing sexual. Just something...friendly."

He backed off, but only a little bit. Asked what appeared to be a genuine question. "Why? I'm not good friend material."

Cali shrugged and felt a little more composed as Kent became distracted from his seduction techniques. "I think that maybe you are. You just haven't had much practice at it."

Kent's expression was one she'd never seen before. He looked startled, confused, a little disoriented—as if he had no idea what to make of this development. He lifted his hand and gently pushed a loose strand of hair out of Cali's face. "Despite your intentions," he murmured, "You know what will happen, don't you?"

Putting a hand on his chest, Cali pushed him back a little bit more. She was determined to resist his irresistibility, but there was no sense in letting him get too close. She was only human, after all and Kent was not above taking advantage of how she responded to his closeness.

"No, it won't. I know we have this...spark between us—we'd be idiots not to realize it—but we're not victims of our physical urges. And I don't want to have sex with you."

His lips twitched and he gave her a long, assessing look.

She shrugged again. "It's no big deal either way. I was just trying to be nice."

Kent extended his arm and planted his hand just beside her right shoulder. Leaned into her again. "Is that what you call it?"

"Yes," she insisted, refusing to pull away from what she knew was a kind of seductive intimidation tactic. "It's called being nice." Curling her lip, she added, "I

know you don't have much familiarity with niceness, so I'll forgive you for not recognizing it when you see it."

He smiled at her and the expression caused a warm pressure to swell in her chest. The smile was a real one, not tender, perhaps, but genuinely amused. "All right," he agreed. "The museum of art tomorrow."

Cali let out her breath and blinked at him. "Good. I'll meet you there at three p.m. then." She turned and walked out of his office, her hands shaking just a little.

She had succeeded in what she'd come there to do. She'd taken the interview and had offered friendly gesture to Kent. At the same time, she had made steps—however small—toward stifling this bizarre attraction between them. All in all, it was a very good work for a Friday afternoon.

Tomorrow, she and Kent would have a friendly visit to the art museum. Look at some Renaissance paintings.

Cali was quite excited about it. And just a little bit proud of herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later, Kent opened and shut the cabinets in her kitchen until he found where she kept the wineglasses.

They had gone to the art museum as planned and things had gone smoothly. Kent had obviously wanted to have sex afterward, but he'd taken her rejection with ironic good grace. After that first Saturday, they'd started getting together a couple of times a week and had done normal, innocuous things like go to the movies, go out for lunch or picnic with Jim in the park. Cali knew they weren't best friends or even very close—Kent still never let her get past his protective barriers—but he was a witty and entertaining companion when he wanted to be and she thought that they were gradually becoming more comfortable with each other on a level that wasn't sexual.

Not that the idea of sex had ceased coming up between them. They'd occasionally exchange an unexpectedly hot look and once in a while Kent would get too close to her, his warm proximity causing Cali to draw away from him quickly. She knew he was still interested in having sex with her, but he wasn't pressuring her at all and he hadn't made any actual advances since the afternoon they'd gone to the art museum.

She wasn't sure if she had helped to curb the loneliness she'd recognized in Kent, but at least things were no longer cold and awkward between them. And he kept hanging out with her, which she assumed meant that he was enjoying himself.

Cali finished uncorking the wine bottle and then poured the Chardonnay into the glasses Kent had confiscated from her cabinet. But, before she finished pouring one glass, she felt Kent move until he was directly behind her.

He was close. Very close. She could feel his body brushing against her back. "Kent?"

"Hmm." He reached around her to take the wineglass she'd just filled. But then he didn't step back or move his arm, so his warm body kept pressing into her back and butt.

Cali felt her heartbeat speed up and her hands shook a little around the wine bottle. "You're trying to tempt me," she said, attempting to sound reproachful and surprised when her voice came out as husky.

"Am I?" he drawled, his breath blowing faintly against her hair. "Is it working?"

It *was* working. She was definitely tempted. But she wasn't stupid enough to let her guard down and do exactly what she'd decided she wouldn't do.

"No. You've got some very good, subtle moves, but they're never going to work on me." She turned around and pushed him away from her gently. "If ever I change my mind about having sex with you, it will be for reasons other than your attempts to seduce me."

He looked curious, as if he wanted to ask what kinds of reasons might lead her to change her mind. But he resisted the impulse and moved away from her, immediately turning off his seductive charm.

"And don't think I don't know your game. You were just trying to change the subject. I still think you should do it," she insisted, picking up her glass and tasting the wine. "And not just for the good publicity it would offer, although I'd think that alone would compel you to go through with it. But I think if you actually see the children you've helped face-to-face, the donation of all that money will mean more to you. It won't be just a public gesture of your generosity."

He curled up his mouth very slightly. "I'm not a fan of children and the idea of visiting the old clinic really doesn't appeal to me." He glanced away from her and took a sip of his own wine. "I'll visit the new clinic once it's completed. That will provide a much better photo opportunity, anyway."

Cali shook her head and rolled her eyes, feeling an unavoidable drop in her stomach. Sometimes Kent was such a disappointment as a human being. Just when she'd start to think he had some genuine feelings, some real compassion, he'd say something like this and blow her hopes completely out of the water.

"Now you're disappointed in me," Kent remarked, studying her expression. "But you're the one who has all these unrealistic expectations about discovering the humanity in me. If you would just realize who I really am, you wouldn't suffer such disappointment."

"That's crap," she grumbled, moving into the living room. "You're the one who has delusions about the extent of your inhumanity. You're just not as cold as you'd like to think. And I know perfectly well why you don't want to visit the children in the clinic more than once."

Kent lowered himself onto her sofa. Gave her a superior look. "And why is that?"

Sitting down as well, Cali tucked her legs up under her. "Because you're afraid." Before he could object, she went on, "You're afraid the sick kids will make you feel too

much and so you'd rather think about them impersonally, from a safe distance. Well, that's cowardly, Kent. And, no matter what your flaws—which admittedly are many—I never thought I'd have to call you a coward."

Kent scowled at her unpleasantly and then leaned his head back against the sofa, closing his eyes. "You must be the most infuriating woman in the Midwest."

Cali chuckled, for some reason pleased by his response. She'd taken a big risk and had expected Kent to get hard and icy with her. The grumbling retort was much more desirable.

Not to mention adorable.

"Well, you are every bit as infuriating as me," Cali informed him. "I think you *do* want to go visit the children's clinic, if you could get over your fear of feeling things like sorrow and sympathy. And I think you really *are* a kid person."

Kent actually snorted. "Poor thing," he murmured dryly, his eyes still closed and his lashes dark against his skin. "Suffering from such absurd delusions about me."

His voice was pitched to be ironic, but Cali thought she heard something more than that in the words. Her belly clenched a little bit and she found the courage to ask, "Haven't you ever wanted kids?"

Kent opened his eyes and looked at her coolly. "Why should that matter? I'll never have any."

Cali unconsciously scooted a little closer to him. "You're what? Not even forty-five? Men have kids at that age all the time." Wrinkling her nose, she added, "I'm sure you could find some young, healthy brunette who was willing to breed your children." Her voice was slightly more bitter than she'd intended.

Kent's mouth quirked. "I believe that sounded a little catty."

It had sounded *very* catty, but Cali wasn't about to admit it. "I'm just going to ignore that remark," she said with chilly hauteur, trying to get them back to the issue at hand. "So why don't you start getting someone pregnant?"

Kent shrugged and the amusement left his face. "I've considered it. But I can think of nothing worse than becoming a bad father. I *had* a bad father, remember? I know what it does to a child. And, should I ever have children, that's the kind of father I would be."

Cali made a sympathetic sound in her throat and felt a corresponding ache in her chest. "But, Kent, you wouldn't have to be a bad father. If you want to—"

He interrupted her coldly. "Cali, give it up. Some things you just can't escape."

And now Cali wanted to cry for him, grieving that he had so convinced himself of this piece of nonsense. "But Kent," she began, her voice cracking a little.

"Cali, stop sounding so pitiful," he insisted, pinning her with a merciless glare. "I'm not torn up about it, so you shouldn't be either. I'll never be a father, but it's just not that important to me."

He was lying to her and yet she still wanted to hug him. Was almost shocked by the revelation of this intimate part of his nature, which had come to her so unexpectedly.

For the first time in so long, he felt real to her. Felt human. Felt flawed and weak and infinitely wounded. Felt like any other man whose life hadn't gone the way he wanted it to.

It was what she'd always wanted to see in him. What she'd thought she would never be allowed to witness.

A glimpse of the man that had always instinctively drawn her to him—the real, deeply compelling man below the polished surface of the billionaire.

And she suddenly realized this was what she'd been waiting for.

So, without thinking through what she was doing, she moved over until she was sitting on her knees beside him. Then she reached out. Took his startled face in her hands. Leaned into his mouth, settling her lips around his lower one and giving him a slow, tender kiss.

"What are you doing?" Kent whispered, his arms tense at his sides and his eyes wide open.

She smiled against his mouth. "That's what you asked me last time I did this. For some reason, I thought you'd be able to recognize a kiss." She slid her tongue along the supple line of his lips. "But in case you need a refresher..."

Pressing her body against him as much as she could from her awkward position, she deepened the kiss, her tongue slipping inside his pliant mouth and teasing his tongue with leisurely strokes.

As soon as her tongue entered his mouth, Kent's arms went around her and he turned his upper body into hers. Then he started to respond to the kiss, his tongue becoming just as active, just as intrusive as hers.

Soon, Cali was flushed and breathless and rubbing her breasts against his chest.

When their lips finally parted, Kent didn't pull away. Just dropped little kisses around her mouth. "I thought you didn't want to do this again."

"I changed my mind," she explained, her hands moving from the sides of his face so she could caress his scalp. She brushed the smooth planes and ripples with her fingertips. "Is that all right?"

He gave a breathless chuckle and slid his hands down to cup her butt over her jeans. "I suppose I can live with you changing your mind." His voice was husky and amused and ironic.

She laughed softly against his mouth and then sank into another lingering kiss.

This time, as their tongues tangled and lips moved against each other, she stroked her hands down his hard chest until she found his belt. Still absorbed in the kiss, she tugged at his shirt until she had pulled the front of it out from his pants.

Kent made a brief sound in his throat when one of her hands dipped under his shirttails and came into contact with the bare skin of his belly. His skin was warm and smooth and the muscles beneath her palm were firm and tense.

Kent's hand had moved up to bury itself in her loose hair and he was holding her mouth against his with hot insistence. Trying to smother a moan in her throat from how her body was responding to this embrace, she flitted her hand across his belly until it found her favorite spot.

She grabbed and gently squeezed the bit of soft flesh on his side.

He grunted and yanked his mouth away from hers. Tilted his head back against the sofa and gazed up at her with eyes that were almost wild.

Something about the intensity of the look and the feel of his soft flesh under her hand caused Cali to panic a little. She wasn't quite sure why, but terror was suddenly vying with desire inside her.

She was about to pull away completely when Kent breathed out in a harsh whisper, "Cali."

And she couldn't help but respond to it. Couldn't help but thrill at the sound of his saying her name in that way. It was erotic and genuine and almost...intimate.

With a moan she couldn't quite smother, she straddled his lap completely. Then she pulled his head up with her free hand and kissed him again, this time using her teeth to tease his lips. She wanted to find some other yummy parts of him to explore, but she couldn't quite relinquish the one part of his body that wasn't hard. So she kept clinging to the flesh of his side.

But Kent soon helped her discover one other *very* yummy part of his body—he pushed her pelvis down against his until she could feel the hard bulge in his pants. They both let out breathless sounds at the contact and Cali found herself helplessly rubbing her groin against his arousal as they continued to kiss.

Her own arousal was already hot and throbbing a little, so she finally pulled her hands away from his side and his head. Started to work on the fastenings of his pants.

Their lips parted again with a smacking sound as Cali leaned back and pushed the fabric of his clothing away to free his erection.

His head was once again sprawled back against the sofa and his body had slouched down enough to give her access to what she wanted. So Cali could see him clearly when she found his hard length and pulled it out.

She experienced the same kind of surreal awe she'd had before, at the knowledge that she was holding him in her hands. But she didn't hesitate to use her thumb to rub the length of his cock experimentally.

He sucked in his breath with a hissing sound and clutched hard at the flesh of her hips.



Her body hot and flooded with an entirely new kind of ownership, she ran her fingers up and down his shaft and played a little with the tip. Saw him wince with pleasure and bite his lip at her caress.

But he kept gazing at her with a strange, deep, incomprehensible look.

She added a little more pressure until she was fully massaging his cock and Kent choked on a groan and arched his back up in obvious pleasure.

The power of it was intoxicating and Cali felt like she might melt away or maybe explode. Her hand still on his cock, she found his lips again. Kissed him more clumsily, more desperately. But couldn't seem to stop.

"Cali," Kent breathed against her mouth, his hand slipping between her legs and pressing against where her arousal was pulsing beneath her jeans.

She unconsciously rocked her hips against his hand. "Yes."

"Cali," he said again, his voice hoarse and broken. It was like he wanted to tell her something.

"Yes?" she prompted more urgently, needing to know what he was going to say. It felt significant, felt like it might change things. His voice sounded so intimate and she couldn't help but think that he might actually be about to share how he felt.

And she really, really wanted to know what this meant to him.

So she pulled her face away, until it was an inch or two from his and locked eyes with him.

"Cali," Kent said once more, bucking up a little as her fingers tightened around his erection. "Cali, I don't have a condom."

She half grunted, half laughed at the letdown. Found herself slumping against him briefly. "That's okay. I've got one."

Pulling herself off his lap with a reluctant moan, she stood up and hurried to her bathroom, where she grabbed a condom out of the unopened pack she had in her medicine cabinet.

When she returned, Kent was still slouched in the same position on the sofa. Rumpled and half dressed and breathless.

She crawled back onto the couch and immediately straddled his hips again, kissing him hard and deep. Then she felt Kent's hands at the bottom edge of her shirt and she pulled away so that he could pull it off over her head.

Then his hands were at the clasps of her bra. And then he was pulling the ivory satin away from her skin.

When her breasts were revealed, naked and exposed in the light of the apartment, Cali felt a painful wave of self-consciousness.

Her breasts were full and heavy, coming to rosy peaks that were now tightly erect from arousal. But her breasts weren't particularly perky anymore—were certainly not the breasts she'd had at eighteen.

She'd prefer it if it were darker in the room or if Kent would remain too distracted to look at them quite so intently.

But Kent was staring at her chest with that same hot expression and his hands lifted to gently cup the soft swells of flesh. And Cali basically forgot her self-consciousness when his thumbs started to twirl her hard nipples.

Her head fell back as she felt tantalizing tugs in her arousal from the stimulation of his hands. She gasped and clung to his shoulders, still vaguely hoping that he wasn't comparing her body to the artificially enhanced brunettes he often dated.

When he pulled at her shoulders, she raised herself on her knees. Let out a silly little whimper when he took the tip of one breast in his mouth.

He fluttered his tongue and nibbled very gently until Cali was grinding herself against whatever part of his body she could reach. Finally, she couldn't stand any more.

She pulled herself away from his mouth. Then off his lap completely. Pushed off her jeans and panties, while he tore open the packet and rolled on the condom.

Before he could move or change positions, Cali straddled his lap again. She was completely naked now and the cool air of the apartment felt shocking against her flushed skin.

Without a word, Kent reached down to hold his erection in place. They lined themselves up and she lowered her pelvis, sheathing his cock inside her as she sank down.

They both moaned as his hard flesh pushed into her, but they smothered the sound with another kiss. Cali didn't move immediately, just kissed him deeply, experiencing the tight, luscious sensations from having him fully inside her.

But soon Kent began making quiet, frustrated sounds into her mouth, so she started to gently rock her body back and forth. The subtle stimulation sent little tingles out from her center and her hands stroked Kent's chest, feeling the tense muscles in his shoulders and belly.

She continued the slow rocking until Kent finally tore his mouth away from hers. He was panting harshly and his face was almost twisted. His hands closed firmly on her hips, urging her into a more intense motion.

Instead of pumping up and down over him, she started to leisurely swivel her hips. The rotating motion caused a new series of sensations to flood through her and she dropped her head back again and gave a silent, breathy groan of pleasure.

Kent's eyes were wild and frantic and he was making occasional, little twitches with his arms and legs. But he hadn't started to thrust up into her yet and she knew he was desperately trying to hold himself back.

Cali re-angled her body until she got some stimulation on her clit and as soon as she did her rhythm became more urgent. She let her head fall forward instead of backward, so her face was just a breath away from Kent's.

She was still merely rocking and undulating her pelvis, so the friction was rich but fairly minimal. It wasn't enough for her to orgasm yet, but she forced herself to wait. Enjoyed the slowly rising pleasure. Let herself feel Kent in every way she could. For as long as she could. Hard and hot and strong—beneath her, against her, inside her.

She loved moving like this over Kent. Loved how out of control he was becoming beneath her, although he was still holding himself back. Hadn't yet let go.

Then, "Please," he hissed, his voice almost inaudible beneath the combined sounds of their heavy breathing.

Before she could respond, she felt one of his hands move from her hip. It caressed up the sensitive skin of her side until it closed around one of her breasts. He twirled and flicked her nipple until the combined pleasure between her breast and her center caused the familiar pressure to build up more deeply below her belly.

"Eh," she gasped softly, her features contorting with pleasure. Involuntarily, she accelerated her movement over him, starting to add an up and down motion to her circular rocking.

Her eyes never leaving Kent's damp, strained face, she started to use her intimate muscles to clasp at his cock.

"Fuck," he breathed, his fingers tightening on her hip until they would leave bruises. He grunted every time she squeezed her muscles around him and then he finally started to thrust up into her body.

The new pattern of their motion added jolts of pleasure to the tingling pressure at her center and it immediately broke Cali's declining control. Grabbing onto his shoulders, she began to ride him for real, the friction intensifying immeasurably as their bodies slapped together.

Her arms went around his neck until she was almost hugging him. She wanted him close. Couldn't seem to let him go. And, from this proximity, her bouncing breasts chafed deliciously against his shirt.

Her weight and his position prevented Kent from bucking up very far, but he'd managed to establish a rhythmic thrusting motion that grew progressively more uncontrolled as he built up toward his release.

She wasn't far away from orgasm herself. She rode him urgently and kept squeezing around him as steadily as she could. When she felt his hand move from her breast to fumble at her clit, the added pressure was all it took to uncoil all of the lush tension inside her.

"God," she gasped, her back arching and body tightening as she felt her pleasure peak. "Oh, God."

And then she came, her muscles spasming around his still thrusting cock, his pushes inside her clenching channel extending the waves of her release.

He didn't come immediately, but instead started thrusting up more wildly beneath her. His face was twisted with effort and concentration and he was making quiet, frantic grunts with each of his thrusts.

She clung to him as he bucked beneath her, holding on as tightly as she could. Still felt lingering spasms of pleasure as her channel tightened automatically around him.

"Kent," she whispered, trying to find his lips despite their erratic motion. "Kent."

Her mouth had just closed over his when he came with a hoarse, breathless sound. His body froze beneath her as he finally fell over the edge. Then he gave a few helpless pumps of his hips, his cock swelling and contracting with his release.

When he came down from his climax, his body relaxed until it was almost limp beneath her. She collapsed against his chest and was glad when his arms went all the way around her, held her tightly.

She gasped wetly against his shoulder for a long time, neither of them saying anything.

And then she finally realized what had happened. She'd had sex with Kent again. For no good reason. Merely because she'd seen something real in him. Seen what she'd always wanted to see.

But nothing had really changed. He still only wanted something simple and physical with her. So this was one more encounter she would have to get over. One more step closer toward very dangerous growing feelings for him.

One more casual fuck instead of what she really wanted.

"Damn," she breathed.

Kent's hand stopped stroking her back. "That doesn't sound very promising."

With a sigh, she pulled her chest away from his. "We didn't do a very good job of not having sex."

His lip twitched just a little. "Indeed. As far as not having sex goes, I'd say this was a definite flop."

"We were doing so well, just being friendly. And now it just got complicated again."

His brow lowered. "It doesn't have to be complicated. We can keep it simple. We both enjoy this. Why does it have to be more complicated than that?"

Why indeed? The biggest irony of them all. But it wasn't exactly something she could tell Kent, so she didn't say anything. Just frowned and kept staring at his relaxed face and anxious eyes.

"I can understand why you want to avoid complications, but I don't see why we can't do so," Kent continued, his voice slightly diffident. "Was this a mistake, do you think or is it something you'd like to continue?"

Cali slumped against him again, her hand unconsciously finding the flesh on his side and squeezing it, as if she needed to remind herself that not all of him was invulnerable.

“Oh, Kent,” she breathed, her cheek resting against his shoulder. “I just don’t know.”

## Chapter Seven

Kent was silent for a minute, while Cali remained where she was — slumped against him, straddling his hips, his cock still inside her. Her inner thigh muscles were starting to feel a little stretched and she could now remember the aftereffects of this particular position.

Despite her growing discomfort, she couldn't seem to pull off him. Didn't move at all until Kent started shifting beneath her and settled his hands on her hips. "I should take care of the condom."

With a sigh, Cali swung her leg over his lap and Kent's slightly limp cock slipped out of her body. When he stood up and kept a careful hold on the condom, Cali collapsed back onto the sofa.

He walked toward the bathroom and Cali reluctantly reached down to find and then pull on her panties and jeans. Her shirt was on the other side of the couch and she had just managed to get her hands on it when Kent came back into the room.

He looked calm and impersonal, his pants now fastened and his chest still bare. She tossed him his shirt while she pulled hers over her head. Her bra had landed on the floor next to the side table, but she didn't have the energy to get up and pick it up.

Kent sat down beside her on the sofa, almost exactly where he'd been sitting earlier. And then just looked at her, as if he was expecting her to speak.

She knew what he was waiting to hear. There was a question she still had to answer. She just wasn't sure what the answer was.

"I don't even know why you *want* it to continue," she burst out, before she could judge whether her words were wise. "I mean, why on earth do you even want me?"

He stared at her blankly.

"What I mean is," she explained, in a more tempered voice, wishing she'd just kept quiet. "Why do you want *me*, when you could have any woman you want?"

"But I *can't* have any woman I want," he murmured, almost inaudibly. Before Cali could even process that, he went on, "Why shouldn't I want you? I'm tired of the kind of woman I'm normally involved with. They're all the same and all rather artificial. They're young and gorgeous, but all surface, with nothing underlying it. With you, there's some real substance beyond the sexiness."

Cali tried very hard not to bloom at the uncharacteristically blunt, graceless compliment. To cover her reaction, she drawled, "Is that a crack about my thighs?"

He gave a faint, appreciative smile. "Not to mention real wit and intelligence," he added. "You're different from the other women in my life."

She had a feeling he was being honest, even though he wasn't really opening up to her. His real self was still hidden behind his barriers, but she was pretty sure he wasn't just making this up. Studying his handsome face, she finally concluded, "But I'm not the only real woman in Chicago who has a mind and a sense of humor. So I'm still left wondering why you want to fuck me?"

Kent gave an oddly awkward shrug and didn't answer. They sat for a minute in silence before he said at last, "Why did you change your mind just now?"

Cali cringed a little bit as she thought about the feelings that had prompted her to come on to Kent when she was so determined not to. Honesty was all well and good, but she wasn't going to expose herself to Kent completely, not when he kept so much of himself hidden away. With a nonchalant gesture, she replied, "You just seemed more *real* to me or something, when you were talking about not having children. It made me..." Her voice trailed off, realizing she could never admit how he'd made her feel.

Kent stiffened beside her. "If you're saying that this was some sort of pity fuck—"

She blinked and her jaw dropped open. Trying to remember what she'd said that could have given him that idea, she answered, "Of course not. How did you figure that?"

He brushed her question away, which she took to mean his reaction had been random and unmotivated.

"So," she said at last, after trying to work out how he might be feeling about all of this. If all he wanted was a simple, physical relationship, then she was going to have to turn him down. But..."Are you saying that you are interested in dating me."

Kent gave a little shrug. "That's been my intention all along." He paused, shifted his eyes and added, "Well, after that first night, anyway."

Swallowing hard, she decided to take more of a risk. "I need a little more information. I'm not asking for you to spill your guts or anything. But can you at least give me a sense about where you're coming from?"

It was a very vague question, but she couldn't think of any other way to word it that wasn't directly asking him if he thought he could ever fall in love with her.

Which was, of course, what she really needed to know.

Fortunately, Kent seemed to understand what she was asking. He pressed his lips together as he thought for a minute and then explained, "I thought about you a lot after that first night after the fundraiser. I'm not sure why, but I found our encounter rather...unsettling. And then, after the situation with the painting, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Until I had to do something about it. So, I suppose, what I would like is for us to start dating and then see where it leads."

His words were still fairly guarded, but it was more than she had ever expected to hear from him. His eyes were direct and unshuttered and he appeared to be searching her face for some sort of response.

When she didn't answer right away, he added, "Isn't that the way it normally works?"

She let out a breath of laughter and gave him a dry smile. "Sure, with normal people. It's just that with you...I don't know...I just never expect things to be normal."

Kent narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure whether that's an insult or a compliment."

"It's neither. But you have to admit that you aren't a run-of-the-mill potential date." Trying to be honest but not give too much away, she concluded, "With you, from the first time I met you, I've come to expect either intense drama or cool neglect."

He looked thoughtful after she had spoken. "I suppose, given our experiences together, even back in Blacksburg, you have every right to think that way." His lips turned up in an ironic smile. "So, what do you say? Shall we try to be normal for once?"

She grinned back at him, feeling the warm, fluttery sensation return to her chest and spread to her belly. It was equal parts excitement and anxiety. This was a very dangerous risk she was about to take and there was no guarantee of it making her happy.

But it seemed she was going to do it anyway. "All right. I'm not sure it's possible, but we'll try to be normal."

Kent nodded, his face returning to its characteristic social charm. "Good. So how would like to go to dinner with me on Saturday night?"

And that was that. As strange as it sounded, Cali apparently now had a real date with Kent Landon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali earnestly vowed to herself that she was never going to go grocery shopping with her father again.

They'd only been in the store for three minutes, but she was already trying not to scream from impatience and annoyance.

Jim was about to steer his cart past the produce section, when Cali stopped him. "You should get some vegetables."

He made a very vivid expression of distaste.

Cali rolled her eyes. "You need to eat something other than soup and potato chips. What about some carrots? You like those, don't you?"

"I like them," Jim agreed, curling his lip. "But they're such a pain to clean up. So whenever I buy them, they just sit in the refrigerator until they rot."

Cali sighed and kept a hand on the shopping cart to keep him from wheeling it away. She wondered when her dad had become so stubborn. "What about these little baby carrots," she suggested, picking up a bag to show him. "They're all ready to go."

"They just don't taste as good."



Pressing her lips together, she managed to keep her voice level. "What about if I clean up all your vegetables when we get back? Then you won't have to do it."

Her father gave her a surprised look. "You don't have to do that."

She shook her head and smiled at him. "I know. But if I do, that means you can't just let them sit in your refrigerator until they mold. You have to eat them." She walked quickly and scanned the bins of vegetables. "Carrots and celery. What about peppers—you like those, don't you?"

Eventually, they managed to get away from the produce and started down the aisles that her father was more enthusiastic about.

He was happily mulling over the rows of canned soup when he asked out of the blue, "So what's happening with Kent?"

Cali felt her heart thud and she jerked her head over to look at her father. "What do you mean?"

"I thought things were going well," Jim explained, picking up several cans and placing them in his cart. "But you haven't mentioned him in a couple of days."

It had been three days, to be exact. Since she'd fucked Kent on the sofa. "Things are fine. We're going out on Saturday night."

Jim was watching her face as intently as Cali was trying to avoid his eyes. "That sounds promising."

Cali rolled her eyes, feeling embarrassed and kind of nervous. She didn't want to start romanticizing the possibilities, only to be disappointed later, so she forced herself to think as cynically as she could. "Don't get too excited. It's just a casual date. This isn't some fairy-tale romance. He's not my knight in shining armor and I am not some damsel in distress just waiting for a prince to come along." She sighed and moved closer to the relevant issue. "I'm pretty sure he doesn't have any deep feelings for me."

Her father scowled at her as he started pushing the cart down the rest of the aisle. "Why do you insist on believing that, if Kent had his choice, he could never choose you?" Jim looked heartily displeased with her as he stopped in front of the coffee. "You've never been able to believe that anyone could ever love you."

Cali made an indignant, frustrated burst of sound. "Dad! Kent doesn't love me!"

Jim shrugged and tossed a pack of ground coffee into his cart. "Maybe not yet. But I'm not sure that you're seeing this situation objectively. Kent is rich and powerful and he's closed himself off from a lot of normal human experiences, but he's just a man like everyone else." On a roll now, he kept talking as he headed toward the snack aisle. "You said yourself that you thought he might be lonely. Why can't you fathom that maybe he's less lonely with you?"

Cali tried to object, to argue, but her father just talked over her.

"Obviously, the things he's worked for in his life haven't really fulfilled him or made him happy. He's at the age when this emptiness is often driven home to a man. Maybe he wants to try something new." Jim stopped walking and turned to stare at his

daughter. "You're a beautiful, intelligent, generous, funny, perceptive, mature woman. Why wouldn't he finally decide that he wants who you are in his life?"

Feeling like she might choke, Cali tightened her face to control how overwhelmed and weepy she suddenly felt. Managed to hide her response with a wry smile. What her father said had made some sense, but he just didn't have the whole story. "That's sweet, Dad. And you're probably right about Kent going through some sort of midlife crisis – his just looks different because his life has been what most men only dream of. But he's had twenty-five years of taking the best of everything, including women, without much effort or commitment. I'm not holding out for a romantic, cheesy wedding at the end of this story."

Jim gave her a half smile. "With your personalities, I would never expect your wedding to be cheesy."

Cali smiled and fell in step with her father as he started walking again. She felt a rush of affection for her father, but she had to be so careful. He was actually giving her hope, when she knew – she knew! – better than to hope for that kind of happy ending with Kent Landon.

"I thought you had been rooting for Aaron," she teased, trying to distract both of them.

Shrugging, Jim smirked as he replied, "I'm flexible. I adapt. And I think Aaron was too agreeable for you, anyway."

"Too agreeable?"

"Yep," her father said, putting four bags of chips into his cart. "You're so stubborn that you'll need someone who's more of a challenge."

\* \* \* \* \*

The date was surprisingly uneventful, enjoyable and normal, an intimate dinner, followed by a stroll around downtown, ending up at the construction site where the new children's clinic was progressing quickly. They got dessert at an expensive ice cream parlor and eventually made it back to her apartment.

There, they had an hour of conversation and foreplay on the couch before they started moving toward the bedroom.

They were half kissing, half walking and they had almost reached the bedroom when Kent's cell phone vibrated. It had gone off a couple of times during the evening and he'd discreetly pulled it out, glanced at the caller ID and then ignored it.

But this time, when he pulled away from her lips long enough to glance down at his phone, he made a face. Looked up at her apologetically. "Five minutes?"

She rolled her eyes and nodded. Then let Kent take the call in private and went into the bedroom to wait.

Glancing at herself in the mirror, she decided she still looked pretty good. No hint of lipstick anymore, but her cheeks were attractively flushed rather than blazing and her hair was rumpled but not sticking out all over.

She was wearing a knee-length skirt and a red clingy top and she thought her body looked pretty good with her clothes on.

Now, however, the clothes would have to come off. And she still wasn't too keen on having Kent peer at her butt and thighs.

With a resigned sigh, she kicked off her shoes and sat down on the edge of the bed to wait. It would have been much better had they not had this interruption. If she could have just been caught up in the moment, then she wouldn't be forced to really think about it. Wouldn't have grown so nervous.

But now she was. Nervous. She was, in just a moment, going to have sex with Kent Landon. Yes, it wouldn't be the first time, but this was the first time it hadn't been spontaneous and random.

They were evidently dating now. Which meant having sex with him this time would be different. Would mean something.

She sat on the bed and stared at the floor. She was still aroused from their foreplay in the living room, but desire was always much easier to handle when you didn't think about it too much.

Kent came into the bedroom before she could work herself up into too much anxiety. Smiling, he apologized and sat down on the bed next to her.

Then he quietly toed off his shoes. And then started pulling his socks off.

Cali gulped as she watched him.

It all seemed so incongruous. What was Kent doing here, in her bedroom, pretending to be a normal person? He wasn't a normal person. He was utterly different from her. He lived a different life, lived in a different world.

And here he was, sitting on her bed and taking off his socks.

Kent Landon. Taking off his socks.

"What is it?" he asked, glancing over at her curiously.

She shook her head. "Doesn't this feel a little strange to you?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Sitting on a bed?"

"No. Just this. That we're pretending like we can be normal."

"Why can't we be normal?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as he watched her. He'd taken off both socks and was now removing his belt.

Cali let out her breath. Gave up on these reflections, since they were just confusing and scaring her. "No reason." Then she smiled at him and added, "Maybe we can be."

He seemed pleased with her conclusion because he moved closer to her and kissed her. After several minutes of kissing, undressing and petting, they had worked back up to the momentum they'd lost when Kent had received the phone call.

Cali had turned out the lamp on the bedside table. But there was still light coming into the room from the hall, so it was dim rather than dark.

She could still see Kent quite clearly. He was lying on top of her, suckling her breast. But she hoped that the darkened room would help to hide any flaws on her body that Kent might happen to find.

Feeling pleasantly warm and deeply aroused, Cali moved under him restlessly, stroking his scalp and rocking her hips.

Then she let out a little grunt of disappointment when he released her nipple and moved his solid weight off her.

He smiled at her quietly and stroked her belly, which she sucked in instinctively at his touch. His eyes slid slowly over her body, from her tumbled hair spread out on the pillow to the patch of curls hiding her wet arousal.

Self-conscious under the heat of his gaze, Cali shifted uncomfortably on the mattress. "Kent?" she asked. "Did you want the condom?"

She could see that he was fully erect, so she reached to grab the packet off the bedside table. Sat up and tore it open. Then brushed her fingers along the hard length of his cock. Got a little bit hotter every time he hissed with short little gasps in response to her touch.

His eyes were smoldering and his whole body was tense as she carefully rolled on the condom.

Then Cali lay back down with her head on the pillow and waited for Kent to lower himself over her.

She saw him checking to make sure the condom was secure, but he didn't change positions. Still sitting on his heels in between her splayed legs, he used one hand to stroke her belly again. Then slid it down until he was caressing her hip.

"Kent?" she prompted, really wishing he'd move over her so she wouldn't be quite so exposed to his gaze.

He didn't answer, except to stroke her thigh, going down the outer side and moving back up on the inside. She gave a silly little gasp when his fingers nudged at the juncture between her legs. He brushed his fingers through the rough texture of her curls and then discovered that the most intimate curls were damp from her arousal.

He was watching her face when he slipped a finger inside her.

She bit her lip at the sensation and then found herself blushing, something deeply unsettling about the way he was watching her. "Kent, I'm ready," she urged him, rocking her hips up as his finger explored. "What are you waiting for?"

Even now, Kent apparently wasn't much of a talker in bed because, instead of answering with words, he simply positioned himself directly between her thighs and cupped her butt in both hands. Then, still kneeling, he raised her hips slightly, so he could slide his cock into her body. Cali made a tiny whining noise as her intimate muscles gave way for the intrusion of his solid flesh. The position put some strain on

her stomach muscles, but her body immediately accommodated the new arrangement and she arched her back and bent her legs up.

"Okay?" Kent asked, a little breathlessly, his face tense and unreadable. He repositioned his hands so that he was holding on to her thighs, with her knees hooked over his forearms. "Yeah," she whispered, feeling like her whole body was directly tuned to the substance of his cock inside her. "It's good."

It *was* good. And, though she would have preferred a position where she didn't feel quite so exposed, she wasn't about to act like a prude and complain.

He pulled his pelvis back and then pushed back into her, his motion slow, steady and sure. The friction was deeply pleasurable and Cali arched her neck back with a sigh.

Kent continued to thrust into her with long, even strokes and Cali started to grind her pelvis against him in response. She could feel a coiled tension in her belly coalesce from her arousal, but it was slow in coming and she didn't yet feel urgent.

Kent's eyes kept raking over her body and she tried not to wonder what he was thinking. She glanced down at herself. Saw that her full breasts were jiggling with their rhythm and that, since she was on her back, gravity was pulling her nipples to the side.

Deciding this wasn't her most attractive look, Cali raised her hands until she was cupping her breasts. When Kent groaned softly as he watched, she squeezed the soft swells of flesh and then chafed her tight nipples with her palms.

The added stimulation increased the rich pressure at her center and Cali started breathing quickly as the sensations grew more intense. Holding her breasts with both hands, she breathed, "Kent. Yes, Kent."

Kent's thrusting suddenly accelerated and the strokes of his cock grew harder and shorter. He started making soft little grunts with each thrust and his hands pushed her thighs back closer to her body.

The shift in position stretched her muscles even more, but it allowed him to sink into her even deeper. Cali mewed in pleasure and tossed her head aimlessly on the pillow, as her orgasm rose slowly, powerfully.

Kent's eyes seemed to be devouring her and something about the intensity and possessiveness of his gaze began to almost scare Cali. She shut her eyes to close out his expression and tried to breathe deeply. But instead made urgent, desperate gasps.

She felt out of control, like she was falling, spiraling. Didn't want to scream, so she tried to swallow over her helpless pleasure. "Kent," she gulped, her hands flying out to fist in the bedding beside her.

He gave an incoherent grunt in response and drove into her rapidly, his fingers tightening on the soft flesh of her thighs.

She was sweating now, from frustration and effort and her body was writhing as she tried to absorb the rising sensations inside her, tried to match Kent's urgent motion. She opened her eyes again and saw his eyes—hot and wild.

Looked quickly away from his gaze and noticed that pulling her legs up this far had caused her normally flat belly to fold into unattractive, little rolls.

But at this point, she was too far gone to even care.

She clenched her jaw and whimpered, determined not to scream or let go too completely. But it felt too good to suppress. She couldn't seem to stop whimpering and soon she was twisting and writhing shamelessly on the bed. Her whole body a fuse, a tightened coil, a wave about to crest.

Her stomach and thigh muscles were burning painfully. She had a piece of hair in her mouth, but she couldn't focus enough to get it out. She knew her face was contorted with pleasure and that her body was twitching wildly, awkwardly. Plus, she was making the stupidest sounds she'd ever heard herself make—something between panting and sobbing.

Then Kent said thickly, "God, Cali, you're gorgeous."

And she came. Crested, ignited, uncoiled. Choked on her cry of release and dug her fingers into the mattress.

Her inner muscles clamped down around him, but Kent kept thrusting, breathing out something that might have been, "Yes, yes, yes."

She was gasping frantically as she came down from the rush of pleasure and she couldn't quite process that they were still having sex. She raised her hand to pull the strand of hair out of her mouth and then wipe some of the perspiration off her forehead.

"Kent," she whimpered. Then wasn't sure exactly why she had said it.

He was thrusting as urgently as he could in this position and the whole bed was rocking in response to his motion. There was a damp sheen on his skin and he looked almost unworldly in the dim light. He still made breathless little noises with each thrust and his eyes were still fixed on her intensely. "Cali," he rasped, the pistoning of his hips guiding their shared rhythm.

She arched her back some more, trying to relieve the strain on her muscles. But the friction of Kent's cock inside her still felt amazingly good, so Cali figured she might as well take advantage of it.

She moved her hand from the bed to her body, sliding down until she found her swollen clit. She rubbed it in firm circles, trying to find a pattern to match the slapping of their bodies together. She felt her channel contracting in automatic response to the intense stimulation.

After a minute, Kent froze inside her, closing his eyes and turning his face away. "Fuck," he breathed, his entire body tightened like a clenched fist. "Cali, you feel incredible."

She blinked in surprise, but something warmed inside her. Something other than the rich pleasure at her center. She did, however, manage to force out, "You feel pretty decent yourself."

He choked on what seemed to be laughter and started up his thrusting again. Cali kept massaging her clit and it didn't take long before she felt another orgasm rising.

This one built up quickly and Cali rubbed herself frantically, panting out a constant, "Ah, ah, ah," in time with their rhythm. Kent was clearly at the end of his restraint. He was driving into her wildly now and his face was twisted with effort. "Cali," he gasped harshly, his cock gripped by her tight, quivering muscles. He thrust once more, strong and hard.

With a strangled cry of relief, Cali felt the tension inside her shatter once more. She moaned low in her throat as her hips rode out the orgasm and she instinctively arched her back up one more time.

Letting go at last, Kent released a muffled exclamation and froze inside her, his face washed with the pleasure of his climax. He was sucking in harsh breaths when his body finally relaxed and he loosened his grip on her thighs.

Cali felt a wave of satisfaction saturate her body and a wave of contentment saturate her mind and her heart. Kent remained as he was for a minute, kneeling between her thighs, his sated cock still inside her. But soon the discomfort of the position caused Cali to shift awkwardly and—responding to her silent urging—Kent slipped out of her and gently lowered her legs back to the mattress.

Her legs and belly were trembling visibly, from fatigue and the strain on her muscles. Cali tried to hide the lingering effects and smiled up at Kent, who was now standing beside the bed.

He smiled back at her and then went to the bathroom to take care of the condom.

Cali didn't move. Couldn't move even if she wanted to. Her thighs had been a little sore after they'd had sex on the couch last month, but it had been years since she'd felt like this. In fact, she might never have felt like this, since she was older now, which meant she felt things more.

Sex could certainly take a lot out of a person.

When Kent came back into the bedroom, Cali wasn't sure whether he would get back in bed with her or not. He might just go home, the evening's activities now completed.

She didn't say anything. Tried not to hope. Didn't want to be disappointed if he didn't stick around.

Without a word, Kent lowered himself back into the bed and pulled the covers up over both of them. They lay on their sides facing each other, as if neither was quite sure what to do.

Something inexplicable prompting her, Cali offered dryly, "You can stay the night if you want."

She certainly hadn't meant the words to wound. If anything, she had thought it was more of a bitter, nostalgic joke. But Kent's face reflected a pained surprise before he masked it.

Cali felt a pang in her chest at the knowledge that she had accidentally hurt him. But then, before she could explain, he must have realized where the words had come from, because he smiled in resigned acknowledgement. "I suppose I deserved that."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to get back at you or be mean. It's just that my initial reflex is to say stupid things whenever I'm nervous."

He watched her steadily. "Are you nervous?"

"A little," she admitted, shrugging to make the words sound casual. "It's such a new thing and I didn't know if you wanted to stick around afterward or not."

Kent nodded as if he understood. "I'll stay if you don't mind, but if you'd rather I didn't, I certainly don't have to."

With a sigh, Cali wondered if all beginning relationships involved this much tiptoeing around each other. It had been so long since she'd been in this position, she really couldn't remember. "I don't mind," she said softly. Then, trying to lower her defenses a little, she added, "I'd like it if you stayed."

Nodding again, he reached out an arm and she scooted over until she was pressed up against his bare chest.

She released a lingering sigh as both of his arms went around her and she nestled into his warmth and his strength.

Suddenly remembering something, she slid her hand down his torso until she found that spot on his side she always liked. The only part of his body that wasn't hard. She squeezed the bit of spare flesh gently.

Kent shifted against her. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?" he murmured.

"Huh," she mumbled, tilting her head up to look at his handsome face.

He was watching her with a guarded kind of amusement. "Is that your way of hinting that I need to work out more often?"

She giggled and squeezed his side again. "No," she told him, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder. "I like it."

He muttered something that sounded like "bizarre", and then they settled into silent languor.

Cali was tired and content and she really liked how she felt in his arms. Maybe she liked it too much. She tried not to get too happy or make any silly assumptions.

This was only their first date. Kent was who he was. And he might never really fit into her world.

But deciding to enjoy it while it lasted, Cali shifted until she was comfortable enough to sleep. Drowsily thought about how nice it was to have someone to fall asleep next to.



## Chapter Eight

"So you've been dating Kent for two months now and you're still not sure how he feels about you?" Cali sighed and sprawled out on her sofa, adjusting the throw cushion behind her head. "Right," she affirmed, speaking into the phone. "We've been dating for two months. We go out, have a good time, talk a lot—about everything that isn't private or intimate—and then we have sex. So I have no idea whether Kent thinks it's getting serious between us or not."

Alice hesitated before she replied, "But it's getting serious for you?"

"Of course, it's getting serious for me," Cali grumbled. "Where have you been for the last two months? I knew I'd start developing feelings for him if I took this step and it's just the stupidest thing. Why do I always do this to myself?"

"I don't think it's stupid," Alice countered in her matter-of-fact way. "Clearly he's interested in you or he wouldn't still be going out with you. Have you ever heard about him dating anyone in the past the way he's dating you?"

Cali combed her fingers through her loose hair and scratched her head a little bit in frustration. "No. Not really. As far as I've been able to tell, he either fucks women or marries them. I've never heard of him really dating before."

"So that must mean he feels differently about you than about all the other women in his past," Alice concluded with satisfied confidence.

Cali didn't feel nearly so confident. Her whole relationship with Kent was like an endless jigsaw puzzle—and she was pretty sure she was still missing a couple of pieces. "Yeah. I get that. I do think he's trying something new with me. But it's not much comfort if he decides he doesn't like it or if he's too guarded to let himself become emotionally connected to me."

"You don't think he's emotionally connected yet?"

Rolling her eyes, Cali admitted, "How the hell can I tell? We never talk about anything deep or personal. We talk about everything else—for hours—but as soon as something gets too personal he closes up. In fact, he was more open with me *before* we started dating—if you can believe it."

"He's probably just scared. For someone who's been as cold and guarded as he has been for the last two decades, making himself vulnerable, even in small ways, must be really hard for him."

"I'm not expecting him to pour out all of his deepest fears and insecurities right away. I just want a genuine connection to the real Kent behind the hard exterior. All I've ever seen are tiny glimpses and hints and I'm not sure that's going to do it for me

long term." She groaned into the phone and stretched out her legs. "I knew this was going to be more trouble than it's worth."

"You don't know what it's worth yet. Don't give up already. Normal relationships take time and I don't think it's that unusual to still not be clear on everything after the first eight weeks. You don't have to be soul mates already."

"No danger of that," Cali grumbled. "I'd be happy to just discover some evidence that he actually *has* a soul." That sounded a little meaner than she'd intended, so she backtracked. "No. That's not fair. I know he has a soul. I know the real Kent exists somewhere behind the slick surface. I'm just not sure he'll ever let me in."

"How much sharing have *you* done with him?"

"I've tried. Really, I have. But there are limits to the extent I'll make myself vulnerable when he shares absolutely nothing with me. I'm not just going to sacrifice myself at the altar of his inaccessibility."

"Good," Alice said. "You did that quite enough when you were younger. I was just checking to make sure you two weren't playing the same game—both waiting for the other to make the first move."

"I think I've made as many moves as I can. I've tried to tell him some stuff about my past relationships, my worries about my dad and other personal crap like that. He listens attentively and asks all the right questions. Seems to be interested in what I have to say. But there's no reciprocation."

"Closed off bastard," Alice muttered, in an offhand way that made Cali feel a little better. "What does your dad think of the Kent situation?"

"Oh, he adores him," Cali said. "Dad's already planning the wedding and everything. I don't know exactly how it happened—since Dad was never such a fan of Kent before—but he's become Kent's biggest cheerleader. He keeps telling me to give Kent more time. That Kent is just warming up and getting used to being part of a healthy relationship. That pretty soon he'll surprise me by expressing his undying love." She laughed a little bitterly. "I'm really not looking forward to the disappointment he'll face when he finds out that's never going to happen."

"Well," Alice hedged, "your father's not an idiot. Maybe he sees something that you don't."

"I'm not an idiot either." When she heard Alice start to object, Cali hurried on, "I know I occasionally act like one. But I've really tried to be open-minded and patient about this and not let my insecurities get in the way of viewing this objectively. If I saw even a few hints of progress, I'd feel better. But Kent actually seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Getting more and more unreadable." Cali felt a little ache in her throat as she added, "I don't even see those lost, lonely looks anymore."

"Cali," Alice said softly, carefully, "maybe Kent doesn't feel as lost and lonely anymore."

Cali tried not to cling to that faint hope, since she was pretty sure it was groundless. "I wish I could believe that. But I don't know how my presence could be making him less lonely in any genuine way. All we do is go out and then come back here to fuck."

"Give it some more time. I think you're right to be careful. You definitely don't want Kent to trample all over your heart. But you know he doesn't manifest his feelings like everyone else, so I'd hate for you to give up on something that had some real potential."

They were silent for a minute. And then, clearly trying to lighten the mood, Alice added, "Well, at least for once you're having lots and lots of great sex."

Cali snorted again. "The sex is good—I'll give you that. But we're not having lots and lots of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're not having some steamy, torrid affair. We go out once or twice a week—and we always have sex after our dates. But that's it. A couple of times a week."

"You mean he hasn't made any surprise visits to your apartment in the middle of the night?"

"Nope."

"And he hasn't called you up for a quickie over lunch?"

"Nope."

"And you haven't shown up at his office wearing nothing but a trench coat and stiletto heels."

Cali couldn't help but giggle at that bit of absurdity. "Alice, I'm thirty-eight years old. And I'm definitely not living in a porn film. I'd die of embarrassment before I even got in the elevator."

"You might be surprised at what you can do at thirty-eight. Or thirty-nine, even. In fact, just last month..."

Feeling a naughty story coming on, Cali prompted, "Yes?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you about it later." Then, after pausing a beat, Alice asked, "But you and Kent are...hot for each other, aren't you?"

"I'm definitely hot," Cali muttered. "I'm horny all the time these days. And Kent has always appeared to be...enthusiastic whenever we move things into the bedroom. But I guess he has no problem containing his enthusiasm during the days between our dates." She let out a defeated sigh. "Or else he's taking care of his enthusiasm with someone other than me."

"Cali! You don't really think he's fucking other women?"

With a groan, Cali whimpered, "How the hell can I know? I hope he's not and part of me doesn't think he is. But we've never said a word about being exclusive. Never even spoken about feelings. Isn't it standard practice for people to be free to date whomever they want until something has been made clear in a relationship?"

"Yeah, but I don't think Kent —"

"Why wouldn't he? He's done it all of his life. Why would he suddenly transform into a different person, just because he's started going out with me? He fucks women. Whomever he wants. Whenever he wants. Gorgeous, exotic, twenty-year-old brunettes. He's done it for the last twenty-five years. Why would he change now?" When Cali realized that her voice was cracking and tears were burning in her eyes, she stopped talking abruptly. Tried to pull herself together.

"Shit, Cali," Alice murmured, her voice not as composed as it usually was. "What a mess."

Cali sniffed a couple of times. Swallowed. Then said, "Yeah."

"But the thing is, you're making assumptions," Alice went on, when she realized Cali was no longer on the verge of tears. "I'm not saying you don't have legitimate reasons for those assumptions, but you just don't know yet. Why don't you ask him?"

"Ask him what? If, in between the nights he fucks me, he fucks anyone else?"

"Well, getting things out in the open helped before. Why not just ask him if he's dating anyone else?"

"I'm scared to. I'm afraid it would make him shut down completely, since he'd probably assume I was pressuring him into proposing or something. And then I'm also kind of scared...of what his answer might be."

"Better to know now —"

"I know," Cali acknowledged with a long sigh. "I'll try to muster up the courage."

"When are you going out again?"

"This Friday. We're going to the theater. You know that old Georgian mansion outside of the city that they converted into a theater? I've been dying to go for months, but it's almost impossible for us peons to get tickets. Kent, of course, can get tickets with no problem. The Shakespeare society is performing *Twelfth Night*, so we're going to see that on opening night."

"Sounds fabulous." Then Alice hummed thoughtfully. "I know it's confusing, Cali, but normal relationships usually are. It's not as easy as in fourth grade, when you could have just passed him a note that said, 'Do you want to be my boyfriend? Check yes or no'."

Cali found herself chuckling. "Pretty soon, I might be desperate enough to try that."

Laughing too, Alice concluded, "Well, if you do, make sure you give me some advance warning. I might fly over, put on a disguise and sneak around to spy on you. I wouldn't want to miss Kent's face when he reads that note."

When Cali hung up the phone at last, she remained on the couch for a long time. Stared at the silent phone.

Kent never called her up without a purpose, never called just to chat. She wondered if he ever got the urge to hear her voice. If he ever wanted her in his bed during the

week—maybe even for reasons other than fucking. Wondered if he thought about her at all when they weren't actually together.

She sighed, letting go of her worries for the moment. She had other things to think about, including a story she needed to write by tomorrow afternoon.

Relationships were really quite distracting. And just thinking about them took up a huge amount of time. It had been so long since Cali had been in one that she'd almost forgotten.

\* \* \* \* \*

At intermission on Friday evening, Cali and Kent walked down to the lobby of the theater to mingle with the social elite, in a way that Cali had learned was commonplace for Kent.

Cali hated mingling. And she hated superficial small talk. But she put on her best polite smile and murmured or nodded at the right moments. Hoped she looked basically presentable and that her mascara wasn't smudged or anything frightful like that.

She and Kent had just traded empty remarks with the mayor and his wife and Cali was taking advantage of the brief lull to admire the architecture and furnishings of the old mansion.

The dilapidated mansion had been on the verge of being torn down when a historical society had come up with a plan to save it by turning it into an exclusive art center and theater. The large ballroom of the original mansion and the rooms above it had been converted into the small theater. A couple of walls had been removed to widen the lobby, but otherwise many of the original architectural details were intact.

Cali strolled around the lobby beside Kent, peering at the intricate moldings and antique wallpaper. She had a feeling that Kent was a little amused by her absorption with their surroundings, but she didn't let that bother her.

He was surrounded by this kind of thing all the time. But it was entirely new for her. And she wouldn't be embarrassed about being excited about it.

She couldn't help but reach out to touch a gorgeous old velvet curtain as they approached it. Peeking behind the curtain, she saw it hid a quaint little alcove, complete with a huge antique mirror on the back wall, a delicate console table on the left wall and a window on the wall to her right, overlooking the garden.

Turning to Kent in delight, she discovered that he was actually laughing at her.

She huffed and glared at him, before she remembered she was supposed to be a grown-up.

"Twenty years later and she's still snooping around where she's not invited," Kent murmured, his voice unusually textured.

Frowning with what she hoped was a superior look, she countered, "I don't see any signs that say I shouldn't look. It's adorable. Why do you think it's curtained off?"

Kent glanced into the alcove and took a measuring look at the furnishings. "Those antiques are worth a fortune. I'm sure they open the curtain when the lobby is used for certain social functions, but they don't trust the riffraff to treat the antiques with respect."

Taking one last look at the delicious little alcove—which seemed to belong in some romantic, nineteenth century novel—Cali pulled the curtain closed with a sigh. It might feel like a Victorian romance, but her handsome, brooding hero didn't wander the moors, tragically pining for her.

Instead, he just laughed at her and occasionally fucked her.

Looking down, she realized that she'd put her hand on Kent's arm, in an instinctive, possessive gesture that made her decidedly nervous. But she didn't move her hand and Kent didn't pull his arm away. So they remained like that as they wandered the lobby.

After a few minutes, they were cornered by a couple who Cali hadn't met before. After they were introduced, Cali discovered they were the district attorney and his wife.

She immediately disliked both of them. Chuck Case was a middle-aged man with too dark a tan and too white a smile. He was one of those men whom some people thought were attractive and charismatic, but Cali always thought were kind of sleazy. He'd just remarried last year and his new wife, Kiki, was very blonde, very young and very ditzy.

Kent and Chuck immediately began to talk business, a conversation that neither Cali nor Kiki had enough information to follow. So Kiki instead decided to regale Cali with a long narrative about the trip she and her husband had just made to Rome.

After gushing in tedious detail about all the great shopping, dancing and nightlife that illustrious city afforded—never saying a word about anything artistic, cultural or historical—Kiki proceeded to babble to Cali about how she had met a real Italian Duke.

It had happened at a garden party one afternoon in Rome and Cali was granted a word-for-word account of Kiki's brief conversation with that scion of a longstanding noble family. Trying not to roll her eyes, Cali kept nodding and making obscure little sounds in her throat that she hoped made it seem like she was interested.

Kent was standing directly beside her, coolly conversing with Chuck, but every once in a while he would dart an amused look over at Cali's face, as if he realized how she was suffering.

"But then," Kiki continued, breaking into the most ridiculous little giggles Cali had ever heard, "we got bored at the party after His Grace left. So we..." She leaned forward, as if she were about to share a secret.

Vaguely interested for the first time, Cali agreeably leaned forward too. "You what?" she murmured, her eyes widened with exaggerated suspense.

"We had a little fun," Kiki whispered, rubbing her husband's butt in a way that Cali considered rather inappropriate. "Right there in the garden. Behind a hedge." She giggled some more. "We were very naughty."

Cali's eyebrows shot up and her fingers tightened dramatically around Kent's arm. "I see."

"You should try it some time," Kiki advised, as if she were an expert on such things. "It's really important to keep sex exciting."

"Indeed," Cali agreed. She moved even closer to Kent, trying to think of some way to urge him to conclude his conversation with Chuck.

Just then, much to Cali's relief, the lights dimmed discreetly to signal the end of intermission. The four of them moved toward concluding their conversations and Cali clung to Kent's arm, for fear Kiki would try to impart any further overly personal information.

Then she heard Chuck ask Kent softly, "By the way, was my proposal acceptable?"

Kent inclined his head. "It's all taken care of."

Cali blinked, realizing she'd just heard a piece of conversation that had been spoken in what amounted to code. After they'd said goodbye, Cali and Kent made their way back to Kent's private box seats – the best seats in the theater, of course.

"What was that about?" she asked, still holding on to Kent's arm.

He arched an eyebrow. "Business."

Wrinkling her nose, she complained, "It sure sounded mysterious to me. What? Are you bribing the district attorney into doing something for you?"

She'd said the words casually, as she would have said them to anyone else. Only after she'd spoken them did she realize that this wasn't anyone else. This was Kent Landon. Perhaps the only person she knew for whom the words might be taken literally.

He twitched his mouth. "Do you really want to know?"

Rolling her eyes, she shook her head and pretended it wasn't important.

But the whole thing kind of rattled her. It was easy to get caught up merely in her personal interaction with Kent – seeing him socially, having sex with him, wondering if he would ever open up to her.

But there were so many other layers to who he was. And many of them unknown, dubious, even dangerous. When she was younger, that kind of thing had held a forbidden kind of thrill. But she had to ask herself if, at this point in her life, she really wanted to be involved with someone for whom bribery and extortion might be commonplace.

Not that she thought Kent was evil or anything. But his world was just so far removed from her own.

She worried about her dad falling down and damaging a knee. About whether she had enough money put away for retirement. Not about political cover-ups and semi-legal machinations.

Kent was watching her strangely. "Everything all right?" he asked, as he allowed her to enter the box first.

Seating herself and straightening the skirt of her gray silk dress, she smiled. "Sure. Everything except hearing too much about Kiki's sexual escapades."

Kent chuckled warmly and sat down beside her. "I was wondering how that came up. I thought your head might explode for a minute."

"It almost did. What a ditz. And I'll be happy to never again have to picture Kiki and Chuck going at it. Especially in a rather public location, hidden only by a hedge." She made a disgusted face. "Ridiculous."

His eyes igniting with a familiar smoldering heat, Kent asked huskily, "You mean you've never had sex in a semipublic location?"

"No," she said, ignoring the little shudder that ran down her spine from the nature of his expression and tone of voice. "I'm normal. I have sex in bed." When he raised his eyebrows skeptically, she added, "And on the occasional couch or office table. But in private. People can have sex wherever they want and I won't judge them for it. But I've never understood the thrill in having quick, awkward sex in a place so public you can't even enjoy it."

"Hmm," was all that Kent said.

She eyed him warily. "Are you going to tell me that you're in the habit of making use of random hedges for erotic, open air activities?" She definitely didn't like the idea of that, mostly because it assumed he was engaging in activities with women other than her.

He gave her a speaking look.

"Fine. I'm the only prude in the bunch, I guess. I did some typical, wild stuff when I was younger, but never anything in public. And now I'm perfectly content with the bedroom. Maybe I'm boring after all."

Cali had said the words lightly, almost teasingly. But after she'd said them she started to wonder if they were true. Maybe she *was* boring. Maybe Kent would soon realize how boring she was.

She'd always considered herself clever and creative, but at heart she knew she was basically normal. However—after living a lifestyle such as Kent's—maybe normal translated into boring.

It wasn't an encouraging thought. And it added another layer of distance between them.

Kent didn't have the chance to respond because the lights in the theater went out just then. In the darkness, he reached over to drape an arm around her shoulders, which surprised and pleased Cali, since she hadn't found him to be a particularly touchy person.

Pushing aside her insecurities, she leaned into him a little. Tried to plan out how she was going to approach the question she still needed to ask tonight.

She definitely needed to find out—very soon—whether or not he was sleeping with anyone else.



So intent was she on her musings that she gave a little jump when Kent's hand started to move down her shoulder. And then her back stiffened dramatically when she felt his fingers somewhere where they certainly didn't belong.

His fingers brushed back and forth across her nipple—lightly, almost casually. She sat in her seat stiffly, waiting for him to stop.

But he didn't. He just kept going. And soon the sensations started to feel quite pleasant and her nipple started poking out through the silk of her dress.

She turned her head to look at him. "Kent?"

He had been staring at the stage, but now he turned to give her a quizzical look.

Making a face at him, she shifted restlessly in her seat. Then settled into it again when he drew his hand back up to her shoulder.

Cali was just starting to get into the drama on stage again when she felt Kent's hand moving once more. Back to her breast. Back to lightly fondling her nipple.

She glared at him. Said in a low whisper, "I am not going to have sex with you in this box, so you can just get that out of your mind right now."

He cocked an eyebrow, as if she'd said something absurd. "I assure you. That's the furthest thing from my mind. Far too uncomfortable here."

Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, she peered at him for another minute. When he just sat mildly, watching the play, she turned back toward the stage herself.

Waited for his hand to move again.

It did. After just a few minutes. But this time it moved to her neck, gently caressing the lines of her throat, stroking over her quickening pulse.

She took a deep breath, feeling her body respond to his delicate touch and to the illicit thrill of it happening in a packed theater.

They were in a private box and not on the main floor. So there wasn't anyone else around them. Technically, they probably could have had sex up there without anyone else being the wiser—as long as they could stay perfectly silent and were back far enough. But—while Cali might be persuaded to engage in a little erotic adventure—having sex in a crowded theater was beyond the limit.

But that certainly didn't stop her from getting aroused.

And she got more and more aroused as Kent's skillful hand traveled from her neck to her shoulder, then down her arm, then across her belly, then back up to her breasts.

It happened very slowly, with a lot of exquisite pauses in between his touches—never moving lower than her bellybutton—but the leisurely nature of the stimulation made it all the more delicious.

After about forty-five minutes, Cali was breathing erratically and shifting uncomfortably in her seat. She had crossed her legs about twenty minutes ago and was now squeezing her thighs together as discreetly as she could.

It would have been comforting had she been able to be angry at Kent for getting her into this condition—hot and throbbing in her fancy clothes, in the midst of elegant socialites—but she was well aware of the fact that she could have stopped him at any time.

The truth was that she didn't want him to stop. The truth was that she was feeling more alluring, more sensual than she'd ever felt in her life.

Which was ridiculous, given that she was thirty-eight years old.

His hand had moved to the nape of her neck and he was now gently massaging her neck under her hair. The touch was neither intimate nor risqué, but for some reason she found it as erotic as anything she could remember.

Her head fell back and her mouth fell open with a wordless gasp of pleasure. She arched her back slightly as his fingers rubbed her sensitive skin and she knew her nipples were tight and clearly visible through her dress. But she didn't even care at the moment.

Kent had been, for the most part, focused on the stage throughout his exploration of her body, only darting little glances over at her occasionally to gauge her reactions. But now he was watching her intently and her awareness of his hot gaze made her gasp a little more.

After another five minutes, she was sure that she would burst into flames. It was crazy. This wasn't a piece of soft porn. This was just her normal life. And yet she was dangerously tempted to jump Kent in the middle of the theater.

Finally, she moved her hand from where it was clenching the arm of her seat. Reached over into Kent's lap to make sure she wasn't the only one this out of control.

To her relief, she found the tight bulge in Kent's pants. Still staring blankly at the stage, she rubbed her hand blindly against his arousal.

He made a soft, guttural sound and closed strong fingers around her wrist. Pulled her hand away from his lap.

Before she could react, he had stood up, right as the curtain fell on the last act of the play. Instead of waiting for the applause and curtain calls, Kent pulled her to her feet and dragged her out of the box.

Not that he actually needed to drag her. Cali was right on his heels, thinking about the amount of space he had in the back of his limo and the conveniently tinted windows.

Kent wasn't walking quickly as he descended the polished stairs, but she could feel throbbing energy coiled inside him and the jacket to his suit didn't quite hide the bulge of his erection.

She grabbed his arm as she heard applause break out in the theater. "I'm not opposed to sex in a limo," she informed him breathlessly, wishing she hadn't worn quite such skimpy panties.

He took her hand as they made it down the stairs. "That's good to know." After a beat, he added, "For another time."

"For another time?" she asked, as Kent led her across the lobby.

Finally, she saw where he was heading. The little, curtained alcove she'd discovered during intermission.

"Oh," she gasped stupidly, as Kent pulled back the curtain and propelled her inside. The curtain fell back in place and they were alone in the quaint little space. "But..."

He leaned against her, backing her into the wall with the window. His face was hot and intense and only inches from hers. "I believe semipublic sex was at issue earlier."

"But—" she began again. Couldn't finish because he was kissing her.

His kiss was deep and hungry and she matched it with her own. Her arms went around him instinctively and she rubbed her tight nipples against his chest. She was trapped between his body and the wall, the window ledge poking her in the butt. But all she could feel was his heat, his strength, his solid body against hers.

Something inside her prompted her to quip, when she tore her mouth away from his, "Sure, if you think *this* is semipublic. Everyone is still in the theater."

His hands were caressing her body in fast, urgent strokes, tracing her breasts, belly and hips. "Not for long," he countered, his mouth moving to her throat. "They'll all be in the lobby in a minute."

And suddenly the reality of the situation was brought home to Cali. She was really considering having sex in the lobby of a theater, with only a curtain separating them from everyone else.

Her heart started drumming frantically at the prospect.

"Kent," she breathed, arching her neck backward as he teased her throbbing pulse. "Kent, what if someone—"

"That's where the thrill comes in," he replied huskily, sliding his hands down her thighs until he had bunched up the hem of her skirt. "You said you didn't understand it. So I thought maybe we should try it. Just so you know you're not missing out." Then he slipped his hands under the fabric so that he was caressing her bare thighs.

She had wisely decided against pantyhose that evening.

Cali swallowed over a moan when she felt his fingers on the satin of her panties. "Oh, God," she gasped, as he started to stroke her intimately. "I'm way too old for this."

He twisted his face into what she thought was supposed to be a scowl, but it wasn't very effective because she'd started rubbing up against his groin. "What does *that* mean?" he demanded, his voice rough with desire.

She rocked her hips into his pumping fingers. "It means I feel like a horny teenager," she admitted, clutching at his shoulders and whimpering a little when he removed his hand.

He'd bunched her skirt up around her hips and now he lifted her so that her weight was mostly supported by the wide ledge of the window. Then he fit his hips between her thighs until the bulge of his arousal was rubbing directly against the damp spot on her panties. "You think teenagers ever feel like this?" he asked hoarsely, making little thrusts against her swollen flesh.

She arched back against the window, pretty sure it was dark enough in this alcove that no one could see into the window from below. "God, no! No teenager ever felt as good as you do." Her hands had somehow ended up on his ass and she was doing her best to push him into her more firmly.

Kent dropped his head to her shoulder. Grazed her skin, bared by her wide neckline, with his teeth. Murmured, "No one's ever felt as good as you do."

Cali tilted her head back and mewed in delight, more from the warm feeling flooding her chest than the rich pressure at her center.

He thrust his clothed erection into her again and she tried to grind her own arousal against it.

"Kent," she whispered, tensing up as she heard the applause in the theater finally fading away. "I think I could come just like this."

With a grunt, he pulled back. "But if we're going to do this, we might as well do it for real."

They stared at each other for a few seconds, flushed, panting and wordless.

Then Kent said softly, "It's your choice, Cali. If you don't want to do this, just say the word. The limo is conveniently located and we could finish this there."

And now it was much, much harder, because she really had to make a decision. Obviously, she wanted this. Just as Kent wanted it. But she couldn't deny that she was nervous.

Really nervous. The curtain in front of the alcove wasn't that much protection and there was no guarantee that no one would catch them. It was one thing for teenagers to get caught being naughty, but for people their age...

But—to her astonishment—the slight risk involved got her as excited as it made her anxious. And she had never done anything like this before. How many more chances would she have?

She looked at Kent and he was clearly holding himself back, waiting for her to make her decision. And that was what decided it for her.

Cali grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back toward her. "If we get caught, I'm so going to hit you."

Chuckling with amusement and what sounded like relief, Kent grabbed her hips and kissed her again. His tongue sought hers ravenously and she moaned into his mouth, until she heard a few voices in the lobby.

She would have tensed up, but Kent's fingers had found her panties again. He adjusted his hands and then pulled hard.

Cali smothered a squeal as the satin was pulled abruptly tight between the cheeks of her ass.

Kent made a frustrated growl and she realized that he had tried — and failed — to rip her panties at the seam.

Giggling helplessly at the irony of it, she gasped, “Serves you right for trying to use caveman tactics in the real world.”

He scowled at her and repositioned his hands on her panties. “I used to be good at this,” he told her, keeping his voice very low since people had started trickling out of the theater. “So stop laughing. You’ll bruise my manly pride.”

Still choking on her amusement, Cali also felt strangely soft at his response to her and at the ironic warmth in his look and voice. “Try again. This time, I’ll be suitably awed by your manliness.”

With a jerk of his hands, this time he ripped her panties apart. Cali cooed appropriately, her exaggerated gushing mingled with her hushed giggles.

But when Kent pulled the torn shreds of her panties away from her skin, she did feel a little bit thrilled.

As Kent reached into his pocket to pull out a condom packet, he eyed her ruefully, “So did that absurd diversion spoil the mood?”

“God, no,” she assured him, reaching down to unfasten his pants. “Don’t you dare stop now.”

Together they got the condom on and Kent quietly repositioned her on the window ledge, holding her up with his body as he sank into her.

The lobby was now flooded with people and chattering voices seemed to come from all around them. Silently, Kent pulled his pelvis back and thrust into her smoothly, the rich friction of his hard cock in her wet channel causing Cali to bite down on her lip.

Kent’s face was now focused and intense and he was gazing steadily at her flushed face. He slid a hand down her thigh until he was grasping the flesh of her butt. With her knee hooked over his forearm, he pushed her open even wider to his thrusts.

If it wasn’t for all the voices in the lobby, Cali could have focused solely on Kent and on the pleasure he was giving her. But the voices didn’t stop. Got louder. Multiplied. Seemed to move closer and closer to the curtain.

Now that all of the other distractions of getting to this point had faded, Cali’s heart started drumming painfully again. Yet, as Kent made another strong, delicious thrust, she gasped loudly, trying to wrap her free leg around his body.

She tried to concentrate on Kent’s damp, handsome face, but her eyes kept straying to the curtain. They weren’t far from the curtain and she could see every little flutter the thick fabric made whenever someone passed by.

Her mouth fell open with a harsh breath as Kent thrust again.

Through her sensual haze, Cali tried to process everything. They were having sex in this alcove. Kent's cock was sliding in and out of her body. One of her legs was wrapped around him, her heel desperately seeking purchase on his body. They were both panting and trying to smother the involuntary sounds of their lovemaking.

And anyone could – as she had done earlier – draw the curtain aside and peek in.

She whimpered softly, thrilled and terrified and flooded with sensations from the feel of Kent inside her.

More socializing and mingling was going on in the lobby now, since many in the audience had lingered to take advantage of the cocktails that followed.

The voices were everywhere. And seemed to be right there on the other side of the curtain.

Kent kissed her hungrily, then nuzzled her neck, his thrusts precise, steady and strong. "They're standing right there," he murmured into her ear, evidently reading her mind. "Right outside the curtain."

His voice was as erotic as the strokes of his hard flesh and Cali had to press her face into his shoulder to keep from moaning, as the physical sensations coalesced with her fear and excitement to create a deep, rising pressure below her belly.

A group of people had moved to stand right in front of the curtain and Cali could actually hear the words of their conversation.

Without a sound, Kent drove his cock into her again, levering his pelvis up as he did. Cali bit back a cry of pleasure, clutching at his hard, solid body desperately. Tried to bury her face in his jacket.

But she couldn't seem to look away from the curtain and she lifted her face once more as Kent withdrew.

"And then," a man said outside the curtain, "I told him that his company would be getting no more of my business."

His hand squeezing her ass, Kent thrust forward, levered up. Cali's body arched back like a bow, as jolts of sensation shot out from where he was moving inside her.

In her position, she couldn't pump her hips very well, but she was rocking into Kent's rhythm as much as she could, trying to intensify the sensations.

"If they want to send out unsatisfactory products," the man on the other side of the curtain continued, "then I'm not going to keep wasting my company's money on them."

The pressure was building inside her with frightening strength and Cali felt like she might just explode. She was burning up, starting to perspire and couldn't seem to take a full breath. And Kent seemed to be all around her, enveloping her completely – his intense heat, his warm, expensive scent, his hands, his lips, his body, his cock. All of him. All around her. And there was only the curtain between them and the rest of the world.

"Cali," Kent said softly, hoarsely. "Turn your head."

She was too far gone to even question him. She jerked her head around to look in the other direction, into the alcove instead of at the curtain.

Saw the enormous, antique mirror. Saw what it reflected.

She choked on a groan, her hips thrashing frantically as the erotic nature of the mirrored images enflamed her even further.

"That's what they'd see," Kent whispered, each word punctuated by a taken breath. "If they move the curtain, that's what they'd see."

And now Cali couldn't look away from the mirror. From the dim reflection of Kent's mostly clothed body pumping urgently into hers. Her arms twined around him. Her bare legs splayed and twitching with their motion. And her face...her face—flushed and wild and contorted with pleasure and frustration.

"Kent," she breathed, her hand fumbling down until she could grab the firm flesh of his ass.

What was she doing? She was just Cali. Utterly normal. And yet she was doing this now.

Kent's motion had become more erratic, but he was controlling himself enough to keep their bodies basically quiet. "What would they say," he rasped, almost inaudibly, "if they pulled the curtain? If they saw us?"

"Oh, God," Cali gulped, forcing herself to stifle the sound. But couldn't stifle the images. Couldn't help but imagine someone pulling the curtain.

Seeing the two of them fucking wildly. Seeing her close to orgasm in Kent's arms.

Kent made a muffled, breathless noise and his thrusts got shorter and faster. But he was still rocking his hips to give her as much stimulation as possible.

She was almost dizzy now, overwhelmed by everything she was feeling. Her body was moving with him, as if by instinct and she felt the exquisite pressure inside her swell, build, grow—until it was more than she could handle.

But she was too tightly wound now to come. Wanted to. Needed to. But was terrified to let go that much. Not with the conversation of strangers taking place only a few feet away.

Nothing between them but the curtain.

She whimpered into Kent's neck, trying to hide the helpless sounds she was making. The pleasure kept building. The pressure kept tightening. But she couldn't seem to release it.

"Cali," Kent whispered, trying to find her face but too far gone to move his hands, which were gripping her body bruisingly.

She just made another tiny mewling noise and writhed against him, trying to get enough friction to push herself into climax.

"Fuck," Kent gasped softly, as her squirming caused her body to clamp down on his cock. He was making fast, urgent pushes into her—nothing that could count as real thrusts. "I can't...Cali..."

She was practically sobbing with frustration—albeit silently—and was willing her body to act the way it was supposed to.

The thrill and delicious sensations had all turned into erotic torture because she just couldn't seem to let go enough to come.

The curtain fluttered wildly as someone evidently brushed against it. Cali wanted to squeal but managed to strangle the sound.

Kent's body was like a tightly coiled spring and she knew he couldn't hold out much longer. He was rocking into her frantically and his cock was generating jolt after jolt of pleasure—all swelling into the orgasm that just wouldn't come.

"Cali," he said at last, his voice low, thick and urgent, "try biting my shoulder." He met her eyes. "You can come."

Too desperate to do anything else, she closed her mouth over his shoulder, feeling the solid substance of his body under the fabric. Then she bit down hard, channeling all her pent-up fear and frustration into the clench of her jaw.

She came. Harder than she'd ever come before.

She convulsed against him, coming apart completely, only his shoulder under her mouth smothering the helpless sounds of her release.

Kent climaxed too, as soon as her teeth had dug into his shoulder. Her inner muscles kept clamping down rhythmically around his cock and he jerked his hips clumsily—pushing into her clenching channel. He was able to stifle his cry of pleasure, but she knew he must have come powerfully too, because the throbbing spasms of his cock inside her lasted longer than normal.

She was gasping so loudly when she finally came down that she had to hide her face in his shoulder again.

Kent was panting too and she could feel him trying desperately to steady and quiet his breathing. Still rocking gently against her, Kent stroked her hair and her back as she shook uncontrollably in his embrace.

Then that same man outside the curtain laughed loudly. And must have taken a step backward. Because the outline of a body was suddenly visible, pushing against the curtain. And the thick velvet was briefly, jarringly displaced.

Cali was too stunned to even react. But Kent shifted his stance instantly and then froze in place, with his body blocking hers from view.

"Damn curtain," the man grumbled, evidently now taking a step forward. Because the velvet settled back into place. "Why they would put a curtain in such an inconvenient place I'll never know." One of his companions said something and he replied, "No. I think I'll just head home."

Then the voices gradually moved away from the alcove.

Cali and Kent both relaxed as the panic faded and Cali chuckled nervously, feeling amused but still not quite recovered from her orgasm.



"I didn't *think* you were quite as casual about semipublic sex as you pretended to be," she murmured teasingly. "You act like you do this all the time and like you couldn't care less if you were caught. But I saw how fast you moved just now when you thought we were discovered."

His face appeared rather drained and was damp with perspiration, but he managed to look appropriately arrogant. "And why would I have done that?"

She snickered, feeling absurdly mushy in the aftermath of their lovemaking but trying to disguise her feelings. "To hide my nakedness. I saw what you did." She eyed him playfully. "Such an old-fashioned gesture for someone who is supposed to be an expert on semipublic sex."

To her shock, Kent actually looked slightly embarrassed. He shrugged and muttered, "Just a deeply rooted instinct to protect females that I've never been able to overcome." He gave her a long-suffering look. "Besides, you aren't really naked and I never claimed to be an expert."

"Oh, but I thought you'd implied...?"

He rolled his eyes and started to pull out of her, holding the condom carefully in place. "You think a lot of things that have no basis in reality."

"So have you or haven't you done something like this before?"

He eyed her coolly. "That is entirely irrelevant."

Pulling her skirt down, Cali tried to straighten her dress and brush some of the wrinkles out of the silk. Then she slipped her strappy heels back on and pursued, "Kent? Have you..."

Her voice trailed off as she looked up at Kent. He'd redressed himself, but was now holding the used condom and looking around for something to do with it.

Cali burst into quiet laughter. "Forty-five years old and nowhere to throw out his condom."

He gave her a very unpleasant look. "Perhaps if you could stifle your amusement, you might come up with a helpful suggestion."

Because he was starting to look genuinely annoyed, Cali managed to suppress her inconvenient sense of humor. "If your suit didn't cost five thousand dollars, I would just tell you to stick it in your pocket."

Kent looked down at the pocket at issue. "My housekeeper would never forgive me."

"Oh, wait," Cali said, keeping her voice low, since there were still people scattered throughout the lobby. She reached down and picked up the sparkly, little purse she had brought. Opened it and pulled out a couple of tissues. "Maybe these will help."

Grumbling under his breath, Kent did what he could with the condom, but didn't seem to appreciate the tissues as much as he should.

They took another look at themselves in the mirror before they left the alcove. Cali's dress was wrinkled, her hair was mussed and her cheeks were way too red. And Kent looked a little tired and rumpled himself.

Cali had a strangely surreal moment as she gazed at their images reflected together. In the mirror, they looked like they were together. Like a couple. And something about that frightened her—in a slower, deeper way than she'd been frightened of being caught earlier.

Shaking off the idle thoughts, she smoothed her hair down a little more. Then, since they were basically presentable, they turned to leave the alcove.

The lobby had cleared out considerably, so no one seemed to notice them at all. When they'd crossed the lobby, Cali nodded to a door on the right. "There's a men's room," she said mildly, hiding a smile for fear of annoying him again. "You could use the trashcan in there."

He darted her a suspicious look, but went into the restroom. When he returned, Cali was leaning against a wall—since she seemed to be having trouble staying on her feet—but she was once again laughing to herself at the incongruity of Kent Landon and his desperate quest to dispose of a condom.

He must have known she was having another private giggle, because he glared at her as they started out of the building. But he kept a supportive hand on her back, which she very much appreciated—since she was a little sore and feeling rather wiped out.

But that didn't get in the way of her suppressed hilarity.

"I'm sure adventures with condoms are very amusing," he murmured dryly, keeping his eyes on her laughing face. "Just so you know, you can go on birth control any time now."

Cali snorted and said the first thing that popped into her head. Which was never—never, especially when she was this worn out—never a good idea. "I've been on birth control for a couple of months, but there's no way we're going without a condom until I'm sure that I'm the only one you're fucking."

Kent stopped dead in his tracks and gaped at her.

Flushing painfully and wishing she could just sink into the floor, Cali stopped walking too. Made herself meet his eyes. She'd wanted to bring this up anyway, so they might as well get it over now.

Although only an idiot would have brought it up the way she had.

"What are you talking about?" he asked hoarsely.

Cali frowned and drew her eyebrows together, hating that she now had to repeat it. "I just mean that—unless I'm in an exclusive relationship—I'm not going to have sex without a condom."

His whole body was brutally tense and he was staring at her like she was crazy. "Aren't we exclusive? Are you having sex with other men?"

"No," she gasped, her heart fluttering wildly, trying to keep up with something that just didn't make any sense. "I'm not. I just didn't know if you were—"

"Of course, I'm not having sex with other women," Kent interrupted, sounding surprised and offended. "We're dating, aren't we? Did you really think that I would cheat on you?"

"No," she gasped again, horrified by the mess she'd made of this. "I mean, it wouldn't have been cheating. Yes, we're dating, but... I just didn't know. You'd never said anything. We'd never dealt with that issue, so I figured it was just up in the air—"

"So you just assumed I'd fuck anything with a pulse?"

"No! But I certainly wasn't going to assume you were completely committed to me. We've never talked about that at all. You've never given me the slightest clue about where you stand in terms of being exclusive."

Kent was looking decidedly grumpy. "You could have taken the fact that I've been dating you for two months now and given me the benefit of the doubt, assuming I was in it for real."

She snorted, feeling confused and defensive. "Why should I have assumed that? All I have to go on is who you've been for the last twenty-five years. Are you telling me that your previous experiences with women should have given me confidence in you?"

His eyes shuttered instantly. "Is that what you think about me then?"

Groaning in exasperation, she realized she'd unintentionally hurt him. Tried to explain, although she was rather annoyed that Kent was making something simple so difficult. "No. For God's sake, Kent, I don't just think you're some heartless playboy—or else why would I be going out with you at all. But it's really hard for me to believe that you could change your habits so easily. I'm not trying to insult you—it's not that I've expected you to be unfaithful or cruel to me or to anyone else for that matter—but you've not always taken the women you get involved with seriously in the past. So why should I assume that you'd make a complete transformation just because you decided to date me?"

Her question was more urgent than she'd intended, but she really needed an answer for it.

Kent's annoyance faded a bit and he watched her with a quiet kind of intensity. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you shouldn't just have assumed that I would change. I've had empty sex most of my life. But I thought you understood where I was coming from. I was honest when I told you that I wanted to try something new." He looked briefly uncomfortable. "That's what this is. That's what I'm doing. Trying something new...with you."

For some reason, his words reassured her more than any declaration of sincerity or commitment would have done. They rung true and she couldn't help but believe him.

She suddenly realized that she'd gotten the answer she needed. And, miraculously, it was the answer she'd been hoping for.

She felt a giddy warmth rush through her chest. Looked up at him almost shyly, "So," she said hesitantly, "you're not having sex with anyone else?"

His brow furrowed as he watched her, his expression careful and guarded. "Just you."

"Oh. Good. Me too." Then, since that wasn't quite right, she clarified, "It's just you for me too."

She'd just fucked Kent in the lobby of the theater, but she found herself blushing a little bit as she said those last words.

Kent's face relaxed some, but he still looked rather rattled by the whole conversation. Despite his evident distraction, however, he gently helped her into the limo, as if she was injured rather than simply a victim of really good sex. Then he got in after her.

They looked at each other dumbly as the driver pulled away from the curb.

And Cali realized—for the first time—that maybe they were a couple after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kent walked her back up to her apartment after a quiet, tense limo ride home, but when she invited him in, he declined. He didn't look angry. Just kind of wary. And Cali figured she better give him some space.

"Thanks for tonight," she said, leaning over to kiss the side of his mouth. "It was quite...exhilarating."

He gave a rueful smile. "Yes. We should go to the theater more often." He trailed his fingers down the side of her face gently and then watched as she opened her door and stepped into her apartment.

"Talk to you later."

He stood in the hall—handsome, elegant, utterly cool—and gave her a tired smile. "I'll call you tomorrow." He was about to turn to leave, when he added, "Oh, I nearly forgot. The new Children's Clinic is opening next week and I was going to tour the facilities next Friday. I thought maybe you'd want to go with me."

Cali's mouth fell open just a little, feeling ridiculously touched by the casual offer. "I'd love to," she replied, trying not to make it sound like it was a big deal.

"Good. Have a good evening." And with that, Kent started back down the hall toward the elevator.

The invitation was just a small gesture. But it was very important to Cali. Maybe it was his way of opening up.

To her.

## Chapter Nine

As it turned out, the tour of the new Children's Clinic facility was mostly uneventful. She and Kent were shown around the new building and informed of all the improved space and equipment. They met several friendly, well-kept staff members. And they spoke to a few of the kids—all of whom were clean and not very sick. Kent asked the children some questions that had clearly been arranged in advance—about why they liked the new clinic and why they thought it was important.

There were several photographers, a cameraman and a couple of reporters present. This wasn't big news, but it was a photo opportunity. And Kent's staff had made sure that there were enough witnesses there to document the visit, to capture Kent's benevolent nature and his personable interaction with the people involved.

All in all, Cali was a little disappointed.

This could have been an opportunity for something real to touch Kent in a genuine way. But everything about the visit was clean and pretty and fake—poised perfectly for a photo. So, as the tour was wrapping up, she was pretty sure the whole thing would end up being meaningless to Kent—instead of an experience that made a true impact on him.

She didn't know what exactly she had expected. But this wasn't it.

All of it was superficial, so Kent could be superficial too. Wasn't forced out of his comfortable, polished, social existence.

Thus Cali was rather glum after the day's events were completed and the photographers and reporters had all departed. Kent was finishing up some remaining business with the supervisor of the clinic and Cali stood off to the side and watched him.

Marveled at how perfect Kent's persona was. How controlled. How blindingly polished. Wanted so much for him to show her what was behind it.

Wondered if he ever would.

When they finally left the office and prepared to make their way toward the exit, Cali saw a little boy barreling down the hall with his chin tucked down and his eyes on the floor beneath him. He clearly wasn't watching where he was going.

She saw where he was heading, but, before she could react, the little fellow plowed right into Kent's legs.

Kent—who had been trading comments with the supervisor over his shoulder—almost tripped, unprepared for the surprise assault on his legs. But he caught himself quickly and gave an automatically cold response, "Excuse me."

The redheaded boy evidently recognized the disapproval in Kent's voice. He pulled himself off the floor, whimpered and raised a tear-streaked face. "I'm sorry," he choked, looking as if he expected Kent to yell at him.

Kent's initial irritation faded entirely at the sight of the little boy cowering beneath him. Instead, he squatted down until he was at an eye level with the child. "That's okay. Although it usually helps to look where you're going. What's the hurry?"

The boy made a snuffling sound, but managed to explain, "I'm not supposed to cry, so I had to run outside and hide."

Cali's heart was touched by the boy's obvious distress and his valiant efforts to remain strong. She lowered herself next to Kent and used a tissue to wipe at some of the smears of dirt and tears on the boy's face. "It's okay to cry once in a while. I cry too sometimes."

This, evidently, wasn't to be tolerated. The boy wrinkled his nose and gave her a superior look. "You're a girl."

"Oh," she murmured, torn between amusement and sympathy. "That's true. Good point."

Clearly she didn't have the testosterone required to deal with this small tragedy, so she stood back up so she'd be out of the way. Left it to Kent, who seemed surprisingly comfortable squatting down beside the boy—especially since Kent claimed to not like kids.

Kent looked at the boy gravely. "Sometimes boys cry too."

Despite the lingering tears that were trickling down his face, the boy managed to scoff. "But *men* don't cry. Daddy says I'm s'posed to be a man. He gets mad when I cry."

Cali almost choked on her pity at how desperately the boy was trying to live up to his father's insensitive directives. Wondered what kind of father would want to turn his child into a stoic.

She felt, rather than saw, Kent grow tense beside her. "A man might cry too, if it was something really big." Kent met the boy's eyes and asked, "Why were *you* crying?" His voice was so gentle. And his gaze was as soft as she'd ever seen it. But everything else in his face looked kind of frozen.

The boy's face twisted. "My brother's really, really sick. And...and I'm afraid he might...he might..." He couldn't finish. Instead, crumbled into pitiful, half-suppressed sobs that he was trying so hard to hold back.

Cali's belly clenched. Partly in sympathetic sorrow for this brave, sad little boy. But partly because of Kent.

She could see Kent making a connection with the little fellow. Knew that so much about this boy would evoke memories of Kent's own childhood. Memories that she realized still had the power to hurt him. To crush him.

She could see how—like the boy—Kent was trying to make himself hard. Trying not to care. Trying not to hurt.

“That’s really big. A man is allowed to cry about something like that.”

“Would *you* cry?” the boy asked, in a tiny, wrenching voice.

Kent nodded, his whole body now clenched like a fist. “I would. Little brothers are very important.”

“Daddy says it’s wimpy and and weak to cry. He says I need to be fighter, not a whiner.”

Kent winced very briefly, as if he’d been struck by a blow.

Cali’s heart was bursting—flooding—and she wanted to weep herself. For this little boy. And for the little boy that Kent used to be.

“I don’t think you’re a whiner,” Kent concluded, standing up at last. He was clearly touched and pained by his interaction with the boy—moved by pity and empathy and all the scars from his own past. But he was trying to hide it under his cool surface. Trying to act as if the conversation had meant nothing.

Cali wasn’t deceived for a second.

“You don’t?” the boy gasped, gazing up at Kent with something resembling adoration.

“No. A real man loves his little brother enough to cry.” This was clearly supposed to be Kent’s parting statement and Cali knew he needed to escape from this soon. Right now, Kent still had himself together. He’d been struck, but not battered by the feelings he didn’t want to feel.

But extending this any longer would level his defenses. Something Kent would never allow.

The boy’s face crumpled again. And, before Kent could get away, the boy had clutched at Kent’s leg in a desperate hug, burying his face into the side of Kent’s thigh.

Cali actually choked. Watched Kent look down at the little fellow. Saw the stunned emotion barely under control in his eyes.

Sniffing, the boy pulled away, leaving a damp smear on the expensive fabric of Kent’s pants.

Kent was obviously determined to get away from this thing that was making him feel too much. He was hard and stiff and his face was masked in a tight, blank expression.

But Cali saw Kent’s eyes. They were desperate. And tender. And panicked. And so, so sad.

Cali wanted so much to comfort Kent. Help him deal with the onslaught of bitter memories and feelings. Since there was nothing else she could do, she laid a gentle hand on his lower back and started rubbing it slowly. Let her touch communicate her presence, her support.

But Kent pulled away from her touch.

A little hurt by this rejection, Cali still saw where it was coming from. She could understand the need to isolate himself, to lick his wounds in private. Her kindness would only make him feel weaker and thus he couldn't allow it.

So she didn't try again. Didn't speak. Just stood calmly beside him. Felt irrationally terrified by the effect this encounter might have on Kent.

They were about to walk away, when the boy asked pitifully, "Will you come see my brother? He's just down the hall. He'll want to meet my new friend."

Cali's chest ached so much she couldn't breathe. She stood perfectly still and watched Kent's face.

Shouldn't have expected anything different, but was a little disappointed when Kent answered, "We don't have much time today."

The boy's eyes fell. "Okay. Grown-ups are busy. I know. Daddy always says he is too."

Because Cali had been carefully studying Kent's face, she was able to see the brief flash of responding emotion. For just an instant, Kent's face looked just as crumpled as the boy's did.

Then, "Where is he?"

The boy's face transformed. "Really? You'll come say hi?" His eyes darted over to Cali and he added very graciously, "Your lady can come too."

Cali almost smiled at being called Kent's lady in that quaint fashion.

Kent did smile. "That's very generous of you. Sometimes they're hard to understand, but ladies are good to have around."

The boy nodded sagely. "My mommy's good to have around. But she cries a lot. Is your lady a crybaby too?"

Darting Cali an ironic, sideways look, Kent answered soberly, "No. She's pretty tough for a girl."

Cali didn't have time to dwell on the warm feelings his words evoked. Because they were walking down the hall toward a wing they hadn't visited on the tour.

As they proceeded, the boy trustingly slipped his hand into Kent's—a gesture that was surprisingly sweet and childish for this tiny boy who pretended to be a man—and Cali held her breath as she waited to see if Kent would allow it.

But Kent didn't pull his hand away. Held the boy's dirty fingers until they reached the room.

It was dead silent in the room as they entered. The clinic only handled outpatient procedures, but evidently the little brother was here for some sort of medical treatment, because he was in a bed, almost buried by thick blankets.

Neither she nor Kent asked what illness the little brother had.



The brother was maybe three or four years old. And his mother was sitting next to the bed and had obviously been crying.

There was also a man in the corner of the room—the father, Cali assumed—who had a stern face and the coldest eyes she'd ever seen in anyone since Philip Landon.

"There you are," the father said, in a voice that wasn't harsh, but was as hard and impenetrable as stone. "Run away again and we'll have to have another discussion."

Clearly, this was a threat because the boy cowered pathetically for a minute. But then he screwed up his courage and announced, "I brought a friend to see Johnny." He turned to Kent. "See. Here he is." And to his brother, who was staring up with huge, haunted eyes, he explained, "This is my friend. He's very important and got his picture took and everything."

"Hi," Johnny whispered.

"Hi," Kent replied. His blue-gray eyes were deep and poignant, in stark contrast to the blank control of the rest of face and body.

"Jake," the boy's mother chided, "you know you shouldn't be bothering people."

"He didn't bother us at all," Kent countered. "He's a very impressive little man." Then he took a step forward and looked down at Johnny. "I guess you're glad to have such a brother."

"Yeah," the fragile little boy said in awe. "Jake is best at everything. I hope I get to be like Jake when I get big."

It should have been too maudlin to touch her, but there were tears pooling in Cali's eyes now. No way to stop them. However, she tried to stay back so she wouldn't get in the way, since this clearly wasn't about her.

"I'm sure you will," Kent assured Johnny.

"You're important?" Johnny asked, his voice scratchy and weak. "Can you make me better?"

Kent's controlled expression cracked just a little. "I wish I could. But I'm not a doctor."

"Oh," Johnny sighed in disappointment. He looked down at the blankets tucked up under his chin, but then quickly shot his eyes back up to Kent. "But you're Jake's friend?"

Cali discreetly wiped her eyes. Saw the mother do so too.

"Yeah," Kent breathed, reaching down to brush back the thin fringe of auburn hair from the boy's pale forehead. "I'm Jake's friend."

"Mine too?" Johnny asked, something pleading in his eyes.

Cali saw the mother turn away, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

"Yours too." Kent's voice cracked slightly on the last word.

Then the father stepped forward. "I'm sure these good people have to be going now."

The implication was obvious. They'd been dismissed in no uncertain terms.

Kent scanned the man with cold appraisal but didn't argue. Turned his head, caught Cali's eyes, nodded his head.

"Thank you," Jake said in a tiny voice.

Kent moved over to his little redheaded friend and squatted down once more until he could look the boy in the eyes. "You're welcome. And don't forget that real men love their brothers."

Jake nodded, tears swimming in his eyes but not falling.

Standing up, Kent turned to Cali. But then just stood there, frozen in place. As if he couldn't move. As if he was lost.

Cali stepped over. Hooked her hand on his elbow. "It was nice to meet you all," she said quietly. "Our thoughts will be with your family."

There were some murmured responses and then Cali sort of pushed Kent into a walk. He went with her automatically, his eyes pained and distant.

As they left the room, they heard the father snapping coldly at Jake, "You are not to whine to other people again."

Cali winced at the words and she felt Kent jerk, an intense energy suddenly uncoiling inside him. He started to turn back into the room and Cali was instantly terrified. Could see the whole scene play out—the turmoil of feeling inside of Kent exploding into violence.

She knew that, when Kent looked at Jake's father, he was seeing his own.

Cali stopped him with her hand on his arm. "Kent, we can't."

His arm was shaking a little in suppressed angst and rage, but he let her pull him down the hall. She navigated them out of the building and found Kent's car and driver waiting outside. Then she shoved Kent into the backseat and got in beside him.

The ride back to her apartment was absolutely silent, both of them lost in their thoughts. Kent brooding over all the pain this encounter must have resurrected. Cali brooding about Kent.

She was wise enough to know that Kent wasn't ready to open up to her about what had just happened, so she didn't ask him to. Didn't say anything. Just sat beside him, ached for him.

Kent automatically got out with her when they reached her apartment building and walked blindly with her to her door. Then he just came in, with no evident purpose at all.

They stood in the entryway dumbly. And Cali had no idea what she should do.

"Kent, do you want to talk about it?"

Kent stared at her blankly.

She felt woefully unprepared for this. She'd never been any good at comforting people who were hurting. And Kent was wounded. Bleeding. And still wouldn't let it show.

"Would you rather go home and have some time to yourself?" she asked, trying to give him whatever he needed.

He just kept staring at her. Said nothing.

It was still relatively early, but she thought of one more thing. Stepped forward. Put a soft hand on his chest. "Kent," she whispered, "do you want to just come to bed?"

Kent finally released his breath. "Okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali went into the bathroom for a few minutes and when she came out Kent was already undressed and in bed.

She turned out the light, switched off the ringer to her phone and silently crawled under the covers beside him. Then shifted onto her side and looked at him, not really sure what he needed for her to do.

What she really wanted to do was hold him. But she wasn't sure if he would allow it.

Kent stared at her in the dark for a minute. Then said very softly, "Good night." Rolled over with his back to her.

She wanted so much to cry for him—for how much pain he was hiding—but knew that wouldn't do any good. She realized then that any comfort she gave him would have to be initiated by her. He would never ask for it. Never admit to even needing it. Especially about something like this. This hadn't been a tragedy or a crisis—just a random event that had triggered all the sorrow and pain from his childhood.

He could never admit to being wounded by something so small.

He'd spent twenty years convincing the world—and then convincing himself—that he was absolutely invulnerable.

So, without a word, she scooted over until her body was pressed up against his back. Wrapped her arms all the way around him and held him as tightly as she could.

He was tense and awkward in her embrace at first. And he shifted uncomfortably as if he wanted her to let him go. But she didn't let him go. Kept holding onto him. Pressed her cheek against his warm skin. Felt him breathing in short, uneven pants.

But, after a while, he finally started to relax in her arms, which made Cali exhale in relief. She hadn't been sure that this was the best thing for him—it was so hard to gauge what the balance should be between comfort and pressure. She didn't want to push too hard and have him retreat from her completely.

But it seemed, for once, she'd made the right decision.

When he relaxed, she began to move one of her hands. Softly stroked his belly and chest. Pushed a few little kisses into the back of his neck.

His breathing evened out at last and she heard him release a loud, raspy sigh. It warmed something in her chest to know that she was able to help him a little—maybe not much, not in the deepest way. But at least she could help him relax, help him let go of how tightly he'd been holding himself since they'd encountered Jake in the hallway.

She rubbed his belly, which was flat and toned and nestled her body into his. Wished she had something to say, something that could start to fix things.

But she had no words at all. And wasn't sure he would listen to them anyway.

She kissed the nape of his neck once more and—when he didn't object or pull away—she trailed little kisses up the back of his scalp, feeling the texture of his short hair beneath her lips. Slid her hand up to his chest. Found his heartbeat.

Realized it was beating just as fast as hers was.

When she pressed one more wet kiss into the middle of his head, he made a guttural noise and turned around in her arms.

Then his arms went around her. He didn't kiss her. Just pulled her to him tightly. Held her as desperately as she was holding him.

She sighed with a poignant kind of pleasure at how he felt in her embrace, warm, strong, solid, real and human.

Since he'd repositioned himself, she stroked his back instead of his belly. Ducked her head down and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. Wanted to wrap her legs as well as her arms around him and keep him safe—never let him go.

At first, Kent just clutched her against him. But after several minutes, he started to stroke her body the way she was stroking his. His hand rubbed soft circles on the small of her back. Then it drifted down to caress the curve of her butt.

Cali released a low, pleased moan at his touch. She wanted to take care of him. Wanted him to take care of her.

She kept holding him, stroking him, comforting him in the only way she could. And, after almost an hour of silent touching, she started to feel him harden against her.

She didn't react. Didn't move. Didn't stop caressing him. She had no idea whether or not he would want to act on his physical response, so she didn't acknowledge it. Waited to see what he would do.

Her hand, however, unconsciously drifted down a little lower on Kent's back. Brushed along the firm muscles of his ass.

He grunted softly. Pushed his growing erection into her middle.

So finally Cali looked up into his eyes. They were still so lost. Still so desperately sad. Didn't look hot or lustful at all. "Kent, we don't have to. We can just hold each other tonight."

He didn't answer. Merely leaned down. Found her lips. Gave her a slow, hungry kiss. It wasn't his normal kiss. Wasn't skillful, passionate and confident. This one was

almost tentative—as if he were searching for something in her that he wasn't sure he would find.

She responded instinctively. Opened her mouth to him. Slid her tongue against his and rubbed soothing patterns against his lips and the roof of his mouth. Tried to give him what he wanted. What he needed but just couldn't ask for.

During their kiss he grew fully erect and the feel of his hard flesh caused a corresponding emptiness to awaken at her center. The ache she felt between her legs was deep and almost raw and she needed Kent to fill it.

She was gasping when he finally released her mouth. Slid her hands slowly along his back and butt, until one of her hands found her favorite spot on his side.

She squeezed the spare flesh and he grunted in response. Jerked his hips in an involuntary little thrust.

Obviously, his body wanted this. But he hadn't made any definite moves. So she still didn't know what the rest of Kent wanted. Wished he would say something. Anything. Tell her what he needed.

Wished he could ask for it.

When his hands slid down to cup her ass, she looked up at his broken face. "Kent, tell me what you want."

His face twisted briefly and his eyes were lonely, heartbreaking. He finally said, as if the words were wrenched out of him, "Cali, I need you tonight."

Her face crumpled up and she choked on emotion, yet she managed to control herself almost immediately. But her heart must have burst open and flooded her belly because the rich feelings saturated her completely.

She pressed a kiss onto the side of his mouth. "Kent, I'm here. You have me." She shifted against him, more aroused than ever now but trying not to let him see it so that he wouldn't feel obliged in any way. "We can keep doing this. Or we can make love. It's up to you."

He breathed out a hoarse, little groan and buried his face against her neck. Finally, he said, "I need all of you."

And she understood that. So finally she let herself slide her hand forward to caress his hard cock. He moaned helplessly at her touch, his responses not as guarded as usual since his defenses had been so battered.

She rolled onto her back and pulled him on top of her. He fell automatically into position between her legs. "Kent, I'm ready," she told him, opening her legs wider and bending them at the knees. "No need to wait."

He closed his eyes briefly and then reached down to move his erection into position. He'd started nudging at her entrance when he froze dramatically. "Condom," he muttered.

She shook her head. "We don't need one. Remember?"

He let out his breath in a rush. And then pushed his hard length into her wet channel.

She wrapped her legs around him, managing to hook them after the second try. He sank in even deeper and she rocked up into him—loving how tight and full and complete she felt with him inside her.

She didn't think she'd be able to come. She hadn't had enough stimulation before he entered her and their bodies were too close together now for her to rub her own clit. But she didn't care. His being inside her filled her need for the moment. And she just wanted to be there for him. Give him whatever she could.

Kent had tucked his head down and had buried his face in her throat. He was panting and she could feel his warm breath against her skin.

Now his whole body felt tense and angsty again and she was worried that this wasn't what he really needed after all. "Kent," she murmured, one of her hands stroking the back of his head. "Kent, do you not want to be on top? Because I can..."

"No," he interrupted hoarsely, his mouth now circling kisses around her throbbing pulse. "Like this is perfect."

"Okay," she breathed, still rocking her hips. He wasn't thrusting, but the pumping of her pelvis generated a light friction, which produced tantalizing little tingles.

She held onto him tightly and then sighed as he eased the weight of his lower body down onto her. It was heavier than she was used to, but she loved how he felt. Loved that he would let her support some of his weight rather than holding himself up on his own.

"Okay?" he asked, nudging his arms under her shoulders so he could pull her into an embrace.

She leaned up to kiss him. Spoke against his mouth. "Perfect."

He didn't make real thrusts. Just delicious, small pushes into her. She knew enough about her own body by now to realize that with this adjustment she might actually be able to come. So she angled her hips and pumped them up until his pubic bone rubbed against her clit as they rocked together.

His face was tense as it normally was when they had sex. But his eyes were naked and vulnerable. Still not hot or wild. Rather, desperate and hungry and needy.

She never looked away from him. Held his gaze and offered him everything she could—everything in her body, in her heart. Clung to him. Cradled him between her thighs. Gently stroked the back of his head.

He was grunting and panting in time to their rhythm and occasionally he'd let out a hoarse groan, as if he couldn't hide how her body was pleasing him.

Soon, Cali was gasping too and she didn't try to suppress her growing pleasure. Made soft whimpers and whines as she felt a slow, rich pressure swell up at her center.

Kent was building up toward climax quickly and his motion soon became urgent and erratic. He had too little control this evening and he wasn't able to hold himself back.

Cali didn't want him too. "Good," she breathed, meeting his pushes with ones of her own. "Come, Kent. Come."

"Cali," he choked, staring into her eyes as if he were drowning in them. "What about you?"

She tried to grind her clit against his pubic bone, getting closer to the edge and not wanting him to have to worry about failing to please her. She sucked in a breath and made a mewling sound. "Me too. Soon."

"Cali," he rasped, his voice almost pleading, his eyes begging her for something she wasn't sure she was able to give. "Cali."

His hips were thrusting frantically, his cock sliding in short strokes in and out. She inhaled with a shuddering breath and writhed beneath him, almost at the peak.

Then, "Kent," she choked. Arched underneath him. And felt deep, trembling quakes break over her as her pleasure was deliciously released.

She didn't look away from Kent's face, even as she climaxed. Held his eyes, trying desperately to keep her eyelids from closing involuntarily.

He let out a hoarse exclamation as her muscles clamped down around his cock. Tossed his head. But kept staring at her desperately.

Pushed into her clenching muscles a few more times. "Cali."

He came, his face transforming dramatically with the rush of sensation and relief. She saw his eyes change too, as they held her own. Saw the lost look fade beneath the blaze of pleasure.

Then, for the first time in her life, she felt Kent's release in her body. No condom in between them. Nothing between them. Something about it was almost terrifying.

Cali was shuddering in the wake of her climax and from the intensity of the entire experience. Kent froze for a moment above her. Then whispered, "Cali," and collapsed.

He basically fell on top of her, his whole weight pressing her into the bed. She gasped in surprise and sudden pressure, but kept her arms and legs around him. Kept holding onto him, as if her embrace could somehow hold back the bitterness of the world.

Neither of them moved for a long time, even though his weight eventually became truly uncomfortable. She couldn't bear to have him move off her. Didn't want him anywhere but in her arms.

He burrowed his face in the space between her neck and shoulder and kept it there, occasionally nuzzling her gently.

She knew he was hurting, knew he was bleeding. But knew that he'd never express it in any way other than this. She wished he could cry the way she did. Or speak it out

loud. Anything to release the deeply suppressed pain that he hadn't let himself acknowledge for years.

But he wouldn't allow himself any of that. So she just kept holding him. Hoped that it was helping, that she was giving him some of the comfort he needed.

After a very long time in silence, he rolled off her, finally pulling his soft cock out of her body. He shifted over to the other side of the bed, facing away from her once more.

Her instinctive reaction was to feel rejected—as if Kent were rebuffing her care and concern—but she realized almost immediately that his response wasn't about her. He hadn't really been able to let go completely, but tonight he'd made himself more vulnerable than he'd been in an astoundingly long time. It wasn't something Kent would easily be able to accept, so it was up to her to make sure he didn't regret it.

Feeling a little moisture trickling down her inner thigh, Cali scooted over close to him again. Pressed her body once more into his back and wrapped her arms around him.

He shifted in protest, but she still didn't let him go. "Kent, let me. You said you needed me tonight. So let me be here for you."

Kent grunted out something incoherent. Didn't really respond, but stopped trying to pull away.

So she started stroking his chest and belly again. Softly. Soothingly. Felt him uncoil a little and then relax completely in her arms. She pressed a kiss into the back of his neck. "It's okay, Kent," she murmured, her voice barely a breath. "You can go to sleep."

He did. After another half hour.

Cali decided that, even if she hadn't accomplished anything else this evening, at least she had helped him to sleep, which she was sure he wouldn't have done otherwise.

She felt unsettled and deeply moved and a little bit sick as she kept caressing his sleeping body.

Being this vulnerable had been wrenching for Kent. But it hadn't been painless for Cali either. Seeing him this way, having him need her so nakedly, had been something she'd thought she'd wanted. But now she wasn't sure she was really equipped to deal with it.

No one had ever really needed her like that before.

In some ways, being needed was just as hard as being needy. And she'd been so intent the last couple of months on getting Kent to open up with her that she hadn't considered all of the ramifications.

He was a real man. With real needs. And a real, tormented soul.

And he needed her. He didn't have anyone else.

The reality of it was almost frightening.



\* \* \* \* \*

The following day, another reality was driven home to her. This one was equally hard.

Maybe people could change – and maybe one day Kent would start to open up to her more completely – but people couldn't just change overnight.

Kent was gone when she woke up the next morning.

## Chapter Ten

Cali could understand exactly why Kent hadn't been able to face her that morning. After the emotional intensity of the night before, he would have felt too vulnerable and exposed. He would feel the need to pull back so that he could regroup and regain his sense of himself.

She really *could* understand it. And she could have predicted his retreat. But it still hurt a little.

Because last night hadn't been easy for her either. She had given of herself in ways that were brand new to her. And she needed some reassurance that she wasn't giving herself to him in vain.

So she felt a little achy when she looked at the empty bed beside her. Noticed his clothes—which had been draped over the chair in the corner—were gone. Then she got up to see that he hadn't even left her a note.

But, when she came back into the bedroom, she saw that there was a message blinking on her phone. Remembering how she'd turned off the ringer the night before, she thought with a loosening of her chest that maybe Kent had left her a message.

The message, however, wasn't from him. The message was from a hospital not far from her apartment. Informing her that her father had been injured and had been brought into the emergency room last night. The message included no more details than that.

Cali's throat closed up as she listened and then realized that the message had been left at half past nine the night before. Which meant that her father had been brought to the hospital ten hours ago, while she had been sleeping through the night like an idiot.

Cursing whatever instinct had prompted her to turn off her ringer, she threw some clothes on and ran out of her apartment in a panic.

Thought of all the ways that her father might have been injured. Imagined the heartbreak she might find when she got to the hospital.

She wasn't ready for this now. Wasn't sure she could handle it. Yesterday had been wrenching enough. It seemed brutally unfair that this should happen right on its heels.

And that it should have happened to her father.

She was nearing meltdown when she raced through the doors of the hospital. But once there she learned that the worst hadn't actually happened. Her father had fallen down a flight of stairs in his building, having lost his balance after being accidentally barreled into by one of two boys who'd been playing ball in the stairwell. Her father had a mild concussion and had torn up his knee, but it was nothing critical or life threatening.

By the time she arrived, they had admitted him into the hospital, so he was already in a room when she found him. He needed to have surgery on his damaged knee and—when the doctor dropped by shortly after Cali arrived—they discussed scheduling the surgery for tomorrow, provided Jim was fully recovered from his minor concussion by then.

After she'd calmly talked to the doctor and assessed her father's condition, Cali sat down in a chair next to his bed, shaking uncontrollably.

Her relief that the accident hadn't been any more serious was overwhelming, but once the panic faded she suffered an emotional crash. Realized she was on the verge of tears as she watched her father sleeping in his bed. He was stable, but drifted in and out—since a nurse awakened him regularly to assess his condition.

Cali made herself take a few shaky breaths and tried to get herself under control.

This was bad news, but she wasn't going to lose her father.

After about an hour she had assured herself that her father was basically all right, so she took her cell phone and went to the small waiting room, the one in which she was allowed to make calls.

She stared at her phone for a minute, trying to summon up enough courage to dial the number. After last night, she was nervous about calling him so soon—since she was afraid Kent wasn't ready to hear from her and that he would be aloof and distant. But she really wanted to tell him what had happened and she thought that he'd probably want to know.

So she dialed a private number to his mobile phone—a phone he always carried with him—and waited for him to pick up.

But he didn't. And she was eventually sent over to his voicemail. Trying not to assume that he'd seen who was calling and was intentionally ignoring her she attempted to compose an appropriate, articulate message to leave for him.

Failed miserably.

"Hey, it's me," she began, in a very hoarse voice. "Cali. Sorry to call so early, but I just needed to tell you that..." Her voice broke as she thought about her dad lying there in the hospital bed. "I mean, my d—" Then she almost lost it completely, having to say the words out loud drove home the reality of how much worse it could have been. Giving up on explaining what happened in any comprehensible way, she concluded in an uneven rush, "Just can you call me back as soon as you can? I'll have my cell phone with me. It's important."

She snapped the phone shut, her cheeks blazing. Hoped she hadn't sounded as stupid as she thought.

With a sigh, she dialed another number and left a slightly more coherent message on Alice's voicemail.

When she'd hung up, she stared at the silent cell phone for a few minutes. Then got up and went back into Jim's room. Watched the nurse check her father's vital signs and make a few notes on his chart.

Cali sat with her father all day, feeling anxious and sick and depressed. He was pretty lucid by the afternoon, but he was in a lot of pain and she knew that he was more miserable than she was.

Which was pretty damned miserable.

In fact, she couldn't remember having a worse day. Sitting alone. Watching her dad suffer. Brooding about all those hours her dad had been by himself at the hospital, while she'd been in bed with Kent.

Who wasn't calling her back.

The only time she left her father's room was when her cell phone rang. When it did, she went back out to that waiting room and had a long talk with Alice. Ended up crying a little. But didn't tell Alice that Kent hadn't yet returned her call.

Cali was not going to assume the worst this time. He might be working all day, as he often did, even on Saturdays. Maybe he hadn't had a chance to check his messages yet or maybe he was waiting until the evening, when he'd have more time to get back to her. There could be any number of reasons why she hadn't heard from Kent yet.

She wouldn't assume he was ignoring her on purpose.

It wasn't like she needed him here anyway. She'd done fine on her own for twenty years. And she'd do fine on her own for twenty more years.

But curled up in an uncomfortable chair while her father drifted in and out of an uneasy sleep, she had to admit that it would have been really nice if Kent was here with her. Or if he would at least call back so she could tell him about what had happened.

Instead, Cali watched her dad anxiously. Pretended to read a stupid paperback she'd bought. And waited as, hour after endless hour, her cell phone didn't ring.

It was dark by the time she left the hospital for the night. She stumbled down the hall of her building, completely wiped out. Nearly collided with the gossip old lady who lived three doors and had to mumble out an explanation. When she finally slumped into her apartment, she wanted to just collapse. But she hadn't eaten all day, so she made herself a sandwich and forced herself to take as many bites as she could.

Then she crawled into bed, putting her cell phone in easy reach on the nightstand.

At ten that evening, she had to acknowledge to herself that Kent was probably not calling her on purpose.

Which was fine.

It wasn't the end of the world. He was probably still unsettled about how much he'd needed her last night and was giving himself some time to recover before he faced her again.

She could still understand the need to back off a little and she wasn't going to assume that he was having second thoughts about their entire relationship.

He would probably call her tomorrow.

She had no problems with that.

Kent wouldn't know that she needed him tonight.

She eventually fell asleep and woke up early with a dull headache. She groggily grabbed her cell phone to check for any calls, but no one had phoned while she slept. So she showered, got dressed, got some coffee and a couple of aspirin.

Then headed for the hospital by herself.

All the symptoms from the mild concussion had faded by yesterday afternoon, so they were going ahead with the surgery this morning.

She saw her father briefly before they took him into surgery. Smiled cheerfully, kissed his cheek and said she'd see him in a few hours.

And then Cali sat in a depressing waiting room all alone, trying very hard not to feel sorry for herself.

Couldn't help but wonder why this had to happen.

This wasn't a dangerous surgery, but all surgeries had some risk. And her dad had looked so old and weak that morning. Another knee surgery. Another round of painful, tedious rehabilitation, assuming they were able to successfully fix everything during surgery.

It didn't seem fair that her dad had to go through all this. He had just recovered from his previous surgeries and now he was slammed with this.

A tear plopped onto a page of the book Cali was pretending to read. She wished she had a brother or a sister. Or a mother who was still around. Or that Alice was with her. Anyone really.

She felt so alone.

After four hours, Cali started to get worried. She hadn't thought the surgery was supposed to take this long. Even if they were just working on his knee, he would still be under anesthesia. And she kept imagining complications. Kept visualizing the surgeon coming to tell her about how things had gone horribly wrong.

Four hours and ten minutes. Then four hours and twenty minutes.

By that time, her heart was racing painfully in rising panic and—as she tried to control her nerves—two more tears plopped onto her book, onto a page she hadn't turned in two hours.

"Cali."

She was sure she imagined the voice and wondered if she were having auditory hallucinations from sheer misery. Didn't even look up. Stared down blindly at the wet spots on the opened book in her lap.

"Cali." The voice came again and it was closer this time.

And she knew the voice. Had known it for years. Looked up dazedly as Kent hurried toward her. He was dressed casually in a long-sleeved, crew-necked gray shirt and black trousers and he had a worried expression on his face.

Cali blinked at him. "What are you doing here?"

He knelt down in front of her chair. "Is everything all right?"

She nodded, feeling utterly disoriented and like she might just burst into tears. "Dad's still in surgery, I guess. On his knee. He should be fine. It's just taking a long time." Her eyes darted back to the clock on the wall, trying not to keep imagining tragedies.

Four hours and thirty minutes.

Then she turned back to look at Kent, who was anxiously scanning her face. She couldn't believe he was here. He hadn't even returned her call. "How did you..."

Her words trailed off when Kent reached out and took her face in his hands. "Cali, are *you* all right?"

"Yeah." Her voice cracking on the word. She couldn't help but tilt her face into one of his warm hands. "It's just been a long couple of days."

The ache in her chest was starting to rise. Swelling into her throat. Burning in her eyes. And finally she couldn't contain it.

Lost it completely when Kent gathered her in, pulling her forward against his chest.

She shook against him, not really sobbing but overcome by a flood of much needed release. Felt like it might be okay to let go for just a minute as she burrowed against his warm strength and was surrounded by his rich, familiar scent.

Didn't feel all alone anymore.

Cali was pulling away from Kent, summoning back her composure and trying to figure out how to deal with remaining confusion between them when the doctor came to find her at last.

She rose to her feet immediately. And Kent stood beside her with a supportive hand on her back as the doctor told her that the surgery had started late but had been completely successful. Her father was in the recovery room now and it would be a couple more hours before she could see him.

When the doctor left them, Cali had no idea what to do. She just blinked at Kent and thought she might collapse to the floor.

Kent stroked her cheek. "You need to get out of here for a while. Let me take you to lunch. You can't see your father yet anyway."

She shook her head, dreading even the idea of food right now. "I'm not hungry."

"When did you last eat?"

She had to think before she could remember. "I ate half a sandwich last night."

Kent pushed her toward the hall. "Come on. You need to eat."

They went to a little hamburger place, conveniently located near the hospital. They sat in a quiet corner and Kent made her order a real meal.

She had been honest about not feeling hungry. In fact, her stomach felt kind of queasy. But, after she'd taken a couple of forced bites under the merciless scrutiny of Kent's gaze, she decided she was hungry after all. Finished her burger, all of her fries and half of Kent's.

They'd just engaged in light, casual conversation as they ate, but when they finished their mood shifted dramatically. They stared at each other silently, both obviously hesitant to bring up what they still had to discuss.

Finally, Kent began, eyeing her soberly, "Cali, why didn't you tell me what happened?"

She narrowed her eyes and sucked in her breath, suddenly worried he was going to try to blame this on her. And, for once, she knew it wasn't her fault. "I left a message. Said it was important. Asked you to call me back."

After pressing his lips together, Kent replied, "I wish you had told me in the message what was going on. I had thought you were calling to talk about—"

"The other night," Cali finished for him, wishing this conversation was already over. "Well, I wasn't. And it was you who didn't call back."

Reluctantly, Kent nodded. "I'm sorry about that. And I'm sorry I wasn't...here for you. I was trying to work through some things before I talked to you again."

This, of course, Cali had known all along. "And did you figure anything out?"

He shrugged faintly. "I don't know. But I never would have waited to get back to you if I'd known you needed me."

She met his eyes. Said something that was so hard for her to say, "And I guess it never occurred to you that I might need you anyway, even if my dad wasn't in the hospital."

Kent sighed and closed his eyes briefly. "No. It didn't. I *am* sorry, Cali."

Nodding and relaxing a little, she was prepared to let it go at that. She'd screwed up enough herself that she didn't need to hold a grudge about this. And she realized that his apologizing to her might be the greatest progress they'd made in their relationship yet. "I know you are. And I was fine on my own." She made a shy, little glance down at the table. "But I'm glad you're here now."

She was. Really glad. So glad it was almost scary.

They were silent for a minute, both reflecting on what had been said. Then finally Kent asked, "Aren't you wondering how I knew where you were?"

"Oh. I'd forgotten. I guess I just always expect you to be omniscient."

He smiled at her very warmly and his expression made Cali's chest feel suddenly fluttery. "I went over to your apartment this morning, so I could apologize and thank you for...the other night," Kent explained, looking briefly uncomfortable. As he continued, though, he regained his typical composure. "I ran into the elderly lady who

lives down the hall from you and she mentioned it in passing. So I made a few calls and figured out where you were.”

His hand was lying on the table and—feeling very brave—Cali reached over and took it in her own. Rubbed the back of his elegant hand with her thumb. “Thanks for coming, Kent.”

He met her eyes and seemed to mean so much more than the words he spoke. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They returned to the hospital and saw Jim, just as he was brought into his room from recovery. He spoke to them both and seemed particularly glad to see Kent. But he was still pretty out of it, so they let him sleep.

Kent stayed with her for the rest of the day and the afternoon wasn’t nearly as miserable as the previous day had been.

In the evening, he took her back to her apartment. They ate a light supper and then went to bed.

Cali was too exhausted and drained to even think about having sex. But Kent held her for a while. And then slept with her all night. Woke her up to say goodbye before he left the following morning.

The morning, however, didn’t make everything better. It would be another long recovery for her father. He would be in the hospital for at least a few days and then move to a rehabilitation unit for another week or two.

Cali took some time off work that week so she could be with her father for part of the days. And Kent came by the hospital every evening. Stayed a couple of hours, chatting with Jim—who perked up dramatically in Kent’s presence.

Then Kent would take Cali back to her apartment. Sometimes they’d have supper. Sometimes he’d stay for an hour or two and watch TV or a movie with her. They’d always kiss a little. And there was always a moment at the very end of the evening when it was clear that Kent was waiting for an invitation for more.

But Cali just didn’t feel up to having sex that week. She was drained from the emotional turmoil, exhausted from the hours she was spending at the hospital and still kind of down about her father’s whole situation.

So, at the end of the evenings, Kent would go back to his own place and Cali would go to bed alone.

She was sure that after a few days, she would feel like having sex again. But the last time they’d made love had been so deep and intense that it made Cali a little wary. She wasn’t sure she could handle experiencing something so powerful right now, not on top of everything else that had happened.

In fact, the thought of it kind of scared her.



Kent didn't complain, even when the week drew to a close and they still hadn't had sex. All that Friday, Cali tried to talk herself into it—reminding herself how amazing she felt in Kent's arms. She loved having sex with Kent and now she could whenever she wanted. Only an idiot wouldn't take advantage of it.

But Friday evening, despite her resolve, she and Kent visited Jim, went out to dinner, kissed good night and then went to their beds alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali went to the hospital the next morning at about nine o'clock. She brought her dad some breakfast and chatted with him cheerfully until his physical therapist arrived.

Since physical therapy was a slow, difficult process, Cali left the room, not wanting her dad to be embarrassed by having her witness his awkward movements.

Needing to kill some time, she strolled into the little waiting room on the floor and stood staring out the window, looking down at the city street below. She'd been standing there for about ten minutes when she felt an arm slide around her waist.

She hadn't even heard Kent approach, but she didn't jerk in surprise when she felt him press his body into her back. "Hey," she murmured, leaning back against him a little.

"Good morning." Kent wrapped his other arm around her as well, so that he was embracing her from behind. Moved his hands up and down her sides before he began to intimately rub her belly.

Cali sighed in pleasure and closed her eyes, loving how strong and safe he felt behind her.

"Is everything all right?" The question didn't sound as casual as it might have been and she intuitively realized he was asking about something more than the mood of the morning.

She hesitated. "Yeah. It's just been a hard week."

Kent tilted his head forward so that he could kiss the side of her neck. "Well, it's the weekend now and your father's doing well. Maybe you can relax a bit more."

Looking back at him wryly, she inquired, "This is about our not having sex, isn't it?"

Since she had turned her head, she was able to see him quirk his lips. He admitted, "I might have been thinking about that occasionally."

"I'm sorry, Kent. I guess it's been frustrating for you. But I'm sure I'm not the only person in the world who doesn't feel like having sex when they're tired and stressed." She stiffened just a little, anxious as she waited for his response.

"As long as that's all it is," he replied, one hand still rubbing her belly.

She stiffened more dramatically and jerked her head back to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. I've just gotten the impression that your reluctance might be based on more than fatigue and stress."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you'd tell me."

She thought for a long time, trying to be honest with herself and with Kent. She was afraid he might be right, but she had no way to understand why it was or what might be prompting it. "I don't think there's anything else," she said at last. "I just haven't felt like it this week."

"You know, you can tell me," he murmured, nuzzling her neck again, "if something about us is starting to...concern you."

Cali supposed the fact that the thought of making love to him again was freaking her out a little might count as a concern. But she didn't even understand it herself. So how was she supposed to tell him?

"I'm sorry, Kent. Not having sex must suck for you."

He made an amused sound in his throat. "It's just been a week. And I assume it's not a longstanding arrangement."

"No. I'm sure I'll be back in the mood soon."

They stood there together in silence for a while, Kent holding her snugly against him.

Then he suggested, his voice a little diffident, "Here's an idea. I just found out that I have to go out of town this afternoon for a few days."

"Oh, no," Cali interrupted in distress, before she could think through her reaction. She turned to look at him again. "You do?"

God, she sounded pathetic. What the hell was wrong with her?

Kent smiled as if he liked the fact that she was disappointed. "Yes. Unexpected business to deal with in St. Louis. But it's just a short flight away from Chicago. If you wanted, you could come with me this afternoon and stay the night. It might do you good to get away for a little while."

A warmth spread through Cali's chest at the invitation, but for some reason it also made her heart race in rising panic. "Thanks. But I can't. I've got to stay here with Dad."

"He's doing fine. Surely you could leave him alone for one night. You could be back by tomorrow afternoon."

Cali shook her head, feeling secure in the knowledge that the trip was out of the question. "I suppose you're hoping that getting away will get me feeling...hot again. But I can't leave right now, Kent."

Kent was watching her face intently. "Are you sure there's not something else you're not telling me? Are you still a little angry that I left you by yourself last Saturday?"

"No," she replied honestly. "I'm not mad. I promise."

"Maybe you subconsciously feel like I let you down and you're reluctant to trust me with your body again," Kent suggested, his voice unassuming and impersonal.

Cali smiled dryly. "You *have* been thinking about this, haven't you?" She exhaled slowly. "I really don't think it's any of that. I've just been...tired."

He didn't respond. So—even though doing so was really, really hard—she made herself ask, "Do you think you can be patient for a few more days?"

"Of course," Kent murmured, gazing out the window at the city street she'd been staring at earlier.

Something about his look made Cali very anxious.

\* \* \* \* \*

After lunch, Kent insisted that she go back home and rest for a few hours, instead of sitting with her father all day. He even escorted her back to her apartment before he left for St. Louis, so he could be sure that she wasn't going to cheat and stay at the hospital.

Since she was worn out, Cali didn't argue too strenuously. Plus, she was getting tired of sitting in a hospital room for hours on end.

Kent had come into her apartment with her and they were saying goodbye when he pulled her into a kiss.

Somehow the kiss became deeper and hotter than either of them intended and soon Kent was groaning against her mouth and pushing his pelvis into her middle.

He was already hard and Cali—to her great surprise—felt her body responding automatically. She tore her mouth away from his and breathed, "Kent."

Making a guttural noise in response, he lowered his mouth to her neck and let his hands roam over her body.

"God!" she gasped, as he pressed the hard bulge of his arousal against her again.

Still in their embrace, they stumbled over to the sofa. And then, before she knew it, she was lying on her back with Kent on top of her. "Cali?" he asked hoarsely, "do you want..." He nipped at the pulse in her throat, making her shudder and pant.

She was too hot and overwhelmed, but her body was definitely responding. "Yeah," she replied faintly, relieved that something wasn't horribly wrong with her after all.

"Thank God." His hands slipped under her shirt. Pushed up her bra to bare her breasts. Then palmed the soft, full swells of flesh.

Cali arched beneath him as he squeezed and chafed her breasts.

"Cali," he said in a husky voice, moving down her body until he was mouthing her quivering belly. His hands still fondling her breasts, he teased the soft skin around her bellybutton with his tongue and teeth. "Cali, you feel incredible."

She whimpered an incoherent response and squirmed beneath him. And squirmed even more helplessly as he kept working her over with hungry, urgent caresses.

Soon, she was as wet as he was hard. And, before she could even follow the movements, they had removed her jeans and panties and Kent had fumbled open his trousers.

And then he was pushing inside her and she was moaning in pleasure as the tight pressure filled and stretched her.

Kent's face was intense and needy as he gathered her up in his arms. Buried his face against the side of her neck. "God, Cali, I missed you."

She couldn't do anything but whimper and her heart was now fluttering frantically. She couldn't help but see how much he needed her—and not just physically. Last Friday hadn't been a one-time experience. Kent needed her still. Needed all of her.

He began to thrust and the friction was rich with sensation. But Cali, as she rocked and writhed beneath him, was bombarded with other conflicting feelings as well.

Knew she was scared now. Was starting to figure out why.

Kent's rhythm above her was rapid and erratic and Cali grunted out a breathless "Eh" every time he thrust hard inside her. Her legs were pulled up toward her body and her heels were resting against the lower part of his ass. The whole sofa was shaking noisily with their motion and it felt like Cali was witnessing their frantic, half-dressed fuck from somewhere outside her body.

She felt kind of dizzy. Closed her eyes and whimpered again. Wondered when their lovemaking had grown so intense. Surely it hadn't been like this from the very first time.

Kent's cock inside of her felt as good as it always felt, but she wasn't going to come this time. And the realization made her panic even more. She felt suddenly trapped. Didn't want to deal with how Kent might respond when she didn't orgasm.

She never made a conscious decision, just instinctively increased the urgency of the sounds she was making. Squeezed her inner muscles down around Kent's cock as she gave a final, breathy cry.

Her eyes were still tightly shut, since Kent's face above her was just too disturbing. But she felt him drive into her for another minute, with progressively more breathless grunts. Then he shuddered above her. Choked out one word. And came.

She didn't open her eyes until both of them had caught their breath. Saw Kent was watching her intently in a way that made her stomach knot with worry.

"Cali?" he prompted, as he pulled his soft cock out of her body.

She forced a smile and stretched languidly on the couch. "It was good. I don't know why I wasn't in the mood before."

That was a lie. She knew exactly what her problem had been. But she wasn't ready to get into it at the moment. She needed some time to sort through her feelings before she hashed them out with Kent.

Kent said nothing. Just looked at her gravely as he fastened his pants and tucked back in his shirt.

"I hope you have a good trip," she said with forced cheerfulness, hoping he would leave soon.

She wasn't sure how much more of this awkwardness she could take.

His eyes shuttered. The hard mask went up. She actually saw it happen, saw the transformation on his face.

They mumbled out a few farewells and Kent said he'd call her tomorrow.

Then he left. And Cali slumped back onto the couch. She could still smell the raw scent of their sex. And she could feel his wet release inside her, trickling down her inner thigh a little now. But she didn't clean herself up.

Just lay there.

A few months ago her life had been calm, contented and pleasant. Her only complaint would have been the unfulfilled desire to have sex occasionally. But then Kent had shown up and inexorably made himself a part of her life. And, since then, things had gone horribly wrong.

## Chapter Eleven

The next morning Cali was awakened out of a deep sleep by a ringing phone. In a groggy stupor, she reached blindly out toward her nightstand until she found the phone. "Hello?" she mumbled thickly.

"Cali," Kent said from the other end of the call. "It's Kent. I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"No," she lied, trying to pry her eyes open and focus on the call. "I mean, yes, a little. But it's no big deal. I needed to get up anyway." She looked at the clock next to her bed and was shocked to see that it was already nine-thirty.

She panicked for a minute before she remembered it was Sunday.

"It's good you slept in," Kent replied. "You needed to catch up on your sleep. I'm sorry I called too early. I thought you'd be at the hospital by now."

"I should be. I was just too tired to set the alarm last night."

There was a brief silence between them that Cali thought felt kind of uncomfortable, so she asked quickly, "How is your trip going?"

"Fine. Nothing much has happened yet. I've got meetings starting in a half hour, though and they should last until five or six."

"Oh." She couldn't think of a thing else to say.

Kent hesitated for a long time too. "So, do you want to talk about what happened yesterday?"

Cali gulped and felt her heart sink down into her gut. "Not really. I mean, nothing happened. I told you the sex was good."

There was another long pause before he answered. "It didn't feel to me as if you enjoyed it." His words were tight and clipped and his voice very unpleasant.

She wasn't sure she could tackle this issue first thing in the morning. Rubbing her face to try to wake herself up some more, she explained, "It was fine. I was just a little distracted."

"Then why didn't you say so? How do you think I felt when I realized I'd just made love to you when you didn't want it?"

"I *did* want it," she objected in a rush, terrified by what he'd just said. "I did want it. You know I was aroused and into it. It was just that halfway through I started feeling kind of...weird. I was distracted. It happens. It was just a fuck. Nothing to worry about."

"Cali," Kent replied, his voice growing a little frustrated. "I want to have sex with you. But I want to have sex with someone who wants to have sex with *me*."

"For God's sake," Cali groaned, getting frustrated herself. "It was one time. And it was only for a week that I wasn't really in the mood. What the hell do you expect from me? I like to have sex and I like to have sex with you. But I'm a normal woman, not a nymphomaniac—and every single fuck isn't going to be an earth-shattering experience for me."

"And yet I still feel like you're not telling me something and that this is just a symptom," Kent insisted, sounding very hard and controlled. "I can't believe you actually tried to fake an orgasm with me."

Cali didn't feel hard or controlled at all. In fact, she felt like a soft, gooey pile of confusion and conflicting feelings. And the fact that Kent could remain so composed through all of this made her irrationally annoyed. "I wasn't trying to deceive you," she explained, trying to remain reasonable despite her growing resentment. "I did it without thinking—just sort of an instinct. I was confused."

"About what?"

She just couldn't seem to answer that question. "I'm sorry I didn't handle it better," she snapped. "But I'm sure I'm not the first woman to try faking with you. You're not some sex god, you know."

He didn't answer immediately and she had a feeling he was reining in an angry response. When he replied, his words were like chips of ice, "If you have any particular complaints about our sex life, feel free to share them, rather than making nasty, indirect comments."

Cali groaned and wished she'd never woken up this morning. "Kent!" she exclaimed. "I'm not complaining about your performance. I'm just saying that I'm a normal woman and I'm not always going to have mind-blowing sex. If you want someone who will scream out in ecstasy about how godlike you are and eagerly fuck you senseless every night, then go find some hot, sexy twenty-year-old to satisfy you."

"Is that what you'd like?" he asked, his voice like a weapon. "For me to fuck someone else so that you'd have an excuse to end things between us?"

Cali choked on her outrage. "Is that what *you* want? Me to end things so that you can escape from anything real, anything that makes you feel too much?"

"Damn it, Cali," Kent growled, losing his cool restraint at last. "If you're trying to make me angry and frustrated enough to give up on us, then, I assure you, you've nearly succeeded."

Cali was close to tears, but they were from fury as much as grief. "I hate how you always do that—take a roundabout way to say something simple. I'm sick of always talking around the issues. If you've changed your mind about us, then just say it," she raged.

"I don't have anything to say! You're the one who won't say what you're thinking."

They seemed to be at an impasse. Both just breathed angrily into the connection for a minute.

It wasn't clear which one of them hung up first, but basically they hung up on each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali tried to put aside her frustration and distress when she went to see her father that day. He was feeling a lot better than he had in the last few days, so they watched ESPN together for a while and then after lunch, for the first time, he managed to walk very slowly up and down the hall with his walker.

He was tired when they got back to his room, so he lay down on his bed. Cali picked up a book she'd brought with her, since she assumed he was going to take a nap.

But he didn't. Instead, he asked out of the blue, "Why didn't you go with Kent?"

She blinked at him, absently closing her book. "What? How did you —"

Jim gave a little smile. "He asked me yesterday morning, before he went to find you, if I could do without you for a day."

Cali stiffened in her chair and felt a strange, twisting feeling in her gut.

"Of course, I said I'd do fine and that it would be good for you to get away for the night." He eyed her affectionately, "I can't thank you enough for all you've done for me this week, but I think hovering over me constantly is starting to wear you down."

Cali felt an ache of tenderness in her throat at this evidence of her father's love. "It's not. I'm doing fine. I like hovering over you."

His mouth twitched. "Hmm. Maybe. But you've been looking a little stressed. And frankly if *you're* stressed, you're going to make *me* stressed—which would be counterproductive for both of us."

Chuckling, she assured him, "I'm feeling better today. I got caught up on my sleep this weekend."

"So I'm wrong in thinking you've been about to cry all day?"

"Yes," she choked, not quite honestly. "You're wrong. I'm fine."

"So why didn't you go with Kent?"

She swallowed hard. "I needed to stay with —"

Her father put a hand up. "The real reason."

While she could hardly go into detail about the sexual issues with her father, she did kind of want to share her worries with someone who loved her unconditionally. So she thought for a minute, sorting out what was appropriate and what wasn't appropriate to tell her dad. "Things are kind of weird between us right now. We had a big fight on the phone this morning. And—I don't know—for some reason this last week I've been kind of freaking out about me and Kent."

"And you don't know why you're freaking out?"



"No," she said. "Well, I know how I've been feeling. I've been starting to get really scared about where this thing with Kent is heading. I just don't know why it's hit me suddenly since I wasn't really scared before."

Her father snorted in amusement. "Sweetheart, even *I* know why you've gotten scared this week."

"You do?" she gasped, looking at her father as if he might have transformed into a sage. She'd been so muddled about the whole thing for so long that she would cling to anything that might help her make sense of it.

"It doesn't take a genius to see that something has changed in Kent's behavior this last week." When his daughter just stared at him, he continued, "Cali, surely the change is obvious to you too. Didn't you and Kent see each other only once or twice a week before? And yet this last week he's spent every single evening with you."

"With *you*," she corrected, feeling her heart doing that familiar panicked fluttering again. "You're in the hospital, so he would naturally —"

"Sit with a boring old man every evening out of pity? Don't be ridiculous. Obviously, he's doing it for you."

Cali flushed, feeling strangely embarrassed. "Maybe. But that doesn't mean that —"

"Are you saying that you think the Kent of six months ago would have done that? Cali, he's changed. This week, he's been looking at you differently, talking to you differently, putting his hand on your shoulder like you're the most precious thing in his world. I always knew he had feelings for you and I was pretty sure he was a goner from the very beginning. But he was always holding something back, as if he couldn't trust that it was real. For so long, Kent couldn't quite decide if he was going to allow something as good and real as you in his life. But something happened last week. I don't know what it was, but he's made his decision. He's not wavering anymore."

Cali was trembling by the time her father finished his speech and trying to will her heartbeat to even out.

She'd known it too. Subconsciously. She'd realized the difference in Kent. After what had happened at the children's clinic and afterward, Kent's panic about his naked need of her must have finally forced the issue. And that weekend he'd decided that a relationship with her was worth the risks and vulnerability involved.

She'd known it. Sensed it. Hadn't let herself acknowledge it before.

Because the truth of it was so incredibly frightening.

"Yeah. I think you're right. That's why I'm freaking out." She looked up at her father ruefully, "What a spineless wimp, huh?"

Jim shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Cali, you're letting your insecurities take over again. You know better than that. You have every right to be afraid. It wasn't as scary before because you could reassure yourself that it would probably be temporary. Now, you have to admit that it might last." He winced as he shifted his leg awkwardly. "Which means *you* have to make a decision."

"A decision I'm apparently too weak to make."

Her father made an exasperated noise. "Stop it, Cali. You're not weak. Only a fool would jump into something like a relationship with Kent Landon without seriously considering what that means. Your life for the last several years has been very satisfying. And it's been basically calm and simple. That won't be true of your life if you decide to make Kent a part of it. You're a smart woman, Cali. Taking the time to consider whether that's what you really want doesn't mean you're weak."

She gave her dad a faint smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. In fact, it means you're strong. You're not so desperate for love and approval that you'll do anything to get it. Whatever you end up deciding, you'll do it consciously and thoughtfully. Not rush headlong into something that might not make you happy."

Cali relaxed in her chair and gave her father an affectionate smile. "I don't know how you did it, Dad, but I feel a whole lot better."

"That's my job."

"Maybe my worries *were* valid. But," she added with a sigh. "I'm not sure I handled my hesitation in the best way. In fact, I think I made a big mess."

Jim gave her an ironic look. "Why aren't I surprised?"

Cali was silent for a few minutes, trying to sort out her feelings, her desires and her fears. Now that she'd admitted it to herself, she had to figure out if she wanted to make the same decision that Kent had.

Finally, her father asked, "Any thoughts?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure if I'm in love with him yet."

Jim shrugged. "You don't have to be in love with him yet. What do you want *right now*?"

Cali thought for another minute. Chewed on her lip and stared at the window across the room. "I think I want to be with Kent, even if it's complicated."

"All right then," her father replied, sounding rather pleased with himself. "So what are you waiting for?"

She looked over at him, confused.

He gave her an impatient look. "Get yourself on a flight to St. Louis. He wanted you there and now you want to be there too."

"But what about—"

"I'll be fine. The physical therapist is coming in an hour or two and then I'll just lie around and recover for the rest of the evening. And I'm sure I can muddle through tomorrow morning without your company."

"I'm not even sure whether or not Kent has plans this evening," she objected, starting to feel an excitement rise up in her chest but forcing herself to be reasonable. "He wanted me there yesterday, not today. And we had that big fight this morning."

Her dad rolled his eyes at her. "Do you really think that he's going to care that you're a day late? The man's crazy about you. The best way to get over a fight is to talk it out in person. Now get going. If you can get a flight in the next few hours, you can be there in time for dinner."

Feeling bizarrely giddy, Cali got to her feet. "Are you sure?" she asked, one more time.

"Cali!" her father bellowed. "Get!"

Cali got.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali knew what hotel Kent was staying at and—although the front desk wouldn't give her his room number—she was a good enough snoop to figure it out without too much trouble.

She was a little nervous about surprising Kent like this, not sure how he'd feel when she just showed up at his door at seven o'clock on a Sunday evening. But she was even more nervous about the thought of calling him and trying to explain everything over the phone.

So here she was. Standing in the hallway outside his suite. Wishing she'd spent a little more time on her appearance, since she was still wearing the jeans and green top she'd put on this morning. Wondering if Kent was even in his room. Trying to imagine what he'd say when he saw her.

But she was here now. So she might as well do this. Hopefully, he'd be glad to see her and they could begin to work out the confusion between them.

Cali tapped on his door, her heart drumming with agonizing intensity and her breath coming out in strange little gasps.

Maybe he wasn't even here. She wasn't sure what she would do if that was the case. Camp out in the hall until he came back?

No, he must be here. The door was unlocking. Swinging open.

Cali blinked. It wasn't Kent. It was a young, gorgeous brunette, wearing nothing but her long, tousled hair and a man's dress shirt.

"Oh," Cali mumbled, "I must have the wrong room. I was looking for Kent."

The brunette eyed her curiously. "This is Kent's room."

That was when Cali's heart dropped into her gut.

"He's in the shower," the brunette continued easily, gesturing toward a closed door Cali could see from the hallway. Cali could also see a room service tray, complete with champagne, a vase of red roses and two dishes covered with silver. "What did you need?"

It felt like the world was spinning around her and Cali couldn't seem to breathe. Not to mention the fact that she recognized the shirt the brunette was wearing as one of Kent's. "Um, I was just..."

The brunette, who Cali now realized couldn't be much more than eighteen years old, gave an erotic chuckle. "I'm planning to keep him busy all night, since I almost never get to see him anymore. But I can tell him you dropped by if you want."

"No," Cali muttered, thinking she might actually be sick. "I'll catch him later."

As the door swung shut in her face, Cali took a few raspy breaths, trying to compose herself enough to walk back down the hall.

There couldn't be any doubt about what that brunette had been doing in Kent's suite. With tousled hair. Wearing his shirt. Champagne and a romantic dinner set up for the two of them in the background.

Cali had told Kent that morning that he should find a hot, sexy twenty-year-old to fuck.

Apparently that's just what he'd done.

A few aching sobs ripped through her as she waited for the elevator, but then she made herself remember her father's words. Made herself acknowledge what she knew to be true as well.

Kent had changed. And he just wouldn't do that to her.

Yes, it looked bad. Looked horrible. But maybe there was some sort of explanation. Kent often had women throwing themselves at him, so maybe this brunette had snuck into his room and set herself up to have a good time, without Kent even knowing about it.

It wasn't the most likely scenario, but it could happen.

And Cali wasn't going to assume the worst anymore.

She had changed. Kent had changed.

And maybe they could have a new beginning. Even at this point in their lives.

She wasn't going to give this up until she knew for sure what that brunette was doing in his room.

So Cali turned back around and made her way back to his suite. Rapped on the door again, her cheeks flushed and hands trembling.

Once again, the brunette opened the door. Still wearing Kent's French blue shirt. But, this time, only one of the buttons was fastened.

"I wanted to—" Cali began. Then stopped talking altogether.

Because she heard Kent's voice come from the bedroom. "Honey, did you get the door? It's probably —"

He appeared then. Damp and almost completely naked, with only a towel slung low around his hips.

Kent froze when he saw Cali standing in the doorway.

"Yes," the brunette drawled, moving over to drape herself intimately against him. "I got the door."

Then, as Cali watched in stunned stupor, the brunette reached out and squeezed Kent's bare side.

Cali's favorite spot.

She choked and whirled around, hurrying blindly back down the hall. Too completely crushed to even cry.

"Cali," Kent called out after her. "Cali, wait!"

She ignored him and, seeing the world through blurred eyes, pressed the call button for the elevator. Then jabbed at it again and again, willing the elevator to arrive.

The doors slid open and Cali stumbled in, pressing the button for the lobby just as she saw Kent start down the hall after her. He'd had to delay long enough to pull on a pair of pants.

"Cali!" he roared, racing down the hall at a dead run, moving so fast that she was afraid he'd get there before the doors slid shut. "Cali, wait!"

She didn't wait. The doors closed just in time and she felt the elevator sink down toward the lobby.

She was sinking with it.

She'd been a fool. An idiot. Convinced herself that the impossible could somehow materialize.

It couldn't.

People might try to change. And maybe, in theory, individuals weren't inevitably trapped by their history and experiences. And perhaps in pretty stories there was such a thing as new beginnings, renewal or renaissance.

But this was the real world. You couldn't begin again. And some things would never change.

It didn't matter how much you grew or matured or tried to overcome the working of years—certain things would always be true.

Kent was still Kent. And Kent would always take what he wanted and close himself off to anything that might make him vulnerable.

And she was still Cali.

And Cali would always get stomped on.

## Chapter Twelve

All Cali wanted to do was get out of this hotel, get somewhere safe, huddle into a ball and then cry her eyes out. She didn't even want to go home, since that would mean she'd have to see her dad. And she couldn't imagine how she was going to break this to him.

He'd been so sure that Kent was just waiting for her. That they couldn't help but work things out.

But even her dad wasn't always right. Sometimes he was as heartbreakingly wrong as she was.

She knew why Kent had done what he'd done. Some sort of temporary, physical escape from all the confusion, vulnerability and hurt that was an inevitable part of a real relationship. A way to claim his power back. But knowing *why* he had done it didn't help her at all.

At the moment, nothing could help her.

Except getting out of this damned hotel. And then getting out of this damned city.

But the universe must be working against her tonight. Because the elevator kept stopping to pick up more people—and, on the tenth floor, they had to hold the doors open for about three minutes while an elderly lady tried to encourage her reluctant, tiny poodle onto the elevator.

By the time the doors finally slid open in the lobby, Cali was terrified that Kent might have caught up to her by using the other elevator.

As it turned out, she hadn't had to worry about it. Kent hadn't taken the second elevator after all.

He'd run down all twenty-two flights of stairs in his bare feet.

Kent burst out of the stairwell just as Cali was finally getting off the elevator. But fortunately, by this point, her trauma had frozen into an icy calm. So she was able to glance past him coolly, completely ignoring his presence.

She showed no emotion at all as she made her way for the front doors of the hotel.

"Cali," Kent gasped, his face and bare chest covered with a sheen of perspiration and wheezing as he tried to catch his breath. "Cali, don't leave."

When she kept walking, he ran after her. Grabbed her by the arm. "At least let me explain."

She jerked her arm out of his grasp. Knew every single person in the lobby was staring at them. "Explain what?" she bit out. "Explain how fucking her was meaningless? How you were confused and hurt, so you had to drown your sorrows in

mindless sex? How men have certain needs and—in my selfishness—I wasn't fulfilling yours?"

"No," he rasped, rubbing a hand over his damp hair. He still couldn't take a full breath and the weak, stupid part of her was a little worried that he'd overexerted himself by racing down all those stairs. "I need to explain what you saw."

"Oh, Kent," she replied, with a bitter little chuckle. "I'm quite well aware of what I saw." She let her eyes skim disdainfully over his half-dressed, panting figure. "But no need to worry about it. This thing between us was bound to end soon, so this just made the break cleaner and easier."

Kent stared at her, something shocked and pained entering his eyes. "You don't mean that," he said at last, pausing to suck in some more air. "You have every right to be furious after what you saw, but I'm telling you that you misun..."

She snorted and forced down the sob that was rising in her throat. Turned her gaze into a weapon. "Save it, Kent. It doesn't matter."

She was about to continue, but this time Kent interrupted, "Do we have to discuss this in the middle of the lobby?"

"Why shouldn't we? What I have to say will only take a minute."

"Well, I have a little bit more to say." Kent was frustrated now and still breathless. "Can we please go somewhere more private?"

"I am not going back up to your suite," Cali said, weeping inside and raging over how hard it was to hide her heartbreak from him.

Kent glanced around blindly and saw the manager, who evidently wanted to get a barely dressed Kent Landon and the woman he was arguing with out of the lobby of his ritzy hotel and so was subtly gesturing toward a private sitting room off the lobby.

With a resigned sigh, Cali went with Kent into the sitting room, figuring she might as well get this over with now so she'd never have to see him again.

When he'd shut the door behind them, she said with chilly hauteur, "Kent, this conversation is pointless. I don't care why you did what you did. I don't want to hear any attempts at explanation. I'm surprised and disappointed, but it's not like you meant that much to me. We're both adults. We had a good time. So let's just move on and forget about it."

"Cali, stop lying to me. I know you're hurt and if you'd just let me ex—"

In a miraculous act of sheer will, Cali managed to roll her eyes. "Kent, get over your egotistical delusions. Obviously, our relationship was only temporary, so, while I would have preferred you to be faithful while we were together, your behavior only speeds up the inevitable."

He was staring at her intently, with something desperate in his eyes. So, despite the fact that her hands were shaking, she managed to school her face into casual composure.

She'd humiliated herself enough for any lifetime. Trailing after Kent all the way to St. Louis, thinking they could actually...She was not going to let him see how much he'd crushed her.

"You don't mean that," Kent replied, his voice soft and rough.

Something naked and vulnerable in his expression was about to tear down her defenses – which was brutally unfair since he was the one who had done this to her – so Cali turned away from him and stared at a print of a woodland landscape that was hanging on the wall. "Kent," she said coolly, gripping her hands together so he wouldn't see how much they were trembling, "get over it. Yes, it hurts my pride a little to think that you would have done this, but that's as deep as the wound goes."

She thought the lie was pretty convincing, although it was a pitifully hollow kind of victory.

"All right then," Kent said blankly. "If you don't care one way or the other, then I won't bother to explain it to you."

"Good," she said, her voice breaking just a little. After a pause, she forced herself to continue clearly, "Obviously, we can't continue fucking now that this has happened. But I'm sure I'll see you around."

"All right," Kent said again and something about his voice made her want to cry. Her back was to him, but she heard him move toward the door. Heard him open it. Then heard it click shut.

And now that it was safe, she couldn't hide her anguished feelings anymore. She raised her hands to her face and released a few choked sobs into her palms.

"I knew you didn't mean it."

Shocked, Cali gave a broken squeal and jerked around to see that Kent hadn't actually left the room.

He took five urgent steps over to her and closed his hands over her upper arms. "Damn it, Cali. Why do you keep lying to me? If you'd just let me –"

With an outraged cry, she tried to pull her arms away from him. "You're calling *me* a liar? How dare you resort to such a childish, dirty trick to spy on me. Fine," she sobbed, tears streaming helplessly down her face now. "Fine! You bastard. Take all of it! Take everything from me, including my pride. Don't even leave me that!" It was as if all the suppressed grief, rage and betrayal inside her had exploded.

"Cali," Kent said thickly, desperately trying to keep a hold on her frantic, squirming body. "Cali, stop it. I didn't have sex with her."

This surprised her so much that she momentarily stopped struggling and gaped at him. But her reason and sense returned almost immediately and she tried pushing against his chest to get away from him. "Maybe not yet, but you were about to! I'm not blind. She was in your fucking shirt! And the room service. And she said...said she was going to keep you busy all night!" She gave one more jerk of her body, but couldn't get away from the strong grip of his hands. "How gullible do you think I am?"



"Cali," Kent insisted, his voice nearly as uncontrolled as hers was. "I would never have had sex with her. That was all her doing. She's been after me for two years. I was in meetings all day, so I took a shower as soon as I got back to my room. And, while I was in the shower, she got into my suite and set up the little scene you witnessed."

Cali was momentarily stumped, trying to follow what was going on. Kent sounded so passionate and sincere, but how could she ignore the evidence of her own eyes? And how could he possibly expect her to?

Finally, she snarled, "Why are you even bothering to try to convince me of this lie? Is it so much fun to lead me around like a stupid, trusting pet? I saw you, Kent! You weren't trying to get rid of her. You were wandering around almost naked and she was all over you!"

"Cali," Kent explained, his voice calmer now, though still a little breathless. "I had just stepped out of the shower and found her there. She's the daughter of a business associate, the one I'm in negotiations with right now. I couldn't just rip my shirt off his seventeen-year-old daughter and push her out into the hall of the hotel. I called him immediately to come up and get her. It was him I was expecting when I found you at the door instead."

His story was actually starting to make sense, which was the bitterest of cruelties, since Cali knew it just couldn't be true.

"You let her squeeze your side," she accused him, something cracking in her chest at just the memory of that intimate gesture.

"I know," Kent breathed, raising a hand to cup her cheek. She tried to pull away from the warm touch of his hand, but her face seemed to lean into it instead. "I had just seen you standing there, Cali. And I could see that everything I have with you was about to crumble in ruins around me. I was too stunned to pull away from her. I'm sorry."

Cali had no idea what was going on. She'd been so happy. And then so utterly shattered. And then so desperately enraged. And now she was just confused. Nothing made sense anymore.

But she knew—she knew!—that things couldn't be put back together so easily. Not when they seemed so completely broken. Not when it was *her* life at issue.

He must have recognized that she was caving, because Kent moved a little closer to her. Tangled his other hand in her hair and then curved it around the back of her head. "Cali, it was the most ridiculous set of coincidences that all worked together to convince you of something that just isn't true. Even if we weren't a couple, I wouldn't have had sex with her—if only because she's just seventeen and not quite mentally stable. But, even if that hadn't been the case, ever since we've been together, I haven't even *wanted* to have sex with anyone but you."

He was gazing down at her almost pleadingly and his eyes were so incredibly tender.

And Cali wanted so much to believe him. Felt every pulse in her body crying out that he was speaking the truth. *This* was the Kent she'd come to know over the last few months. This was the Kent that her father saw.

This was the Kent that she'd been ready to finally commit to, no matter how hard it might be to share a life with him.

This was the *real* Kent. The Kent under all the hard, polished surface.

"Kent?" she choked, wondering if everything could be made right so easily.

"Cali, it's the truth," he assured her, wiping her lingering tears away with his thumb. "While it would have been nice if you could have just believed that I wouldn't cheat on you, I can understand how, after what you saw, you need some concrete proof. I can introduce you to her father, who's probably already rounding her up as we speak and giving her a lecture about endangering his business deal. And we can dig up the police report I filed last year when she broke into my penthouse." He thought for a minute, then added a little sheepishly, "And we can talk to the manager of the hotel, who will tell you that I'd reserved the private gym for two hours tonight, so I could work out my frustrations and maybe become tired enough to sleep, instead of lying in bed all night worrying about you."

It felt like the world had knit itself back together again. Like her heart had knit itself back together too.

But then, "No," she cried, jerking away from his gentle hands. "I can't believe you." She broke into humiliating, helpless sobs. "I heard you call her honey."

She would have sunk to the floor in a heap had Kent not held her up. "Cali," he said, his voice so, so tender. "Cali, her *name* is Honey."

She nearly strangled on one of her sobs. "What?"

Kent was smiling now, although his expression was still a little concerned. "I just called her by her name. Honey. Honey Worthing."

Cali released a strange little snicker that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Eyeing her warily, Kent asked, "Cali, is everything all right?"

She snickered again. And then the snicker turned into a hoarse laugh. And then she was cackling hysterically, bending over at the waist with the force of her hilarity.

"Cali?" Kent murmured, pulling her up and then forward against his chest. "Cali, are you really laughing or have you gone a little hysterical?"

"What the hell?" she wheezed, clutching at his body and finally realizing that she was allowed to do so. "What kind of cruel, absurd, dark comedy of errors is this? It's like some spiteful symbol of our entire relationship. With the combination of our pride and insecurities, if we can possibly misunderstand each other, we will."

Kent chuckled a little bit too and stroked her hair as she leaned against him. But his voice still sounded a little cautious. "Does this mean you believe me?"

"I guess so. No way could you make up something so ridiculous."

"It's not *that* ridiculous. I have women stalk me quite often, I'll have you know."

He actually sounded rather offended.

That sent Cali off in another burst of hilarity.

When she'd recovered, he asked, looking diffident again, "So, I'm not sure exactly where we stand now. But would it be all right if you stay here tonight? I could find and introduce you to Bill Worthing, who by now has hopefully found his daughter. Then maybe we could order something for dinner and try to figure out everything else that's gotten confused between us."

Cali blinked at him, something warm and gooey displacing the brokenness in her chest. "Okay," she agreed, her voice a little hoarse. "That sounds good."

They were on their way out of the little sitting room when Kent said, "What are you doing here, anyway? I thought you didn't want to come."

"Oh," Cali murmured, feeling inexplicably shy. "I decided I did after all."

\* \* \* \* \*

Before they went back upstairs, Kent found the manager and had a brief, quiet conversation.

Now that the most important issue had been cleared up, Cali felt tired and a little bit silly. She'd had a total breakdown, which wasn't exactly the way she'd prefer to begin an evening with Kent. And, though she felt perfectly justified for thinking what she'd thought, she wished she could have kept her composure.

Her only comfort was that Kent hadn't kept his composure either. In fact, he'd been as uncontrolled as she'd ever seen him. Had been almost desperate to get her to believe him. Had raced down the hall after her—a thrilling image now that she could understand it correctly—and then all the way down the stairs.

All of which she took to be a very good sign.

Once Kent had concluded whatever business he'd had with the manager, he and Cali made their way over to the elevators.

When the doors to one of the elevators slid open, a middle-aged man in a business suit stepped off, dragging a now fully dressed Honey Worthing with him.

Cali's first response was vague nausea, since the sight of Honey brought back to her the sickening torrent of emotions she'd experienced a little while earlier.

But things were different now, so Cali quickly got over her initial reaction. And, despite herself, she couldn't help but maliciously enjoy the brief interaction that followed.

Kent, with impressive self-possession, appeared professional and nonchalant as he conversed with his affluent business associate, even though Kent was standing in the lobby of a hotel wearing nothing but a pair of pants.

Cali tried to be mature about the whole thing. Really, she did. But, when Kent put his arm around her and introduced her to Bill Worthing as if she were someone

important, Cali couldn't help but feel like gloating a little. Especially since Honey – who looked much more childish and less threatening now that she had clothes on – was wearing a mulish expression and sticking out her lower lip, obviously in the middle of a full-fledged snit.

They traded a few greetings and Bill Worthing apologized with obvious embarrassment for his daughter's behavior. Cali smiled in a subdued manner, acted as if nothing untoward had occurred and only leaned into Kent just a little bit more than was required. But did so when she knew Honey was watching. She decided that it didn't matter how old you got, the petty, selfish pleasure you experienced from such victories just didn't go away.

When the Worthings left, Cali and Kent went back up to his suite. Cali wasn't really excited about having an intimate dinner, conversation and what would likely follow in the rooms that were now tainted by Honey's presence.

But it seemed silly to ask Kent to change rooms just because of her insecurities, so Cali was resolved not to even mention it.

She knew now that Kent wanted to be with *her* and so Honey's presence in the suite – while still nauseating – could be ignored and eventually forgotten.

Cali was feeling pretty satisfied with her emotional state and maturity level when they finally got back to Kent's room. He opened the door and let her in and Cali stared around at the main room of the suite in surprise.

There was no longer a single trace of Honey's presence. The room service trays, the flowers, even the towel Kent had been using all were gone. The suite had clearly been reserviced since Cali had seen it last because she could see fresh vacuum streaks on the plush carpet.

She turned to stare at Kent with her mouth open just slightly.

He looked a little sheepish. "I tried to get a new suite, since I wasn't excited about having reminders of Honey and our...er, misunderstanding all around us tonight. They didn't have any others available, but they promised to clean up in here so that it would be like she'd never been in my suite."

Cali gaped at him. "They did all this in the few minutes we were talking to the Worthings?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "The staff at a five-star hotel can be remarkably efficient."

"For you, maybe," she replied dryly. Then she wandered into the bedroom and peered around, looking for one thing in particular. "You know you'll have to get rid of that shirt she was wearing, don't you? I'm not sure I could ever look at it again without shuddering."

Kent had followed her into the bedroom and now chuckled and slid an arm around her waist. "It's already gone. Which makes me even more annoyed with the girl. Not only did she almost destroy everything I have with you, but she also forced me to dispose of my favorite shirt."

Cali laughed appreciatively at his ironic tone and pressed a soft kiss on the side of his jaw. "Buy a new one."

Turning her around until her breasts were smashed up against his bare chest, Kent eased his hands down until he was cupping her butt. "I will," he drawled, teasing her lips with a series of tantalizing little kisses. "And maybe *you'll* wear that one for me."

Sighing in pleasure, Cali rubbed up against him and felt both erotic and tender at the same time. Could hardly believe it was possible after what had happened ten minutes ago. "Maybe."

It was at that point that she remembered that she'd been at the hospital all day, then had sat through an uncomfortable flight and then had been sobbing for an extended period of time. She tensed up a little, thinking about how horrific she must look. Kent drew his eyebrows together and pulled away from her slightly. "Everything okay?" "Yeah," she said, "but do you mind if I use your bathroom to wash my face and pull myself together a little. It's been a really long day." Smiling in response, Kent nodded. "Help yourself."

Cali went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. As she'd expected, she looked almost frightening. Her eyes were red and swollen and underneath them were shadows so deep it looked like she had two black eyes. Her cheeks were blazing unattractively and her hair was an absolute mess.

With a resigned sigh, she splashed cold water on her face and blotted it dry. Then pulled a comb out of her overnight bag and combed out some of the tangles in her hair. She had some makeup with her, but she didn't really feel like messing with it. Decided that Kent would have to take her as she was—red eyes and all—and just be content with that.

After using the bathroom, washing her hands and rubbing some of the expensive, complimentary lotion into her hands and arms, Cali returned to the bedroom where she'd left Kent.

He was sitting on the bed, leaning over and rubbing one of his feet. He looked exhausted and uncomfortable.

"Are you all right?"

Jerking in surprise when she spoke, Kent straightened up and smiled at her. "Of course," he assured her. "Just living with the consequences of running down all of those stairs."

Relaxing, Cali chuckled and went to sit next to him on the side of the bed. "That *was* pretty stupid. You're not a teenager anymore. When you burst out of the stairwell, I was afraid a heart attack might follow."

Kent eyed her unpleasantly. "It wasn't *that* difficult an exertion. I'll have you know I'm in excellent shape."

Cali snorted, enjoying an entirely new freedom in teasing him. "I believe you. I like your shape very much. But it's a good thing you weren't trying to run *up* all those stairs."

He scowled at her, but she had a feeling he wasn't truly offended. Then, with a groan, he leaned back and pulled his legs up, so that he was stretched out on the bed. "Some women would be touched by that noble, romantic gesture. You, of course, only scoff."

"Of course, I scoff," she agreed, stretching out beside him on the bed and scooting up until her body was pressing into his side. Her voice got throatier as she added, "But that doesn't mean I wasn't touched."

He turned his head until he met her gaze and his eyes grew uncharacteristically soft. "You were?"

She used her hand to circle over his bare belly and then slid it down to his side, squeezed her favorite bit of flesh to reclaim it from Honey's presumptuous clutches. She held his eyes and felt tingly all over—from a combination of excitement and tender emotion and a very real case of nerves.

She knew this was a very important moment. Said in a voice as soft as his had been, "Of course, I was touched." Took a short, uneven breath. "I can't believe you actually ran after me."

Kent shifted until he was almost lying on the side of his body she wasn't gripping. Facing her more directly, he murmured, "Cali, tell me why you can't believe that I'd run after you."

And this was so, so hard. Would reveal so much that lay at the deepest core of who she was. But this was what she wanted, no matter how difficult it was to work through, so she whispered, "Because you're Kent Landon and I didn't think you ran after anyone." She closed her eyes briefly. "And no one has ever run after me before."

Kent kissed her. And it was so sweet that Cali ended up moaning low in her throat.

When he pulled away, he said hoarsely, "There was no way I was going to let you get away from me."

Cali was almost embarrassed that she was close to crying again—clearly the overload of emotion had affected her ability to react to situations appropriately—so she hid her face against his neck.

It was difficult for her to be simply happy about what was happening because she could hardly believe it was true.

This was her life. She was still Cali. And yet somehow the universe had shifted.

Kent held her tightly for a minute, but eventually released her and rolled over onto his back. He let out a deep breath, as if dispelling too much intensity and gave her an ironic look. "Are you hungry?"

She choked on a laugh, more relieved than she could express that Kent had lightened the mood. She needed a break so that she could try to sort through her scrambled thoughts and get a handle on her emotions. "Yeah, a little."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know," she said, trying to decide how much food her knotted up stomach could take. "Something light. You decide."

Kent ordered smoked salmon and a fruit and cheese tray, with a bottle of what Cali knew to be very expensive Chardonnay. Then he hung up the phone and lay back down on the bed.

Cali, curled up on her side with her head on one of the pillows, watched him thoughtfully. Without a business suit on, Kent always looked more approachable. But tonight he seemed to have shed his impenetrable exterior completely. His chest and feet were bare and his trousers were riding low on his hips. His body looked as attractive as it always had, but something about it seemed more human than usual. With his eyes closed as they were now, Kent could have been any man—anywhere—who'd had a very long day.

It was an obvious piece of understanding to have come to her after so long. But something melted in Cali's chest as she watched him. He wasn't just the powerful, scheming businessman. And he wasn't just the suave, charismatic billionaire. And he wasn't just the skilled, experienced lover. And he wasn't just the tormented, needy soul.

All of that was a part of him. But there was something more fundamental than any of it.

Kent was a man. A man like her father. Like Aaron. Like Alice's husband. Like the stressed-out guy who managed the coffee shop she liked to stop at in the mornings.

He was a real human man. Even though he was richer, more brilliant, more powerful, more controlled than any other man she'd ever met.

Kent was a man. Who got tired when he ran down twenty-two flights of steps.

"I can feel you staring at me," Kent pronounced, without even opening his eyes. "Are you having some sort of revelation?"

Cali almost choked at how close he was to the truth. "Something like that."

"Well," he muttered, shifting a little. "Can you do so without staring at me quite so blatantly. You're making me self-conscious."

She grinned in delight. "I didn't think you ever got self-conscious."

He opened his eyes slightly and glared at her through half-closed lids. "That shows how little you know. You seem to think a lot of things without verifying your facts."

"I'll admit to having read you wrongly a few times," she allowed, "but you seem to go out of your way to make it hard for me to read you correctly."

Raising his eyebrows, Kent eyed her skeptically.

"Don't you try to deny it. For instance, how the hell am I supposed to know you get self-conscious if you always put on the act of being perfectly confident."

"Perhaps," Kent relented begrudgingly. "But, in my world, it doesn't do to show weakness. And, in my defense, it's often not an act."

This time, it was Cali who eyed him skeptically.

"Don't give me that look. I'm usually far more in control than I am right now," he added defensively. "Tonight I don't happen to be at my best."

Cali had started to melt when he had openly admitted one of the reasons for the hard façade he wore and she was a pile of goo by the time he stopped talking. She breathed fondly, "I think this is the best I've ever seen you."

Then she actually blushed, hardly believing she'd said something so completely besotted.

Kent cocked an eyebrow. "Can't say much for your taste. At the moment, I'm sweaty and half dressed and so tired from running down the stairs that I'm barely articulate."

"Yum," she murmured teasingly. When he shook his head indulgently, she continued, "That only goes to show one thing, you're not the best judge of yourself."

His eyes suddenly turned serious. He reached over and cupped her cheek with his palm. "While we're on the subject, the same goes for you too."

So Cali got gooey again. She'd thought she'd outgrown this particular sensation—a mingling of giddiness, stomach flutters and a tender ache in her heart—when she'd been in her twenties. Evidently, the feeling didn't fade with age or maturity.

In fact, it seemed to have grown stronger. She was so overcome with mushiness that she was afraid she might ooze away.

To her relief, there was a tap on the door just then, rescuing her from drowning in her sappiness. She popped up off the bed. "I'll get it."

"It'll be room service," Kent said, rolling off the bed with a groan. "Go ahead and sign for it. I'm going to take a shower, if that's all right. I have a feeling I don't smell particularly pleasant."

She opened the door for the young man who brought in the trays. He asked if he should uncork the wine and Cali shrugged and then nodded her assent.

After he poured her a glass and left, she took a sip. Took another. Then, deciding she couldn't wait until Kent got out of the shower, she started digging into the aged Brie, crusty bread and smoked salmon.

She had just scooped up some of the caviar with a cracker and popped it in her mouth when Kent returned from what had been a very brief shower.

Had her mouth not been full of food, it would have dropped open as she stared at him. He was still barefoot and bare-chested, but he was now wearing a pair of charcoal gray pajama pants. From the distance, she couldn't tell what material they were made from, except that the fabric was soft, light and looked expensive.

Noticing her stare, he glanced down at himself. "I can put clothes back on if it makes you more comfortable. I didn't feel like getting redressed, but this isn't supposed to be a way to pressure you into having sex." He walked over to join her at the cozy little table. "We don't have to make love tonight if you don't feel like it."



"Oh," she said, after she'd managed to swallow. She was suddenly hot—both in temperature and with something else. For some reason, seeing him in the low-slung pajama bottoms felt even more intimate than actually seeing him naked. She tried to keep her leering to a minimum, but she kept darting glances over at him. And she started to find it really hard to keep her hands off his scrumptious, pajama-clad body. "Okay."

It wasn't just how yummy he looked. It was everything that was implied by his unselfconsciously wandering around like that in her presence.

He peered over at her plate and the trays of food curiously.

Correctly interrupting his look, she said, "Sorry. I was hungrier than I thought. But I saved plenty for you."

Kent laughed softly and helped himself to the cheese, salmon and bread. "Did you want to take a shower too?" he asked, removing a small bunch of grapes with elegant precision.

Cali had a mouthful of gourmet cheddar, so she chewed and swallowed. "Yeah. I feel kind of icky from the flight." She finished her last three bites and watched him loading up his plate. "But don't eat all the Brie while I'm gone."

Chuckling again, Kent poured himself a glass of wine.

It was strange. The mood and scene didn't feel romantic at all—certainly wasn't the clichéd romantic setting that Honey had tried to capture—but it somehow felt even better. Intimate and tender. But like it was everyday life. Like they were home.

Feeling mushy again, Cali picked up her wine to take with her. Then stood up and leaned over to kiss Kent beside his ear. "Just so you know, I'll definitely want to make love to you."

Kent made a pleased, growling sound and reached out to grab her, but Cali evaded his hands and skittered toward the bathroom so she could shower before she jumped him.

She showered quickly and half dried her hair with the hairdryer provided by the hotel—it wasn't even attached to the wall like the hairdryers in all the rooms she'd ever stayed in. Then she rubbed on some spicy scented lotion and pulled the lingerie she'd brought with her out of her overnight bag.

It was a slate blue silk chemise, which was as sexy as her nightwear got. She slipped it on and looked at herself in the mirror. It looked pretty good—flattered her breasts and de-emphasized her hips. But she felt kind of silly traipsing around just in that until they were actually about to have sex, so she was glad she'd brought the short, matching robe.

When she'd tied it at the waist, she left the bathroom and was surprised to see that Kent had already left the table. He was back in the bedroom now and when she entered, he was sitting on the side of the bed as he'd been doing earlier.

He was once more holding one of his feet, but this time he was wincing, as if he was in pain.

"Kent," she asked sharply, "what's wrong?"

He looked up, straightened and put both feet on the floor. "Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Of course," he assured her, his eyes skimming over her figure. "You look gorgeous."

Ignoring the compliment, she hurried over and sunk to the floor. Grabbed one of his feet. "Kent!" she wailed, when she saw the sole of the foot she had grabbed.

The foot wasn't actually bleeding, but it was close. The bottom of his foot had been rubbed raw from running down all those stairs without any shoes.

"Idiot," she chided, trying to look again even though he was trying to pull his foot away from her. "It looks horrible."

"It's fine," he said grouchily. "Just slightly sore."

"It is not fine. The skin is broken. Your feet could get infected."

"Cali, stop fussing," Kent said roughly, drawing both of his feet onto the bed. "I said they were fine."

Giving him a steely gaze, Cali rose to her feet and marched back into the bathroom, where she remembered seeing first aid supplies with all the other amenities. She found a fancy antiseptic, soothing salve and brought it with her back into the bedroom.

Kent was stretched out on the bed when she returned and he eyed the little jar in her hand unpleasantly.

Ignoring his bad temper, she sat down on the end of the bed and reached for his foot. He resisted.

They ended up having a silly, wordless squabble about it, until Cali was about to simply sit on his legs and be done with it.

But he finally gave up and let her take one of his feet in her lap. She rubbed the salve into the bottom of the foot, as gently as she could.

Kent looked uncomfortable at first as she carefully kneaded his sore foot but she continued silently, keeping her face intentionally mild and unassuming, until he finally relaxed closing his eyes as she worked.

She felt strangely fluttery. And strangely tender. But so, so glad he'd allowed her to take care of his feet. Allowed her to take care of *him*.

She was rubbing his toes, trying to avoid putting too much pressure on the spots that were the rawest, when he finally opened his eyes. "So," he began softly—a new note in his voice. "Are you going to tell me why you're really here?"

Her breath hitched. "You asked if I wanted to come stay the night."

"And you said no."

"I changed my mind," she replied, putting down the foot she'd been working on and pulling the other foot into her lap.

"Why?"

She swallowed. This was so hard. Harder than anything else. To be honest with him. Open. Exposed. When he hadn't yet been completely transparent with her. "I figured a few things out today," she began, dipping some more of the pleasant smelling salve out of the little pot.

"Like what?"

"Like why I got scared last week," she admitted, her heart drumming painfully, in spite of everything else that had happened tonight. "Which led to me acting so distantly."

She paused to catch her breath and think through the rest of what she needed to say, but Kent spoke into the pause, "Why were you scared?"

And this was the riskiest part. "Well, I thought—and maybe I was mistaken—but, I guess, I thought that maybe you had decided to be more...serious about us." She paused again. Hoped desperately that Kent would fill the silence, assure her of his intentions, take some of the pressure off her confession.

He did. "You weren't mistaken," he said, meeting her eyes.

She was so overwhelmed that she couldn't look at his face anymore. Focused instead on her task, on rubbing his poor, raw foot. "And that kind of freaked me out."

Kent didn't speak immediately. Then asked, his voice rather diffident, "Because you didn't want us to be serious?"

"No," she countered in a rush, not wanting him to misunderstand. "I did. I mean, I always thought I did. But I never thought that it would actually happen. So, when I realized it *was* happening, I guess I was...overwhelmed by all that it meant. I mean, if it gets serious, then there are other things involved in the relationship besides good sex and stimulating conversation."

"I know," he acknowledged. She still couldn't meet his eyes, but she could feel him watching her intently. "I come with a lot of baggage, Cali. Some of it is part of my nature and some of it is just part of the Kent Landon package—like Honey tonight. I'm not an easy man—in any way. And I wouldn't blame you if you decide that I'm not what you want in your life."

This sounded so typically Kent-like that Cali looked up and wrinkled her nose. "Well, I do. I just needed to sort out how and why I was feeling these things." She swallowed hard. "I'm...sorry about the sex the other day. I did want you, but I wasn't emotionally ready. I was still too scared and confused."

He nodded. "I should have realized that earlier. I was such an ass to you afterward because I felt so guilty about it."

"It's my fault. Not yours."

Shrugging faintly, he replied, "I still should have known better. I let my lust get in the way of my good sense."

They were silent for a while and Cali kept working on his foot. She felt pretty satisfied with things now. She'd been honest and they'd settled the things that had been hanging over them.

They didn't actually need to declare any passionate feelings to still be on the same page about their relationship. And she was sure now that they were.

"So," Kent said at last, "are we agreed about this being serious?"

Cali felt suddenly shy, which was absolutely stupid. But she looked down at his feet and murmured, "Yes."

"And it's not...short term?" he persisted, his voice sounding a little uncomfortable, as if he weren't entirely confident either.

Her eyes darted up to his face. "It's not short term."

Their gazes met and both of them smiled.

"Good," Kent said, his body visibly relaxing.

"Good," Cali replied.

She couldn't seem to stop smiling as she finished on his feet and then returned to the bathroom to put the salve away and wash her hands.

When she came back into the bedroom, she took off her robe and dropped it on the floor. Kent was still sprawled out on the bed, but he was watching her and his gaze grew suddenly hot.

Cali crawled back onto the bed, but instead of lying beside him, she sat next to his legs.

"Cali," Kent complained, "would you please give up on my feet?"

She frowned at him. "I wasn't going to touch your feet." Then, to prove her point, she lifted up his leg slightly and started to massage one of his calves.

This time, Kent didn't object. In fact, he sighed as she started kneading his muscles. And by the time she got to the second one he was practically groaning with pleasure.

And Cali was getting aroused.

She moved up his legs, starting rubbing his thighs through his soft pajama pants. As she worked over his muscles, Kent closed his eyes and released a guttural sound of pleasure that generated a deep ache of desire at her center.

Scooting up the bed toward his groin, she could clearly see his hardening cock through the thin fabric of his pants. She palmed him and applied some light pressure.

He jerked his head and groaned again. He'd opened his eyes and was watching her and the intensity of his gaze made various parts of Cali's body tingle.

But she didn't spend much time on his cock. Moved up his body to rub his firm belly and chest. When she fondled his nipples, he sucked in a ragged breath that turned Cali on even more.

He wasn't even touching her and yet she was practically drooling.

Glancing down his body, she saw that he was fully erect, the outline of his erection visible beneath the loose material of his pants.

Cali was shockingly wet for having no physical stimulation and her inner muscles were clenching instinctively, as if they were already trying to pull him in.

She stared down at her hands on his chest, her thumbs twirling over his nipples. Thrilled at the power of it. The way she was making him pant and moan. But even beyond that, there was something purely exhilarating about being allowed to do this. About having the right to touch him like this.

Sliding her hands up to his shoulders, she leaned down to kiss him. Kent's mouth was hungry and clinging as he responded. Then his arms went around her to try to pull her down on top of him.

She resisted, pulling her mouth away. "Hands to yourself," she told him, hoping he'd let her keep playing this little game, but not certain he would.

Laughing, Kent managed to look both amused and hot simultaneously as he moved his arms back to his sides.

Cali adjusted herself beside him until she was more comfortable and then skated her hands up to caress his face and head until he was moaning from her touch.

"Cali," he murmured hoarsely, after a few minutes of silent touching.

"Hmm?" she replied, mouthing his crown and adoring the texture of his short hair beneath her lips and tongue.

"Cali," he repeated, shifting beneath her, as if he was trying to hold himself back. "You forgot my side."

"No, I didn't," she objected, lifting her head and then scooting back down his body. She smiled at his slightly flushed face. "I was saving it for last."

Then she let herself tenderly squeeze his side, feeling the bit of soft flesh under her fingers. Looking at it closely, she noticed for the first time that there was a little less of it than before.

She frowned down at him. "You're not losing weight, are you?"

He lifted his eyebrows quizzically.

Glaring at him, she said, "You're not allowed to lose this."

He chuckled as she squeezed his side again. But when the fingers of her other hand skated over the skin just above his waistband, his hips jerked a little. Bucked up instinctively.

So she moved her hand down to caress him through his pants, her hand closing around his hard erection.

"Fuck," he said thickly, arching up off the bed a little.

Cali felt like moaning in pleasure just from watching him. Her own arousal was pulsing a little and she hadn't yet even been touched.

Untying the drawstring of his pants, Cali started pulling them down, nudging at him until he lifted his hips enough for her to pull them off all the way. Then she crawled up again and straddled him at the thighs.

"Cali," Kent murmured, looking totally debauched as he sprawled out naked and erect beneath her, "let me get you ready too."

She smiled. "I'm already ready."

To prove her point, she lifted his hand and guided it in between her legs. And then his fingers took over and he was exploring and teasing her wet, swollen flesh. When he slid two fingers inside her, Cali bit her lip and stretched like a cat, grabbing onto his thighs to keep her balance as he thrust his fingers into her with exquisite precision.

When he rubbed her clit with his thumb, Cali made a mewling sound, feeling the deep pressure begin to form beneath her belly. She rolled her hips with the motion of his fingers, intensifying the sensations. Then she grabbed the hem of her chemise and pulled it off over her head, baring her body to him completely.

Her eyes had fallen shut, but she forced them open again as she began to pant and build up toward climax. Kent's eyes were crawling over her greedily and she was almost stunned by how sexy she felt as she gasped in pleasure and pumped her hips against his fingers.

She knew he was trying to get her to come like this, but she wanted him inside her before she came. She had her own plans for him. So at the last minute, she pulled his hand away.

And before he could object, she raised her hips up, reached down to line him up at her entrance and then sank down on top of him, taking his length fully inside her.

Then realized she'd made a mistake.

Kent released a low groan of pleasure as she sheathed his cock with her body, but Cali actually cried out. Arched backward. Felt the briefly halted pressure from the stimulation of Kent's hand leap back into life in response to the deep, tight fullness inside her.

She'd been too close to orgasm before. And now she couldn't stop it.

"Kent," she gasped, her hips starting to ride him instinctively, "oh, God, I can't..." She leaned backward, until she could feel his cock hitting her in the perfect spot. Her body was moving of its own accord, in wild, frantic shudders on top of him.

Kent grabbed her waist, helping to support her as she arched back. "Yes, Cali," he urged, his eyes devouring her body. "Come. Come for me. Now."

She wasn't going to be able to help it. She grabbed onto his knees, which he'd raised slightly and pumped her pelvis over him erratically, feeling the low, deep quaking begin as his hard flesh slammed against her most sensitive spot. "Kent," she choked, her head falling back helplessly as the sensations swelled up to an almost unbearable peak. "God, I'm...Kent...I...God..."

And then she couldn't speak anymore. Grunted out a series of silly, involuntary noises as she rode him hard until her pleasure erupted.

Her eyes blurred over as she came and she released a strange keening sound. She convulsed above him, her muscles clamping down around him as she shook frantically. Her breasts bounced around absurdly and her hair ended up all over her face.

When the spasms finally started to fade, she was able to focus enough to look at Kent's face. It was rigidly controlled and he was biting down on his lower lip. But his eyes were still raking over her hungrily as if he couldn't get enough.

With a whoosh of breath, she released his knees and fell forward. Heard Kent grunt at this sudden change in the angle of his cock.

"Sorry," she muttered, sprawled limply on his chest.

"It's okay," he replied, somewhat dryly, although he was clearly too breathless to be truly dry. "But you almost just lost your chance for a second orgasm."

Cali tried to laugh, but couldn't really manage it. Her mouth had ended up near the side of his neck, so she kissed him there, wetly and clumsily. Her inner muscles had tightened around his cock dramatically in the wake of her orgasm, so she could feel him inside her even more fully than before.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," she groaned, still kind of kissing his neck.

Kent made a breathless noise she assumed was supposed to be a laugh. "What was supposed to happen?"

"I was supposed to ride you until you lost all control," she explained, another little tremor of pleasure making her shudder.

"Maybe you still can." She could hear the smile in his voice.

She raised her head. Looked at his damp, tense face. Knew he was trying to hold himself back for her. Decided she could wait for another day to carry out her original plan.

Letting out a long sigh, she shook her head. "Nope. Too tired to ride you to ecstasy tonight. Have to do it later." She leaned over to kiss him softly. "Your turn."

Kent flipped them over so quickly it made her squeal.

He was obviously tired too, since he didn't waste much time on starting out slowly and leisurely. In fact, he was urgent from the very first thrust.

And Cali realized that her plan had succeeded after all. She'd ridden Kent until he was out of control, it just hadn't happened as she'd expected it.

He drove into her with a rapid rhythm and—as he did so—Cali bent and then pulled up her legs, allowing him to sink into her more deeply.

"Cali," Kent said thickly, panting as he pumped his cock in and out of her body. He straightened his arms and adjusted his weight on his knees, moving his legs farther apart to get more leverage with which to thrust. "Cali, is this...good?"

The bed was already rocking with the momentum of Kent's thrusts and her whole body was jiggling from his motion. But she loved it. Loved how out of control he was and how primal his need was to take her like this. Loved the feel of his hard flesh slamming into her.

"Yeah," she whimpered, one arm above her head, hand fisting into the pillow and the other clinging to Kent's neck. "Yeah, Kent, it's good." Making a whining sound, she arched her neck and then tossed her head helplessly in pleasure. The sensations had coalesced and were starting to build into a coiled pressure again. "Fuck," she breathed harshly, digging her fingers into the back of his neck. "So good."

With a guttural sound of approval, Kent kept driving into her, widening his legs even farther so that his thighs were pushing into hers, stretching her open beneath him completely. "Cali."

Somehow, with the shift in their positions, one of her legs had ended up in the air, which should have made her feel stupid, but instead made her feel wild and wanton. It felt like the whole world was rocking to the rhythm of Kent's thrusts. Like her body had an exquisitely lush life of its own. "Kent," she gasped, angling her hips and bucking up to meet his motion, trying to get a little stimulation on her clit.

"Cali," he rasped again, this time as if he wanted her attention.

So, despite her rising pleasure, she managed to meet his eyes.

His face was damp, strained and tight, but his eyes were rich and speaking. And he was clearly trying to tell her something. Couldn't put it in words.

Despite the jerky motion of their bodies, she slid her hand from his neck to his cheek.

She understood what he couldn't say. And she wasn't sure there were any words to embody the feeling anyway.

Something like...almost in love.

"Kent," she whispered, no longer even nervous about it. "Me too."

He groaned helplessly and ducked his head down, his motion becoming even more uncontrolled and erratic in response to her words.

And, with the added intensity of her emotions, now Cali had almost reached climax again. She started making breathless, little grunts to their tempo and writhing beneath him with wild abandon.

She had just enough coordination to tuck her arm past his so she could reach his side. Found her spot. Squeezed it as she bucked up frantically until her pleasure finally peaked.

Her cry of release sounded almost like a sob and she clutched at Kent's side so tightly that it had to be painful. But as her body shattered beneath him she felt Kent's whole body tense up like a coil.

Then he choked on her name as he came too, her rhythmically clenching muscles pulling him into release and then extending the duration of his spasms.



When she came to her senses again, she realized that Kent had fallen on top of her and that her leg was still in the air. Trying to lower it carefully, she groaned as her muscles protested.

"Kent," she moaned, his weight pushing into her and his legs still stretching her legs too far apart.

"Sorry," he muttered, his face in her hair. "I'm getting off."

Except he didn't move.

"Kent," she tried again, hating to disturb him since he felt so warm and relaxed and sated above her. "My body is in an unnatural position."

"Right." He still didn't move.

So she pushed at his shoulders a little.

Finally, with an agonized groan, he rolled off her, pulling his soft, slick cock out as he did so. Straightening her legs, Cali groaned a little bit too, knowing she'd be feeling this experience painfully in the morning.

"You okay? Sorry about that."

She smiled. "That's okay. I know, once he's in his forties, sex takes a lot out of a man."

Kent scowled at her, which made her giggle hysterically.

Soon, he had to smile too. Reached out for her. "Come here," he murmured, pulling her into his arms.

Cali snuggled up against him, much more comfortable this way. She couldn't seem to stop touching him and her hands roamed over his back, his sides and his ass.

It was thrilling, really. That she could touch him. That she could know that he wanted to touch her. And that there was so much more between them than just touching.

Finding her favorite spot again, she gave his lower side another little squeeze.

"Some might find your obsession with my extra fat a little odd," Kent murmured dryly. "I guess I really do need to work out some more."

She made an outraged noise in her throat. "Don't you dare," she demanded, peering up at him. "You can work out all you want, get your whole body as hard as a rock...except right here." She squeezed his side again. "But not this. This is mine."

Kent shook his head and chuckled. "Agreed. It's all yours."

Cali relaxed against him again and smiled to herself. Couldn't seem to stop smiling.

Never in her wildest dreams. Never in all of her life. Never from any of her past experience. Never. Not last year. Or the year before. Or the twenty years before that. Never could she have imagined that any part of Kent Landon would be hers.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Wow," Alice breathed. "I can't believe it's already been six months since the Honey incident."

"Yep," Cali acknowledged, kicking off her work shoes and shimmying out of her skirt as she held the phone with her shoulder. "Six months. It feels kind of surreal when I think about how long we've been together."

"And no sign of his caving and telling you that he loves you?"

"Not yet. But I understand, so it's not that big a deal."

Alice snorted. "Maybe, but it seems about time for him to gird up his loins—so to speak—and actually get it said." She paused for a second and then added, "So you're not getting angry and insecure about it?"

"No," Cali replied in amusement. "As uncharacteristic as it sounds, I'm really not. Occasionally, I'll admit to getting frustrated because he's still so damned guarded and self-contained—even with me—but that's Kent. You can't erase twenty-five years of defensive strategy just because you're in a serious relationship. And it goes both ways. I'm quite sure he gets irritated with all of my insecurities and my inquisitive nature." She smiled, pleased with that euphemism for being really nosy. "Kent and I have regular blowups. I yell at him for not opening up to me and he yells at me for nagging all the time and not leaving him alone. Then we move on and figure out how to accommodate the other's quirks."

Snickering a little, Alice said, "Quirks. That's one way to put it."

"Exactly. Once I finally accepted that Kent is never going to spill his guts to me, things got a lot less traumatic. It doesn't mean that he doesn't want to share his life with me. I know he does. He just can't express it in the normal fashion. So I just recognize the subtle ways he is trying to open up to me. Gradually, he's doing it more and more."

"Huh. Gradually is right. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Surely the man can lower his defenses enough to share some of his feelings with you."

Cali pulled a T-shirt and sweatpants on and then went back to the main room of her apartment so she could flop down on the couch. "He does in his own way. Kent isn't like most other men and he's never going to change completely. I always thought that, when I fell in love, I would start over at that point—rid myself of all the years of rejection and get reborn into love. But, you know, maybe it's obvious and something everyone else already knows, but it's taken me a while to figure out that it just doesn't work that way. We're not starting over. The years we've lived without each other aren't going to go away—so all we can do is work with it and try to grow into each other."

"Very profound."

Huffing, Cali said, "I told you it might be obvious. But the world tells us all the time that love is a transforming experience. But it's not. There's no transformation. And Kent and I bring into this relationship many, many years of experience that have shaped us into who we are."

"Yeah, I guess so," Alice acknowledged. "You know, if we add up ages, you and Kent have twelve years on me and Mark." She seemed inexpressibly pleased with her reasoning.

Cali frowned. "Ha ha," she pronounced, without amusement. "'Don't forget you'll always be a year older than I am.'" Then she added, "I was actually trying to be serious."

"I know," Alice said more soberly. "I'm glad you've got such a clear perspective on it now. You almost sound grown-up."

Cali sniffed disdainfully. "This kind of condescension from the woman who called me up at five in the morning on her fortieth birthday to ask me if I thought she was still sexy."

"Shut up," Alice grumbled. "Even mature and confident persons such as I have the occasional qualm." She paused for beat. Then continued, "So you really aren't stressing over the fact that he hasn't completely opened up to you?"

"For the most part, no," Cali answered. "Although I'm a little stressed right now. For the last couple of weeks he's been in a really dark mood. Brooding a lot and trying to emotionally distance himself from me. I know something's wrong, but he just won't tell me what it is. I've tried subtle probing and direct confrontation, but he just keeps saying it's work stuff."

Alice made a noise like a growl. "That would irritate the shit out of me. I hope you told him off."

"I'll admit to getting a little impatient," Cali confessed. "I mean, how hard is it to tell your girlfriend of nine months at least a sketchy version of what's bothering you? But he won't do it. I know it's not just work. He doesn't take work this...personally."

"Asshole. What's so hard about saying what's bothering him?"

"You're not Kent. It is hard for him. But I'm pretty sure he'll tell me eventually."

Cali was sure. She just hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali!" Kent bit out the word as he came, in a surge of tight, intense pleasure.

Cali, who'd come a minute or two earlier, was recovered enough to watch his expression transform in a way that made her belly warm in possessive ownership. He might not share with her all of his worries, but there was real vulnerability involved in his naked need of her in bed.

Kent's elbows buckled and his weight fell down on top of her, pushing her into the mattress in a familiar way. His arms nudged her up and he held her in a tight, desperate embrace.

Cali clung to him too, loving this evidence that he needed her so much. But her feet had fallen asleep and were prickling uncomfortably, so she carefully lowered her legs to the bed.

After a minute, Kent shifted to his side, pulling her with him—so they could keep holding each other without his weight becoming oppressive.

They lay together—gasping and shuddering—for a long time. Until Kent finally kissed her and rolled off the bed. Made his way naked to the bathroom.

Cali wasn't surprised. He did that whenever he felt he'd lost too much control. She knew he needed a few minutes alone, in order to pull himself together again.

Personally, burrowing under the covers and not coming out always sounded more appealing to her than walking all the way to the bathroom. But, despite their deepening relationship, Kent was still Kent. And he would always cling to his control.

He came back out in a few minutes and paced back to the bed. When he sat down on the side instead of getting under the covers with her, she knew he wasn't going to spend the night.

"I have a breakfast meeting in the morning," he murmured, leaning down to give her another kiss. "So I'll need to get up earlier than usual."

"Okay," she said, although her eyes were scanning his face with anxious attention. "More space in bed for me to sprawl out."

He smiled appreciatively and his fingers gently pushed back the slightly damp strands of hair from her cheeks. "Do you have lunch plans tomorrow?"

"No," she replied, a little surprised by the question. Usually he was too busy to have lunch with her more than once a week. And they'd just had lunch together yesterday. "What did you have in mind?"

His expression was guarded, almost secretive and there was something uncertain in his eyes. "I thought you might want to join me...in something."

Cali's curiosity leaped into life from the mysterious nature of his comment. "What's that?"

Leaning over to kiss her once more, he breathed, "Nothing important. Just a little habit I've begun."

She was about to ask for more information, but he'd leaned over to pick up his clothes. She realized that was all he was willing to say on the subject.

Sighing in frustration, she watched him dress himself in silence.

Wondered if he'd ever tell her the things that were most important.

Decided that people who said that love should come easily had never really been in love.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day at lunchtime, Kent picked Cali up, still not informing her about where they were going.

She nagged him during most of the drive, until he became downright crabby. "Cali," he said at last, "you're making too big a deal out of this. There's not a big surprise for you at the end of this. It's nothing important. Just a little thing I do. And I thought you might want to come with me today."

Cali scowled at him and muttered something ornery about close-mouthed, secretive billionaires.

She really had no idea what to expect. Had a few silly flashes about some dramatic, romantic gesture Kent might have arranged to express his love for her, but quickly realized that was never going to happen. Kent might be a romantic at the deepest core of his heart, but he'd gone too far down the road of irony and bitterness for him to ever be comfortable doing something predictable and sappy.

Which was just as well. Since Cali was too cynical to appreciate anything that smacked of hackneyed romantic clichés.

And she absolutely hated red roses.

But she still had the feeling that, whatever this was, it still had something to do with their relationship.

So, when Kent's driver pulled them up in front of one of Chicago's most prestigious hospitals, Cali's mouth fell open a little in surprise.

She had no idea what they were doing there.

Silently, Kent helped her out and took her hand as they entered the main doors to the hospital and made their way to the elevators.

Kent pressed the button for the eleventh floor and said absolutely nothing. His face was perfectly blank. His eyes guarded. His body a little bit tense.

She stared at him with an obvious question in her gaze and he resolutely avoided her eyes. Acted almost embarrassed.

Her absorption with Kent's strange mood must have caused her brain to function a little slower than usual, because it was only when the doors slid open and they stepped out into a children's wing that Cali began to have an inkling about why they were here.

She held her breath and didn't speak, realizing that she had to be very careful about how she handled this. Her hands had started to tremble a little in tense anticipation, but she made sure to hide this from Kent.

Kent strolled down the hall without hesitating, as if he'd been here many times before. He led her to a private room.

Then he tapped on the open door, to alert the occupants of their presence and went in, Cali trailing after him with her heart fluttering in her chest.

The first thing she saw was a pale, smiling boy in the bed. A boy that she immediately recognized.

"Kent! You're here!"

The delighted cry wasn't from the boy in the bed. It was from another little boy who'd been sitting in a chair that was way too big for him.

The second boy, whom Cali recognized as Jake from the children's clinic, shot out of the chair and hurled himself at Kent, hugging his legs with ecstatic intensity.

Kent chuckled dryly and gave the boy a warm squeeze on the shoulder, looking casual and unaffected, although Cali knew it was just an act.

"You're late," Johnny said accusingly from the bed. "Mommy said you might not come today, even though it's Wednesday. You *always* come on Wednesdays, but you were late."

"My apologies," Kent murmured, in an appropriately subdued tone. "I stopped to pick up a friend."

Both boys turned identical pairs of blue eyes toward Cali, who was so overcome with her response to what Kent was sharing with her that her eyes were burning.

Jake wrinkled his little nose. "That's not a friend," he objected, as if Kent had said something stupid. "That's your lady."

"Right," Kent agreed, sitting in one of the empty chairs. "My mistake."

Cali was going to sit down next to him, but just then the boys' mother came back into the room, carrying paper bags that were obviously filled with lunch. Cali went over to help her distribute the sandwiches, grapes and cookies, while Kent and the boys had a very serious discussion about Jake's hard morning in kindergarten.

Smiling at the worn-out woman beside her, Cali said softly, "It's nice to see you again. How is Johnny doing?"

The woman smiled tiredly. "It's not looking good. But Mr. Landon has provided us with the best of everything, even flown in experts from around the world. So if anyone can beat this, Johnny can." She blinked rapidly and Cali replied to give the woman a chance to recover herself.

"Kent doesn't give up easily," she murmured, looking at the back of Kent's dark head, "not once he's set his mind to something."

"The boys love him," the woman replied, so that only Cali could hear. "Which is so important since their father is always...so busy."

Cali nodded and wondered what exactly Kent had arranged with the boys' father.

Cali's heart was aching in her chest as she gazed at Kent discoursing with the two little boys. He wasn't playing with them or horsing around and he never talked down to the children. In fact, he could have been talking to any of his adult acquaintances, it was only the topic of conversation that was different.

And the fact that Jake was clinging happily to Kent's knee.

Kent had obviously been to visit them many, many times, since he clearly knew a lot about both of the boys and they were perfectly comfortable with him.

How much these little boys must have moved Kent over the weeks. And how much he must have ached as he tried to do whatever he could about Johnny's illness.

And how much the unavoidable memories of his own family must have broken him. Over and over again.

And Kent had never said a word about it. Had just dealt with it privately, discreetly and without any fuss.

Cali was afraid she might cry. She was so touched by what this revealed about Kent's nature. And so glad he'd finally been able to share it with her.

His bringing her today was a very big deal and Cali wasn't fool enough not to realize it. It might have been a minor thing had anyone else done it, but this was Kent. And his interaction with these children was something very risky for him to share. It revealed Kent's heart, his vulnerability, the tenderness that lay at the core of his nature. A tenderness she'd always sensed was there, once you cleared all the hard, defensive layers.

Her belly flooded with emotion and she felt a lump growing in her throat.

Maybe he couldn't share with her in words all of his deepest fears, traumas and insecurities. Maybe he never would.

But he'd shared this with her. He may not have spoken any words, but he'd let her in to the most private sanctum of his self.

And Cali knew how hard it must have been for him. And how significant the gesture was. She was actually shaking a little bit as she made polite conversation with the boys' mother and couldn't even resent that it had taken him so long to share it.

Finally, Jake peered back at her. "Don't you like us?" he demanded. "Why are you only talking to Mommy?"

Cali came forward immediately, schooling her face with practiced poise. Her reaction here was absolutely crucial.

She wanted to burst into tears of love and joy. Or tackle Kent to the ground in a passionate declaration of thanks and affection. But knew she couldn't make a fuss, had to underplay the moment's importance or else Kent would start to feel awkward and perhaps never open up like this with her again.

"Of course, I like you." Kent stood up and gave her his chair, so she took it and sat down, carefully avoiding looking at him too intently. "I just thought it was a man-to-man discussion going on over here and that you might not want me listening."

Jake scoffed. "We're just talking about school and the mean boy who pushed me down."

Cali shook her head consolingly. "That does sound mean." Then she quirked her lips. "Although sometimes I want to push Kent down."

Johnny's eyes grew as big as saucers and Jake's mouth dropped open. "No way!" Jake breathed. "He's bigger than you!"

Choking on what was half a laugh and half lingering emotion, Cali managed to say, "I know. I'm not sure I could actually do it. But sometimes I'm tempted to try."

"But you're his lady," Jake objected, as if that meant she must be lying. "And Kent is my friend. You shouldn't be mean to him."

"I know," she agreed, feeling such a swell of tenderness and affection—for Jake, for Johnny, for Kent—that she could barely keep from hugging them all at once. "I try my best not to push him down."

"That's good," Jake replied in satisfaction. He popped two grapes in his mouth and, as he chewed, he mumbled out a question, "Do you love him a lot?"

Cali sucked in her breath. Felt tingles of emotion and anxiety spreading through her body. Looked at Jake's sweet, earnest face. Knew Kent was standing behind her, pretending to chat with the mother but listening to every word that was said.

So she replied, "Yeah. I love him a lot."



## Chapter Fourteen

Cali grew more and more nervous as she and Kent left the hospital together.

The rest of the visit had gone quietly and uneventfully and they had left after forty minutes since both of them needed to get back to work. But Kent didn't say anything at all on the way down to the car.

And, once in the car, he casually brought up the topic of their weekend plans—they were planning a weekend trip to get away for a couple of days—rehearsing the details as if nothing unusual had happened in Johnny's hospital room.

Cali kept up with the conversation smoothly and without complaint, but inside she was starting to get fidgety.

She had been calm and confident when she'd answered Jake with the truth about her feelings for Kent. She'd, in fact, assumed that her saying it first would make it easier for him.

But maybe she'd overstepped a boundary. Maybe Kent's feelings weren't yet where hers were. Or maybe he wasn't yet at the point where he could open himself up that much, even after she'd done it first.

She'd been hoping for the last couple of months that he *did* love her. But maybe he didn't. Maybe she'd been stupid again.

And maybe, now that she'd said something, Kent would get freaked out or scared off. It was always a possible risk, especially for someone as guarded as Kent.

Cali was nearing meltdown by the time Kent's driver pulled up in front of her office building. She'd thought she'd come so far in her relationship with Kent—and she'd been so blasé about saying she loved him just now—but what if she'd just screwed everything up?

She was so worried that, as soon as the car stopped, she ducked her head and mumbled out a quick goodbye to Kent. She was about to scrabble out when Kent stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Cali, wait."

She froze and turned to look at him, praying he wouldn't look more closed off than usual.

He didn't. In fact, he looked particularly affectionate. He leaned closer to her and gave her a slow, sweet kiss on the lips, his tongue sliding over the line of her mouth and occasionally dipping inside with tantalizing little teases. Then he spoke, his mouth just a breath away from hers. "Thanks for coming with me."

Her body relaxed dramatically and she brushed her fingertips against his short hair. "Thanks for asking me to come."

She wanted to say more – wanted to say how important it had been to her that he'd allowed her into one of the more vulnerable parts of his life – but she knew she still had to be careful. The bigger a deal she made of this, the more uncomfortable Kent would be.

He smiled against her mouth and she couldn't help but smile back.

Cali couldn't help but pride herself on the way she'd handled the whole situation. Kent may not have returned the words to her yet, but clearly she hadn't scared him away. She'd been smart and reasonable and mature and patient and it was finally paying off.

Maybe this was what it felt like to be a grown-up.

Yes, she still had a little lingering resentment that wouldn't be squelched, but she thought it was negligible and irrelevant. Until she heard herself say as she moved once more to get out of the car, "Although it sure took you long enough."

She actually bit her lip. Painfully. Squeezed her eyes shut and cursed herself for her stupidity. Turned immediately back toward Kent and said quickly, "I'm sorry, Kent. I didn't mean..."

He shrugged, his eyes not quite as open as they'd been a moment ago. "It's fine. You're right. I kept the fact that I was visiting the boys to myself for too long."

She actually agreed with him – and hoped in the future he wouldn't keep something like that from her for such a long time – but there was more than that going on here. She could feel her heart in her throat as she forced out, "Maybe, but I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. It means so much that you –" She stopped, quickly rethought her words. "I mean, I don't want to rush you or –" She broke off, trapped between what she needed to say and what she couldn't say, for fear of making the whole thing an even bigger deal than she'd already made it.

Kent still looked a little wary, but she was suddenly sure that he wasn't on the verge of closing her out. "I know what you mean, Cali. Don't look so panicked." He smiled at her again, looking strangely tired. She could see the little lines beside his mouth and the corners of his eyes very clearly. "You're not going to ruin everything with one random comment."

Cali released her breath, feeling a little silly about her anxiety, even though it wasn't entirely gone. "Oh. Good. Sorry."

He leaned over again and gave her a quick kiss and then she got out of the car without being stopped again.

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening, Kent came over to her apartment late, since he'd had a lot of work to take care of. Cali had been flopped down on her sofa, flipping channels on television. She was tired and bored and a little bit glum.

It was one thing to be confident of Kent's feelings and say that it didn't matter that much whether he ever shared them with her or not.

It was another to say she loved him and not get a response. Sure, she'd not actually said it to him, but still...he had to know that he'd been the principal target of what she'd said to Kent. Yes, she knew about the years of defensive barriers he'd erected around his true self, but still...how hard would it be to put his feelings into words?

She knew why he couldn't let himself be vulnerable with everyone else, but why couldn't he be vulnerable with *her*?

When Kent finally arrived, she felt rather down and was ready for bed.

He wanted to take a shower and she didn't feel up to joining him, so she got under the covers and stretched out, closing her eyes until he returned.

After five or ten minutes, Kent came out of the bathroom. He was naked as he approached the bed and Cali skimmed her eyes over his strong legs, toned chest and fine shoulders. Then she let her eyes dip lower again, to study the state of his cock, just as Kent reached over and turned off the bedside lamp.

He got into bed with her and pulled her into his arms, which was always nice, but Cali grumbled a little under her breath.

"What?" Kent asked, chuckling a little as he pressed teasing little kisses along her jawline and down her neck.

She tilted her head back to provide him better access, as his agile mouth made its delicious way down to her pulse point. "I was just beginning to admire the view when you turned off the light," she huffed, her hand finding the part of his body that she'd been primarily admiring before he'd crawled under the covers with her. He was already a little erect and he hardened a bit more under her hand.

"Were you?" he murmured, a smile in his voice. His hands skimmed up and down her sides, over the fabric of her white tank. The light stimulation gave her a ticklish thrill that made her shiver and release a little squeal.

Then he lifted the covers and peered down at her body. "Why are you wearing pajamas?"

Cali snorted. "My legs were cold and, unlike you, I don't like sleeping naked."

Kent frowned, his fingers dipping under the drawstring waistband of her cotton pajama pants. "Were you planning to go right to sleep?"

Under the pressure of her hand, he was about halfway hard now and—for good measure—Cali reached a little farther so she could cup and gently massage his balls. Got a little wet at the sound of his hoarse moan in response. "I was originally planning to go right to sleep. It's been a long day. But I can probably be talked into something else...if you're persuasive enough."

With a subtle smile, Kent pulled off her top, baring her breasts for his attention. "Good," he said huskily, lowering his mouth to one of her nipples. "I can be very persuasive."

Cali smiled down at him and arched her back instinctively, as the gentle stimulation generated lovely little tingles between her legs. As he mouthed and nipped at her breast, he pulled down her pajama pants and panties and Cali helped to toe them off over her feet.

"And why is it," Kent said, the vibrations from his throaty voice doing intoxicating things to her sensitive flesh, "that you complain when you can't leer at me because I turn off the light, but you always get under the covers before I can properly leer at you?"

Scowling as much as she could in her increasingly aroused condition, Cali objected, "You leer at me plenty. What do you call what you're doing now?"

He was doing a kind of close-up leer, his eyes raking over her face and skin as he suckled her breast. He grunted, making it clear that he wasn't convinced.

"Anyway, I'm quite happy with how I look...when I have clothes on," she admitted, flushing a little at actually admitting this to him. "But once I get naked I can't help but concentrate on all my flaws. So it's far more comfortable if they're hidden."

He lowered his mouth to her belly, which was rising and falling with her quickened breathing. He reached around to cup and squeeze her butt, then his hands lowered to the soft flesh at the back of her thighs. "What flaws?"

Cali snorted again. "Don't push your credibility here." She rolled her hips a little in anticipation as his mouth got lower and lower. "You're squeezing one of my body's primary flaws."

He raised his head and looked at her face. Then shifted his body back up so he could kiss her lips again. "What? This?" He squeezed the spare flesh just under her butt again. "Doesn't feel flawed to me."

She shook her head at him fondly and stroked the back of his head. "Sweetie," she said, "even you can't be blind to the reality of cellulite. No need to humor me."

Rolling his eyes, Kent moved back to her breasts, this time taking into his mouth the one he'd neglected before. "I'm not humoring you. And you're hardly one to talk. You, who profess to adore the fat on my side."

Cali sucked in an outraged breath at his skeptical tone. "I *do* adore it," she insisted, pulling him up enough so that she could reach his side and squeeze the part in question. "It's adorable and totally sexy. But it's completely different."

Kent gave her a speculative look, momentarily interrupted from his ministrations at her breast. "How exactly is it different?"

Cali sighed and spoke the most obvious of truths. "Because it's on *you*."

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I feel the same way?"

It hadn't. Never before. She just couldn't fathom Kent feeling about her physical flaws the way she felt about the bit of extra flesh on his side. "No," she admitted, meeting his eyes as he moved over her completely. She could feel his erection hard against her hip. "Do you?"

He crossed his arms beneath her shoulders, edging her up into another deep kiss. "I do."

The lingering self-consciousness she could never quite shake, even after all this time, melted away as she let herself acknowledge that maybe this was actually true. Even in her most intimate relationships with men, she'd always felt like she was trying to only present her best side. But maybe Kent didn't only want her best side. Maybe he wanted the whole thing.

Kent untucked one of his arms from under her shoulders and brought his hand down to feel at her entrance. Frowning when he realized that she wasn't very wet yet—her pleasure having been distracted by their conversation—he returned his attention to arousing her again.

It didn't take long this time, since Cali was already melting with tenderness. After a few more minutes of kissing and petting, she was wet and ready for him, so he repositioned himself between her legs and sank into her.

His eyes holding hers, Kent wrapped his arms underneath her shoulders once more, pulling her into a tight embrace. Cali wrapped her arms around him as well and she relaxed the rest of her body until all she was focused on was the tight, full sensation of having him inside her.

She smiled up at him, one part of her mind still having trouble believing, even after all these months, that this was her—with Kent Landon between her legs.

Kent returned the smile, his eyes never leaving hers. Then, very carefully, he lowered his weight on her completely, instead of using his elbows for support. The weight of his body was warm and quite heavy, but their skin was touching everywhere and she loved feeling this close to him.

]She pushed his head down so that she could claim his lips and they kissed slowly, tenderly, in unhurried pleasure. Then, as they were kissing, Kent shifted his body a few inches forward on hers, so that the base of his cock could rub against her clit. She shuddered and gasped at the first contact.

They'd done this before, so—without any words—Cali stretched her legs out until she could hook her ankles around his calves. Then she pumped her hips up into him as he sustained a gentle rocking motion and after a few minutes, they synchronized their movements, so that her clit connected with the base of his cock on each of his small thrusts.

Once they'd coordinated their rhythm, Cali concentrated once more on kissing him, letting the pleasure from the rich stimulation grow gradually as they rocked together. After every kiss, Kent would raise his head and gaze down at her with hot, sweet awe, as if he were feeling just as melty as she was.

The combined sensations from his cock rocking inside her and the steady rubbing of her clit were both slow and powerful and Cali eventually started whimpering softly as the pressure built up at her center. Kent was panting now, his breath hot and damp

on her skin, but he never sped up his rhythmic motion. His arms were holding her body snugly and his kisses were getting ardent and clumsy.

Cali was completely overwhelmed. By the pleasure—which was swelling up so slowly, so deeply. By Kent's body, which was heavy and hot on top of her, her breasts rubbing against his chest, their legs entwined, their arms clinging to one other. By the tenderness of his kisses and the depth in his eyes. By what his body and gaze and motion seemed to be telling her.

Involuntarily, she started pumping her hips more urgently, disrupting their synchronized motion. "Kent," she whimpered, feeling tears burn in her eyes.

It was overpowering, almost too much. Kent was everywhere. Everything. Momentarily, the whole of the universe.

"Kent," she choked again, her body jerking wildly as she tried to chase her orgasm, which was so temptingly close.

"Cali." His voice barely a breath. He'd dropped his head over her shoulder as if he was having trouble holding it up. Despite her urgent writhing, his motion hadn't altered. "Cali, baby, don't force it. It will be better if you just let it come."

With another whimper, she relaxed her body again and tried not to control or force the pleasure that was spiraling up from the connection of his cock and her body. She clung to him and tried to breathe slowly, the impatient part of her howling at having to wait this long, at having to let her orgasm come naturally.

After a moment, they were able to match the motion of the pelvises once more. Kent raised his head enough to find her lips, his mouth as hungry and uncontrolled as she felt. The urgency of his kiss was in stark contrast to the slow, adoring motion of his strong body. And Cali was momentarily afraid that her heart had burst open as tender feelings filled her chest and flooded her belly.

After another minute, her stomach and thighs started to tense up in preparation. She stretched her legs even more as she felt the sensations cresting, dug her heels into the back of his calves. "Eh!" she gasped, trying not to squirm, trying not to ride him wildly from below, trying to just let the pleasure overtake her. "Eh! Eh!"

Kent had grown tense above her as well, his body feeling even heavier, even hotter, as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and throat. He lifted his head so that he could look at her once more.

"Cali." The only word on his lips—choked out with his pleasure—was her name.

What he always said as he came.

She met his eyes, despite the blurred sensations about to crest. And she knew. Even if he hadn't said the words. Even if he never would. She knew.

She came with the knowledge, with the last bit of friction from his cock pushing her over the edge. Her orgasm was powerful, shattering and it washed over her in wave after wave of pleasure. She shuddered and quaked and released a loud keening sound that she couldn't possibly control.

Her climax had barely peaked when she saw, felt Kent come as well. Her hard, rhythmic muscle contractions pulled him into a climax as powerful as hers had been. His body stiffened and arched back instinctively. And then he was throbbing, pulsing, choking out breathless, incoherent sounds.

The tension in her body had mostly passed when she felt the spasms of his release inside her. So she could focus on his expression, transformed by deep feeling and physical relief. Could focus on the substance of his body, relaxing on top of her at last and then growing sated and languid. Could focus on how much she loved him. And how much she knew he loved her.

She still wanted to hear him say it. But for now she had what she needed.

\* \* \* \* \*

A month later, Cali woke up earlier than normal.

She lay in the dark, feeling vaguely uncomfortable and crabby, until she realized what the matter was.

She was freezing. Kent had stolen all of the damned covers.

He wasn't normally in the habit of doing this, in general, he was a fairly unannoying sleeper. But they'd begun spending some nights at his penthouse, rather than always staying at her apartment, so she figured maybe he was more comfortable in his own home and had reverted to some very bad habits.

It was sad, really. To discover, after being together for so long, that Kent hogged the covers.

Cali pulled at the little edge of sheet and duvet she had left. Nothing happened. She pulled again. Harder this time. Still nothing.

She gave it one last pull, which ended up being more of a heave.

Kent grunted loudly and must have shifted, for Cali suddenly achieved a new abundance of covers.

Feeling victorious, she was just starting to snuggle in when she heard Kent grumbling something incoherent. Ignoring him, she tucked the covers under her chin and sighed in contentment.

"Was it absolutely necessary," Kent began, his voice a mumbled monotone, "to attack me with the duvet?"

Cali huffed. "You had stolen all of my covers. I had every right to take them back."

He muttered something under his breath, but she couldn't quite make out the words. She figured it was just more complaining, so she didn't ask him to repeat himself. Finally, he asked grouchy, "What time is it?"

"If you weren't too lazy to turn your head and look at the clock, then you would see for yourself that it's five thirty."

This knowledge finally prompted action in Kent. He rolled over briskly and—before she knew what was happening—he was lying fully on top of her.

“What?” she said stupidly, blinking up at his familiar face only inches above hers.

“Good morning,” he murmured, his eyes taking on a very familiar gleam.

“I’m not in the mood.”

Kent frowned down at her.

“I’m sorry,” she went on, trying to stifle the ridiculous urge to laugh at his disapproving expression. “I’m not being grumpy about the covers. I just don’t feel like having sex this morning.”

Kent kept frowning.

“I’m feeling nice and cozy now,” she explained, shifting a little beneath him. “And I don’t want to get all sweaty, sticky and urgent.”

His frown became even deeper.

This time, she couldn’t stop the giggle. “I thought men were supposed to get less horny as they got older and need more time between such...exertions. We just made love last night.”

Kent’s frown turned into a scowl.

She patted him on the cheek. “A man your age needs to take it easy and not...strain himself unnecessarily.”

“Let’s not forget, in our ponderings on maturity, that you’ll be forty next year.”

Cali stopped smirking and scowled back at Kent.

His lips twitched, with what she knew was a smothered smile.

She couldn’t help but grin up at him in response to the amusement in his eyes. When he was in this mood, it was really hard to stay mad at him. “Women my age are at their sexual peak.”

Curling up his lip, Kent murmured dryly, “Well, I don’t see signs of much peaking this morning.”

Cali collapsed into helpless giggles and pulled him into a hug. Pressing her body against his, she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “How did you become so horny all the time? I thought dating a guy in his forties would be less demanding and exhausting.”

Kent pulled his head up to peer down at her again. “Are you complaining?”

“Oh, no. I love how horny you are. It makes me feel all sexy and irresistible.”

He returned her kiss, using more tongue than she’d used. “You are extremely sexy and absolutely irresistible.” Then he added with another frown, “But can we please find a word other than horny to describe my physical impulses?”

Snickering, Cali suggested, “Lascivious?”

Kent chuckled, relaxing above her. “I was never so lascivious until you came back into my life.” His gaze was hot and tender both, as he continued, “I used to always be in



control. But now, sometimes, I'll be sitting in my office and get hard just thinking about you."

"Really?" There was an embarrassing squeak in her voice that she couldn't suppress. It was still hard to believe—despite all the proof she'd had over the last months—that she could actually make Kent Landon so hot.

"Really."

She snuggled against him, feeling happy and fuzzy and warm. Then decided she might as well take advantage of his uncharacteristic willingness to share. "So, Kent..."

"Hmm," he murmured. He was nuzzling her hair and didn't seem to be focusing much on the conversation.

"When did you decide that you wanted to...permanently indulge your lascivious desires for me?"

It was a good attempt. Not heavy or too blunt. It should have been an excellent segue. But it didn't work.

"You already know." His lips trailed along the side of her face.

"I know it was sometime between when we started dating for real and now. But can't you pinpoint the realization a little bit more for me? I've told you all about my multiple confusions and stupidity as we were getting together and outlined the whole progress of my feelings. Can't you give me just a few more details?"

He took a long breath and pulled up a little. "It's all so nebulous, Cali. I want to be with you. Isn't that enough?"

It *was* enough. But Cali still wanted more.

This wasn't about needing to know his feelings. She no longer had any doubts that he loved her. Rather, this was about his letting her through his barriers. Sharing how he felt out loud meant admitting a certain measure of vulnerability, confusion, error...weakness. And that was something Kent still couldn't easily do. Even with her. Even after so many months.

Cali was realistic about their relationship. She knew he'd only ever get so far in opening up. He would never spill his guts to her, share all of his childhood traumas and deepest fears.

Little Johnny at the hospital was progressively going downhill. And Cali knew that Kent was frantically trying to find new experts and more experimental treatments for the boy. She knew Kent's powerlessness to stop the boy's illness made him feel helpless, terrified and weak. Made him feel as small and scared as the boy he had been so many years ago.

She knew he would never openly speak about any of this. But she was convinced that he *could* open up about other things. At least about how he'd fallen in love with her.

That much at least he could do. He just wouldn't.

"Are you mad?"

She shook her head and gave him a little peck on the chin. "No. I'm not mad."

His mouth turned down thoughtfully. "But I'm not going to get any sex."

"You weren't going to get any anyway. I'm not in the mood."

Kent started grumbling under his breath again. Still laughing, she squeezed the bit of flesh on his side that was hers.

"In that case," he concluded, giving her one last kiss. "I might as well get up." And he did. Walked into the bathroom naked.

Cali sighed, still smiling a little. She really *was* happy with the way things were between them. But there must be some way she could encourage him to share a little bit more. Thinking hard, she pulled the covers up to her neck again.

She had a random thought. There was something she'd almost forgotten. Something that Kent certainly assumed was no longer a concern for him. Maybe...

There was something still in play here. And maybe Cali could use it.

Sometimes, the right kind of pressure worked wonders with Kent. She just needed to make his opening up to her safe and inevitable.

She got out of bed and ran into the other room, to a pile of her work files that had accumulated over the past months. She had a habit of working before bed and seldom managed to get all of her files back to the office. It was just as well, since she was pretty sure she'd socked away something she could use.

She grinned as she found a print of a particular photo—the one she'd been hoping to find. Grabbing it, she ran back into the bedroom just as Kent emerged from the bathroom.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"Getting something."

He looked at her expectantly as she handed him the photograph she'd retrieved.

Kent glanced down at the snapshot she'd taken on a whim—of the Giotto, which was now hanging on Kent's wall in his Virginia estate. They'd spent the weekend there a few weeks ago.

He narrowed his eyes. "Is there a point to this or are you just in the mood to discuss art?"

Cali gave him a mild, expressionless look. "You owe me a favor."

"Cali, you can just ask me for whatever you want. Whatever I can do for you is yours."

"But you won't. So I've decided to resort to my half-finished blackmail."

Kent chuckled and put down the picture. "All right. I'm listening. What is it you want?"

He *was* listening—she could tell. Cali took a deep breath, feeling a little bit nervous now that everything had worked out so smoothly. It was a pretty silly plan and there

was no guarantee of it working. She just hoped it wouldn't backfire on her. "Tell me how you feel about me."

Shifting his gaze back toward her face, Kent gave her a half-smile. "You've lost your edge. You care for me too much to actually expose my minor art deception to the world."

She'd thought he would probably say that. "Are you daring me?"

Meeting his eyes, she didn't look away. Tried to convey how serious she was by the intensity of her expression.

No one spoke for about a minute and Cali began to sense a mental struggle going on behind Kent's tense features. She'd opened the door for him—and given him a hard push. All he had to do now was take the step he'd never been able to take.

She was just about to give up—to accept that he'd never be able to open up enough to share his feelings in words—when he burst out, "I love you!"

Cali jerked in surprise, both at his surrender and the graceless blurt of his words.

He recovered quickly, lounging back naked in bed and arching his eyebrows in a familiar, arrogant expression. "Which you already knew perfectly well."

"Oh." Cali felt a delighted little shiver start low in her spine as she snuggled back into bed next to him. "Well, I thought you probably did. But it wouldn't kill you to say it occasionally. You might be the strong, silent type, but I have years of insecurity to deal with and I need a little reassurance."

"Right," Kent agreed, with a roll of his eyes. But he put his arms around her.

They kissed for a moment and Cali felt a giddy thrill of victory. Not just at the fact that he loved her, but that he had finally told her.

It didn't even matter that she'd bullied him into it.

"But," Kent murmured, his lips against her mouth, "I didn't cave because you've resorted to a blackmail scheme that has absolutely no teeth."

"Understood." After a moment, she decided she'd risk just a little bit more. "When did you know you were in love with me?"

It took a long time for him to answer. "After the children's hospital, which is why I panicked. I knew this was the real thing and wasn't sure I could handle it."

It meant so much. Explained so much. Cali felt gooey and contented and let out a satisfied sigh. Kent just looked uncomfortable, as if he might have said too much.

"Thank you," she whispered, giving him another kiss.

He glared at her. "Don't expect this amount of heartfelt confession very often."

"I won't," she promised, inwardly snickering that he considered his terse, awkward words to be "heartfelt confession".

"You've use up your blackmail leverage."

"I know. Sorry about that."

She wasn't really sorry.

"No, you're not. You're disgustingly pleased with yourself."

He was right. She *was* disgustingly pleased with herself. Cali could definitely chalk this one up as a victory.

But she believed in generosity to the defeated.

They made love that morning after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

It happened a month later. She should have expected it. *Had* expected it. But had never wanted to admit the possibility.

Some things couldn't be acknowledged until they happened.

She was at the penthouse that evening. She'd gone there straight from work and was presently in the kitchen, experimenting with a recipe she'd seen on the food channel the day before.

She was trying to chop an onion fast enough to get the meal prepared in a half-hour—and failing miserably—when she heard Kent come into the penthouse.

"Hey," she called out. "I'm in the kitchen."

He didn't answer. And didn't come into the kitchen, even after twenty minutes, which should have been more than enough time for him to take off his shoes, socks and tie.

So, turning the eye of the cook top to simmer, she went to look for him. Eventually found him in his office.

He was standing, sorting through a pile of mail in his hands. His shoulders were stiff and his expression was tense—she could see that immediately.

"Hey, sweetie," she said from the doorway. "Are you hungry?"

He didn't answer. Didn't even look up. Just stared down at the mail in his hands. And then she saw that he'd been through the pile twice. Obviously wasn't reading what was written on the envelopes.

Then she noticed his body was shaking just a little. And his eyes were totally blank.

"Kent?" she asked urgently, hurrying over to him and putting a hand on his trembling arm. "What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, he muttered, "Nothing."

Her heart rose to her throat and for a moment she couldn't breathe. "Kent?"

Finally, he looked up. And his eyes were the saddest thing she'd ever seen.

"Kent?" she whispered again, absolutely terrified and already feeling tears burn in her eyes.

Kent opened his mouth. "Johnny—" His voice broke. And he couldn't say anything else.

He didn't need to. Cali started to cry.

She didn't ask any more questions, just gently took the pile of mail out of his hands. Pulled him into her arms.

Kent didn't say anything. Couldn't say anything. Couldn't put any of his pain and grief into words. Didn't shed a single tear for the boy she knew he'd grown to love.

But he let Cali hold him. Let her stroke him, love him, comfort him all night.

And he was holding on to her in the morning.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Cali had just finished cleaning her apartment, so it would be presentable for her dinner party that evening. She'd had plenty of time since she'd taken the day off from work. When she called in, she'd used the excuse that she was still recovering from the virus she'd had that weekend, but—since she'd been feeling fine yesterday afternoon and most of today—her real reason for missing work was to get things ready for tonight.

After cleaning house, she'd taken a shower and dried her hair, so now Cali walked into her bedroom and put on her bra and panties. They were new—black lace with scalloped edges, as sexy as anything she owned—and she peered at herself in the mirror, thinking she looked pretty damned good.

Especially from the front.

Her breasts were full and still fairly firm, her belly was flat and her hips had a graceful curve. When she glanced at herself from behind, however, she couldn't help but notice the extra flesh just under her butt.

But, all in all, it was a pretty good body for a woman who'd be forty next year and hadn't had any surgical help.

Noticing the book that Kent had been reading last week on the nightstand, Cali picked it up to move it out of the way. There was a folded sheet of paper tucked inside it, so she automatically pulled it out and unfolded it.

She didn't worry about invading Kent's privacy in this way, since he'd never leave anything around that he didn't want her to see. In fact, this was often his way of showing her things he was too uncomfortable talking about directly.

The piece of paper was a crayon drawing of two stick people. One figure was short and had hair colored with the orange-red crayon. The other was taller and had short dark hair. Above the first figure had been carefully printed the name "Jake". And above the second, in the same childish printing, was written "Kent".

Cali sank onto the edge of the bed, feeling a tender ache in her throat as she stared at the little drawing, which Jake must have presented to Kent some time last week.

It had been two months since Johnny had died, despite all of Kent's desperate efforts to keep him alive. Cali had been afraid that Kent would shut himself off from Jake afterward—since making himself so emotionally vulnerable with the children had been why the loss had crushed Kent so completely—but he hadn't. He couldn't visit the boy as often as he had before, but Jake's mother evidently realized that Kent's influence was a positive one—especially considering the kind of father Jake had—so every couple

of weeks they had arranged lunch or a trip to the park, where Kent could visit with his little friend.

Kent hadn't said a word to Cali about their visit last week. But he'd left this picture here. And Cali knew he'd wanted her to see it.

She swallowed hard and put the picture away, thinking about how no one else in the world got to know the Kent that she knew. Just this week, in a popular business magazine, Kent had been listed as one of the ten most powerful men in the country. And he was—he was ambitious, driven, calculating, strategic, manipulative, hard and power hungry.

But he was also sweet. And generous. And he loved these two little boys—one of them dead now—who should have meant nothing to him.

And Cali was the only one who knew this other side of him existed.

She wished he were here now, so she could hug him and somehow convey the depth of her feeling. Of course, then he'd probably pull away and make a snide comment about how overly sentimental she was.

She'd been feeling more sentimental than normal for the last week or two. As she got up off the bed, she decided that she could blame it on either the stomach virus she'd had or on hormones. Her period started tomorrow and she always got extra emotional when suffering from PMS.

Extra emotional and extra horny.

She almost wished she hadn't planned the dinner party tonight, since that meant she and Kent would have to wait even longer before they had sex. She'd been lusting after him all day and now her lust had reached a new level.

Cali was on her way to the bathroom to put on her makeup when the phone rang. Grabbing it, she smiled when she heard Kent's familiar greeting on the other end.

"You better not be calling to tell me you're running late. Everyone is expected over here in forty minutes and my dad doesn't like to eat too late."

"I'm not running late," Kent assured her. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," she replied absently, scanning her figure again in the mirror, quite pleased with the effect of the black panties and bra. "I told you I was feeling better yesterday. It was just a little stomach bug or something."

She hadn't been debilitatingly sick, but she'd felt tired and nauseous for a couple of days.

"Apparently you were sick enough to refuse to let me come over all weekend. Am I allowed to spend the night tonight?"

"Oh, I see. You're horny."

Kent cleared his throat. "I believe we've had more than one discussion about that adjective."

"Right," Cali corrected, frowning as she peered at the cellulite on the top of the back of her thighs. "You're not horny. You're lascivious."

"You haven't answered my question."

"Yes, you can spend the night tonight. I told you I'm better. I've been feeling really good today, in fact. There was no sense in your coming over when I was sick—all you could have done was stare at me as I felt bad and probably gotten yelled at for your trouble. It's just been a few days without sex."

"Four days. And I wasn't complaining."

Cali smiled. "If you want to know the truth, I've been rather lascivious today myself."

"Is that right?" His tone was pitched to convey approval.

"Yes," she admitted. "But don't get too cocky. I've been blaming it on hormones. In fact, I was so lascivious this afternoon that I had to, er...take care of it myself."

He made a throaty sound of interest. "Please continue."

"It's really not all that exciting. I don't do anything very sexy when I'm on my own. Mostly just get in there and get it done."

"Surely you can make it more exciting than that. What were you thinking about?"

And that was a loaded question if ever there was one. Cali usually didn't fantasize much when she just wanted a quick orgasm fix, but Kent clearly wanted to hear something hot, so she figured she might as well indulge him.

It might make things more exciting later tonight.

"I might have had a particular man in mind as I was touching myself," she murmured huskily.

There was a brief pause. Then, "If you tell me you were fantasizing about a movie star or that Olympic swimmer you like, I'll be decidedly peeved."

Cali gurgled with amusement, doing her best to keep it sexy—although she could never sustain the sexy act for very long. "Nope. Not a movie star. Not the swimmer. The Speedo just doesn't do it for me."

After another moment of silence, Kent asked, his voice slightly thicker than normal, "What *does* do it for you?"

"Business suits," she answered—keeping the extra texture in her voice. "Expensive business suits in black and gray. And silk ties. And French blue shirts."

"French blue, huh?"

"Uh huh," she affirmed throatily. "And short dark hair and a great body with the most irresistible bit of flesh on the side and..."

"And what?"

Despite the fairly tame subject matter—Cali wasn't about to engage in phone sex less than an hour before her guests arrived—her sexy act was definitely working. She could hear it in Kent's voice. So she concluded as seductively as she could, "And skillful hands, a talented mouth and an absolutely incredible cock."



"And what were you imagining this dream man would do with those particular attributes?"

She thought quickly, trying to think up an appropriately erotic fantasy. "I imagined that I had gone over to his office—he's a powerful man and works downtown, you see—and I'd teased him a little bit to distract him from his work. Until finally he turned me around, bent me over his desk, pulled up my skirt and fucked me from behind."

There was another pause while Kent absorbed this. "And how was it?"

"In the fantasy? It was amazing. I was clawing at the desk while he took me hard and fast. And it felt so good I wanted to scream. I tried to hold back, so his secretary wouldn't hear, but I was crying out from the pleasure when I finally came." She gave a strategic pause. Then added, "In real life, it was okay, but it would have been much more exciting if I hadn't been on my own."

"We'll have to take care of that this evening, then." Kent voice was low and gravelly.

"Sounds good." Peering at herself in the mirror, her voice shifted back to normal. "You should see my new black lace bra and panties. That's all I'm wearing right now. I'll be dressed by the time you get here, though, so you'll have to just imagine them under my clothes."

"Maybe I'll drag you off between courses and have a look for myself."

Cali chuckled. "Don't even think about it. My dad is going to be here. You are not allowed to even have sexy thoughts when he's present."

Kent grumbled.

"I've got to finish getting dressed," Cali said, still laughing a little. "See you in thirty-five minutes. And don't you dare be late."

When they'd hung up, Cali put the phone down and hurried into the bathroom. She squirmed a little as she realized that, in trying to taunt Kent, she'd gotten herself a little excited as well.

Which was very inconvenient, since it was going to be a while before she could act on it.

Trying to ignore her physical condition, she put on her makeup. Was pleased with how polished and elegant she looked when she was done. Then she fluffed out her hair, trying to give it a little more body.

She almost squealed when she heard a knock at the door, afraid that her guests were a half-hour early. She didn't have any clothes on yet.

But then she heard a key in the lock and realized that it must be Kent.

"It's me," Kent called out, affirming her suspicions.

"How did you get here so soon? You must have been on your way when we were talking."

"I was," he acknowledged, coming into the bathroom, looking cool, expensive and gorgeous in a black suit and French blue shirt.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He came to stand behind her as she put her brush down on the polished surface of the bathroom vanity. "You didn't ask." His voice and expression were intense and possessive and...hot.

She curled up her lip in amusement and met his eyes in the mirror in front of them. "Got you all hot and bothered, did I?"

He sneered. "Exactly as you intended."

"Well, in a few hours, we can fuck until we're both limp and exhausted," she promised, giving him an exaggerated leer.

Kent wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her barely clothed body back against him. "I'm not waiting for a few hours," he countered huskily, his mouth against the side of her throat and the vibrations making her shiver.

She shook her head, although she'd felt tingling pleasure between her legs at his words. "You'll have to. I'm all fixed up and pretty now and you're not going to get me sweaty and mess up my makeup before everyone arrives."

His other arm went around her too and his hands moved up to cup her breasts over the lace of her bra. Then his pelvis pushed into the top of her ass and she felt the hard evidence of his arousal. "I won't mess up your makeup."

Cali bit off a moan as he fondled her breasts, but her body was relaxing against his and she was already plenty aroused. His eyes were hot and hungry and she could see them crawling over her body in the reflection from the mirror. "Kent," she breathed, her body wriggling against the bulge in his pants. "We don't have much time."

"We have plenty of time." He was thrusting his pelvis into her rhythmically and Cali couldn't help but thrust back.

"I suppose I could change my mind," she began, her intimate muscles clenching every time he pushed into her. She'd pretty much decided by this point that he had the right idea, but—in order to keep him from getting too pompous—she glanced back over her shoulder and managed to tease, "But why bother, since you seem to be having a nice little dry hump back there?"

She could feel him chuckling behind her, but instead of expressing his amusement, he leaned down and mouthed her shoulder. Then he slid one of his hands lower to cup her groin, massaging her aroused flesh through the black lace as he spoke. "Hmm. Doesn't feel very dry to me."

And then he bit down on her shoulder.

Cali yelped as a jolt of exquisite pleasure shot through her. She reached out to grab the edge of the sink as his hands worked over her breast and between her legs. "Maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe we can indulge your lasciviousness," she said unevenly, her pelvis grinding into the touch of his hand as the friction started building up into a deep pressure at her center.

Kent smiled predatorily. "Only *my* lasciviousness?" he prompted, removing his hand.

She whimpered at the loss of the friction. "I might be a little horny too," she admitted, squirming against him. "But we have to be quick."

"Agreed," Kent replied, clearly very pleased with this turn of events. He unclasped her bra and pulled it away from her skin. Spent a minute massaging her bare breasts, while Cali watched their reflections in dazed desire as his hands moved over the full swells of her flesh.

Then his hands slid lower and she felt his fingers on her new black panties.

"Don't you dare rip them," she warned. "They're new." Kent made a growling sound as he nibbled the back of her neck. "A very wise purchase," he murmured. And, instead of tearing them off her, he pushed them down over her hips until they fell to her feet.

Cali had a brief moment of self-consciousness, as she thought about Kent peering at her bare butt—even after all this time, she would prefer that he not look too closely at her cellulite. But then his hands were caressing her, from her hips up to her breasts and back down again.

And, when he gently pushed her forward until she was bent over the sink, she forgot all about her cellulite.

She stared at herself in the mirror in front of her—her elegantly made-up face and shiny hair a strangely erotic contrast with her position. She could hear Kent unfastening his pants, but that was all he bothered to do. When his hands moved to grip the flesh of her ass, he was still wearing his suit jacket, shirt and tie.

His face changed briefly as he met her eyes in the mirror. "Are you sure you want to do this now? You're feeling all right?"

She smiled and wiggled her hips in frustration. "You don't really think you could talk me into it if I didn't want to, do you? You're not *that* irresistible."

He returned her smile briefly and then his eyes took on that wild, feral look again. He pushed her legs open a little and nudged at her swollen flesh with his cock. "So you want this?"

She moaned at the tantalizing little nudges he was giving her. "Yeah. I want it." When he didn't move, she added, "Kent, please."

He thrust forward, his hard flesh pushing into her body, her wet muscles making way for his substance and then clinging to it as he sank in completely.

Cali tried to grab onto something, but the smooth surface of the sink top was slick and solid. "God," she gasped, her pelvis already pumping back into him slightly.

"Good?" he asked, his voice a throaty caress. His face was tight and controlled in the mirror and he was gazing hungrily at her flushed face.

"Yeah, Kent," she urged, the pressure at her center becoming torturous. "Move, move."

He began to thrust, starting out steady and exquisitely slowly, but he couldn't sustain the leisurely rhythm very long. She could feel how much he wanted her in the coiled tension of his body and soon he was pumping into her channel with a fast, delicious staccato.

Cali bit her lip at the rising pleasure and felt the cool surface of the sink top against the skin of her forearms and her jiggling breasts. Her eyes kept falling shut, but she couldn't seem to let them remain closed.

Her gaze was inescapably drawn to the reflection in the mirror in front of her.

From her low angle, Kent looked fully clothed behind her—professional, sophisticated, elegant—but he was fucking her like an animal, grunting out rough monosyllables, his eyes primal, his face damp and strained.

She was panting, grinding her hips back against him and feeling the tension grow in her thighs and belly.

"Like this, baby?" he asked roughly, adjusting his hands on the flesh of her ass.

"Fuck," she gritted, trying to keep herself from whimpering with the lush pleasure and wild thrill of their lovemaking. "Fuck, Kent, just like that."

He gave a choked groan as her body gyrated in response to his forceful motion and his head jerked to the side when she squeezed around his cock.

When he'd found his control again, Kent shifted his angle slightly, until his thrusts were hitting her g-spot. Cali made a helpless mewling sound as she felt shuddering pleasure shoot out from the driving of his cock inside her.

"Yeah," she gasped harshly. "More, Kent. Yeah. Hard, fast." Her fingernails were clawing at the slick surface of the sink, futilely groping for purchase.

With a strangled grunt, Kent sped up his motion, his fingers digging into her skin. He was looking down now, probably watching his slick cock rapidly slide in and out of her body.

Suddenly, the rising sensations, in combination with the reflected image of her flushed, contorted face and naked body folded over the sink, was almost too much for Cali. "Oh, God," she choked, feeling his balls jostling against her deliciously. Then she heard herself making pathetic, uncontrolled whimpers and she turned her head to the side, away from the mirror.

But there was a mirror on the side wall as well and she could see her breasts and hair swaying with their fierce rhythm, her expression wild and overcome as Kent thrust into her with primitive need behind her.

"Ah, ah, ah," she choked out, her hoarse cries matching themselves to the tempo of Kent's thrusts. The pressure at her center was too deep, too strong, too much—and it kept rising but wouldn't release itself.

So she clumsily groped down with one hand until she managed to finger her clit. She rubbed at it desperately, practically sobbing with pleasure, frustration and need.

"Yes," Kent hissed, his eyes fixed now on her frantic face. "Come, baby, come."

"Ah!" she cried out at the moment right before the tension shattered inside her.

Then it did.

She came hard, thrashing against the hard sink as he kept thrusting into her contractions. Her eyes had squeezed shut involuntarily and she almost choked on the pleasure as waves of sensation washed over her.

As she came down, she was gasping and still trying to clutch at the smooth surface of the vanity with one hand. But Kent kept drilling into her and the tight friction from his cock was still delicious and excruciatingly potent.

His eyes were primal and possessive as he watched her shudder and wheeze in the wake of her climax. "Kent," she gasped, looking at his familiar face in the mirror. "Kent, sweetie, you come too."

Kent made a harsh burst of sound and hooked a hand around one of her thighs, lifting her leg up so she was forced open to him even more.

Cali held on as best she could, physically helpless but feeling wild and hot and possessive all at once.

This was Kent. Her Kent. The sophisticated businessman who could fuck her until she screamed. And everything he hid underneath it. All of it was hers.

Her eyes were tender as they locked onto his and something nameless and deep was silently spoken in the shared gaze.

"Cali," he forced out, in the thick strangled voice he used just before he climaxed.

She'd continued to rub her clit, so that her channel would keep clenching around his cock in the way she knew drove him wild and suddenly Cali felt another orgasm swell up from the remnants of the first.

"God, Kent!" she cried breathlessly, rubbing frantically at her clit until the pressure erupted once more.

This time she kept her eyes open. Saw her face washed with pleasure as her naked body convulsed over her bathroom sink.

Kent let out a rough shout, his entire body tightening like a clenched fist. And then his hips jerked spasmodically. His neck twitched, tossing his head. His cock pulsed, his body pulsed—and he released himself inside her.

He was repeating—over and over again, in a helpless, throaty whisper as he came—"Cali."

She was shaking and still bent over the sink when she felt Kent start to pull himself together. His body felt hot and relaxed against her and his expression had softened with a languid satisfaction.

"Kent," she said at last, wriggling in her trapped position. "This isn't entirely comfortable."

He blinked and stood up, releasing his hold on her and slipping his wet, softening cock from her body. "Sorry. You all right?"

"Yeah." She smiled at him but groaned as she straightened her back. "It was definitely worth a little stiffness. Although I'm going to pay for this tomorrow." She rubbed at her back and thighs, already knowing they'd be sore the next day.

Kent pulled her into a hug and she burrowed against him, loving how warm, relaxed and tender he always was after they made love.

But, when she felt fluid leaking down her inner thigh, she pulled away. "Now we have to hurry. They're going to be here in a few minutes." She checked out her reflection in the mirror and was relieved to see that she hadn't sweated so much that she'd have to reapply her makeup. A little powder and she should be fine. There was nothing she could do about her flaming red cheeks, anyway.

Kent wiped the fluid off his cock, tucked in his shirt and refastened his pants. Then he was ready to go, looking pulled together and handsome—just a little warmer and more sated than usual.

Cali, however, had a little more to do before she was ready. So she pushed him out of the bathroom and told him to go open a bottle of wine.

A few minutes later, she joined him in the kitchen. Her hair was a little rumpled and her cheeks were still red, but she was fully dressed and didn't appear to be any worse for wear.

She was giving Kent an appreciative peck on the lips when there was a knock on the door.

They let in Jim and his girlfriend of six months—Cheryl. Cheryl lived in Jim's apartment building, was about ten years younger than he was and was both sweet and funny. Cali liked her a lot and she loved to see her father so happy.

A few minutes later, Aaron walked over from next door, towing the new girlfriend he'd found in Florida. When Aaron had first come back, he'd stopped by to say hi, clearly a little nervous about sharing his news with her. Cali, who'd been equally nervous about telling him about Kent, laughed when he told her and they'd fallen into a casual friendship. And he'd occasionally still drop by to borrow something from her.

Everyone was making small talk when there was another knock a few minutes later. This time, Alice and her attractive, blond, much-younger husband came in. Their plane had arrived that afternoon, but Alice had refused to let Cali pick them up, saying she needed some downtime after the flight before she was suitable company again. They were staying at a hotel—again at Alice's insistence—so this was the first time Cali had seen Alice since Cali had visited Seattle a few months ago.

After appropriate greetings and introductions were made, Cali went over to the kitchen to get her lasagna out of the oven. She hadn't made lasagna since her father's birthday party – it seemed like ages ago now – and the smell of it as she pulled it out of the oven made Cali smile, remembering that other night with her father, Kent and Aaron. And then remembering being on the floor with Kent in the kitchen, after she'd dropped the rolls.

Cali gave a little jerk when she realized that someone was behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see Alice.

"Admit it. You just had sex," Alice hissed.

Cali's jaw dropped open. "That's none of your business," she replied in outrage, "and how the hell did you know?"

Alice shook her head "You're glowing orgasmically. It's disgustingly sweet. And Kent looks ridiculously relaxed and possessive."

Brushing her best friend away and flushing a little, Cali pretended to look for her salad tongs. "Mind your own business."

"Fine," Alice grumbled. "Don't tell me all the dirty details." She paused for a beat. Then added, "It was rear entry, wasn't it?"

Cali almost strangled on her shock and indignation. "It was not."

Alice chuckled maliciously. "Don't lie to me. He has that macho glint in his eyes. I'd know that look anywhere. I'm an anthropologist, remember? And mating rituals are one of my specialties."

"Would you shut up?" Cali whispered, torn between embarrassment and amusement. "We are not talking about this with both Kent and my father at the dining room table."

"Right. You can fill me in later." Cali had picked up the lasagna and was starting to carry it to the table when Alice murmured, "You'll have to tell me how he got you off twice."

Cali almost dropped the lasagna.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cali had been looking forward to the dinner party for a long time, but she had also been a little nervous. Despite the fact that he was no longer a threat, Kent still acted a little territorial around Aaron. Plus, Alice and Kent had never met. And, while she was sure Kent would behave appropriately around her best friend, she couldn't necessarily say the same about Alice.

She was afraid Alice might want to have a little fun with Kent. And she was quite sure Kent wouldn't like that.

But, as it turned out, dinner went off swimmingly. Despite Alice's teasing in the kitchen, she seemed to be on her best behavior – which was charming and witty. Kent

too was particularly easygoing that evening, perhaps thanks to the tension-relieving session they'd had before the guests arrived.

Cali was happy, relaxed and having a very good time when she brought out coffee and the chocolate torte she'd made for dessert.

Which was, of course, why she wasn't prepare for Alice to eye Kent in a casual, innocent way. "So when are you going to propose to Cali?"

Cali slopped the coffee she'd been pouring. Kent's mouth dropped open a little as he stared at Alice speechlessly.

And no one else was any help at all. Jim and Alice's husband were snickering audibly, while the others were hiding their grins.

"Well?" Alice prompted with a straight face, when no one responded to her question. "You *are* planning to propose, aren't you? You two have been dating for ages. Cali will be forty pretty soon—and you're not getting any younger."

"Alice," Cali choked out, swatting her friend on the shoulder. This was exactly what she'd been afraid of. She knew it was just Alice's good-natured teasing, but there was no telling how Kent would react. "Stop it at once."

Alice blinked. "What? Have I stepped over the line? I thought you two were in love."

"We *are* in love," Kent answered, having now pulled himself together. He looked cool and composed as he answered, "But that doesn't necessarily mean that marriage must follow. The one doesn't always equal the other."

Cali felt a little clench in her chest. She wasn't in any hurry to get married and it had never been one of her lifelong ambitions. But the truth was that she did eventually want to marry Kent. And to hear him dismiss it so indifferently was a little upsetting. But she kept her face neutral as she finished pouring coffee for her guests.

"Of course, you don't have to get married just because you're in love," Alice replied impatiently. "But my question is still valid. You love Cali and she loves you. You're not planning to dump her and move on to someone else, are you?"

"Of course not," Kent insisted, as if the words had burst out of him before he'd thought them through.

Alice's mouth twitched in amusement. "So why not make an honest woman out of her."

Cali snorted. "I can't believe you just said that."

"I know. But I've always wanted to use that particular line in a conversation. And this is probably the only opportunity I'll ever have to do so."

Kent was just eyeing Alice with cool skepticism.

"Well?" Alice prodded. "Why not? I understand you're a little reserved and Cali's said you sometimes need to be hit over the head before you'll admit what you want, so—"



"Alice," Cali interrupted brusquely, getting suddenly anxious as she saw Kent's expression close down a little. "That's enough. You're embarrassing me."

"I've never understood why people get embarrassed at all. We're just speaking the truth, aren't we?"

"But it's private," Cali insisted, glaring furiously at her friend.

Alice made a face. "Is it?" She glanced at Aaron. "You know they're in love, don't you?"

Aaron nodded and looked amused.

"And you know too, don't you?" Alice said to Jim. She was calm and articulate. Clearly in her element and doing what she loved to do.

"Of course," Jim affirmed. "I've been waiting for them to get married for almost a year now."

Cali groaned and Kent shifted his eyes to her face, giving her a questioning, assessing look that she had no way to interpret.

Now that she studied him, Cali decided he didn't look cold, exactly. He looked almost...intrigued, as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of all this.

"All right," she said firmly. "Stop this right now. You all are not going to gang up on us and force us to declare ourselves engaged. If we do ever get married – and there's no reason why we have to – then we'll decide that for ourselves."

"But my question wasn't for *you*," Alice countered. "I was asking Kent. And we know he's not afraid of marriage in general – since he's been married many, many times before. So what's the problem?"

Kent narrowed his eyes slightly. "I'll go with Cali's answer. Other people's expectations are irrelevant. My previous marriages have no similarity to my relationship with Cali, so there can be no comparison. And Cali and I will decide the timing of when we get married on our own."

Well, Cali reflected, that didn't sound too bad. In fact, it sounded like marriage was a definite possibility.

"Your timing is certainly unusual," Jim put in. "It took you forever to even ask her out on a real date."

Kent shrugged. "Ours has not been the traditional relationship."

Despite her annoyance with Alice and her father, Cali chuckled at this. "That's for sure. Some couples would have kids graduating from high school at our age."

Giving her another considering look, Kent didn't reply in words.

Alice did. "Don't you dare start to call yourself old again."

"I'm not," Cali assured her. "I don't think I'm old. But I've gone through this experience..." She shifted in her chair self-consciously, but she made herself continue, although she couldn't meet Kent's eyes, "Finding the man I love and want to spend my life with—later than often happens. So it's changed the nature of our relationship."

Neither of us is young or inexperienced. We lived whole lives before we got together. So we bring something different to our love than other couples."

Despite herself, Cali had to glance up to check Kent's expression. And she was shocked speechless by the depth and tenderness of his gaze. His eyes locking on hers, he murmured, low and only to her, "It's been our renaissance."

Intimate words in a very public space.

Only Cali would know how intimate the words actually were. And how astounding it was to hear Kent speak them.

Her eyes burned momentarily and she wanted to embrace him, hold him against her, never let him go. All she did, however, was cover his hand with hers.

Everyone else at the table was gazing at them fondly and when she realized it Cali flushed in deeper embarrassment. She was more uncomfortable about being caught acting sappy than she would have been if they'd found out Kent had fucked her over the sink before they'd arrived.

"Renaissance," Alice's husband said casually. "A rebirth? Like you guys have been able to start again now that you're together?"

Cali shook her head. "No. We haven't started again. The Renaissance was about maturity," she explained, using the words Kent had spoken to her in the Landon Industries vault more than a year ago. "So, instead of a rebirth, this is us growing into ourselves. It's the culmination of all the years we lived before we decided to live them together."

She couldn't believe she'd said such earnest, heartfelt words out loud. Darting her eyes up to Kent's face, she tried to gauge his reaction. He looked cool and impersonal, but Cali—knowing him as she did—could see the love and softness in his eyes.

"Too silly?" she murmured, trying to pitch her voice as dry.

Cheryl sniffed a little, clearly overcome by the sentiment. "I think I might cry."

Alice tried to smother a giggle, but failed miserably. And then Jim chuckled. And then Aaron snorted. And then everyone was laughing except Kent and Cali.

Cali sighed and looked up at Kent. He was looking down at her face and to her relief he was now smiling. "They're laughing at us," she said. "They don't appreciate the brilliance of the Renaissance analogy."

Kent leaned over and kissed her softly on the mouth. "What do they know?"

Cali decided he was right.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Cali had finally said goodbye to the last of her guests, she returned to the kitchen to find Kent stacking dishes in her sink.

She went over and gave him a hug from behind. "Hey," she said, pressing her cheek against his back.

"Hey," he replied warmly, turning around and draping his arms around her waist.

"Sorry about that stuff over dessert. I hope it wasn't too weird for you. I know you're used to people being more...civilized."

Kent shrugged. "They didn't scare me away, if that's what you're afraid of."

"Only briefly," she admitted. "They were pretty rude and obnoxious."

"They're family. Or pretty close to family. Isn't that what they do?"

"Yeah. At least, mine does."

They stood silently for a few minutes, their arms wrapped around each other. Until Cali finally got up the courage to say, "You know, I'm perfectly happy with the way things are between us. I hope you don't think I want more than this because of what they said."

Kent was studying her face intently. "So you don't want to get married?"

"Maybe," she replied. "Eventually. But I'm not just waiting around for it. I love how we are together now. So if you don't want to—"

"I do want to," Kent interrupted quietly. Before Cali could react, he continued, "I do want to marry you. But I don't want to rush it."

It didn't feel to Cali like there was any way their timing could be considered a rush. But she didn't say that. Just nodded. Waited for him to explain.

"I don't mean we'd move too fast," he said, glancing away as if he were trying to find the right words. "It's just that all my life I've just grabbed at anything I wanted, trying to snatch it up before it got taken away from me and then clinging to it with all of my might. I don't want to do that with you. I don't want to act like I'm going to lose you if I don't move quickly enough."

Cali nestled against him, feeling a little overwhelmed. "You're not going to lose me, Kent."

"So I'm trying to act against my instincts and just enjoy how things are between us right now." He lifted up her chin. "I *am* going to marry you one day."

She felt a rush of tingling delight at his words. But corrected, "Provided that I say yes."

"Right." After a moment, he queried, "You will say yes, won't you?"

Giggling, she kissed a hollow of his throat. "Very likely."

"But there's no hurry."

She smiled. "No hurry at all."

## Epilogue

A week later, Cali stared at her birth control pills blankly, a heavy feeling in her gut. It was likely just a fKent, but the possible implications had given her stomach flutters all week. And so she'd broken down today and scheduled a doctor's appointment for tomorrow.

Which meant tonight she'd have to tell Kent.

She had no idea how he'd react.

It must be just a fKent. She was rigidly faithful with her birth control and so the likelihood was very low. It was probably nothing.

She stared at herself in the mirror of Kent's master bath—Cali Ross, almost forty years old, wondering if she'd accidentally gotten pregnant.

Cali washed her face and brushed her teeth, with the extra toothbrush she left over at Kent's now. Glancing down at herself in her cotton pajama pants and tank top, she decided this wasn't going to be a sexy night.

Kent was still working in his office in the back of his penthouse, so she figured she'd just go to bed, wondering whether falling asleep before he joined her would give her a legitimate excuse for not telling Kent tonight.

But she was given no chance to consider it. When she turned around, she jerked to an abrupt halt.

Kent was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, eyeing her curiously and wearing only a pair of black pants. "What is it?" he asked.

She almost answered, "Nothing," in automatic response, but then she bit her lip and decided not to be stupid. "I'm late."

He blinked and glanced instinctively at his wrist, where he usually wore his watch.

Despite her anxiety, Cali snickered. "Not late like that. My period is late."

He blinked again, but was otherwise frozen in place. His expression was unreadable and it made Cali's heart sink a little.

She wasn't sure how she felt about this whole situation, but she'd been kind of hoping that Kent wouldn't be upset about it.

"How late?" he asked at last.

"A week."

His brow furrowed. "Has that ever happened before?"

"A week wouldn't mean anything to some women, but I've always been like clockwork." When he said nothing, she added in a small voice, "I've made a doctor's appointment tomorrow."

He nodded. "So we'll wait and see." Then, with that, he started into the bedroom.

"Kent," she persisted, following him. "Can we talk about this a little?"

Kent sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up at her calmly. "How do you feel about it?"

Sighing, she sank down next to him, leaning against him as if she needed his support. "I don't know. I've never really wanted kids and I never expected to have them, since I'm almost forty. But..."

"But what?" he prompted, putting his arm around her.

Cali placed her hand on her belly. "But, if this is our baby, it would be different."

"Of course."

She peered at his face, but still couldn't get a reading. He was closed off, hiding behind his barriers. Groaning, she flopped backward until she was sprawled on the bed. "Birth control is supposed to keep this from happening."

Kent narrowed his eyes as he watched her. "Unfortunately, birth control isn't perfect."

Cali didn't like the fact that he'd used the word "unfortunately". "Tell me about it. I'm too old to have a baby."

Kent's hand stroked her hip softly and then slid up to her belly. "Don't be ridiculous," he said tightly, his tone a stark contrast to his gentle touch.

"It might be nothing. Maybe it's some sort of early menopause."

"Cali," he murmured, an edge of warning in his voice.

Cali exhaled in pleasure as he caressed her belly under her tank top. She was really confused and worried, but would feel a lot better if she could be sure that this was something that Kent might want. "Kent," she whispered at last, trying to interpret the stillness of his silent profile. "Kent, what do you think about all of this?"

He turned his head until he could meet her eyes. "I'm with you, Cali, no matter what. Let's just see what we find out tomorrow."

A lot of the tension eased in her chest and she grabbed Kent's hand and brought it from her belly to her lips. Kissed his palm. "Okay," she agreed, although part of her still wondered if Kent even wanted a child. He'd always been so adamant about never being a father.

They got under the covers quietly and Kent took her in his arms. Kissed and stroked her until she was breathless and aroused. He undressed her and she fumbled until she was able to push down his pants.

Then she pulled him down over her, his body warm, solid and heavy above her. Her hands stroked the smooth planes of his back, the firm curve of his ass, the taut skin and ridges of his skull.

He was kissing her deeply, his tongue seeking and loving. Then his mouth trailed along her jaw, her neck, her hairline.

Their breathing accelerated as both of them became more and more aroused from their embrace.

Cali could feel his warm breath wafting over her flushed skin, could feel the hardness of his erection against her thigh. She silently clawed at his ass with one hand and found his cock with the other, pulling him into position.

Then Kent's fingers traced delicately along her inner thighs, brushed through the damp curls between her legs, fingered her open, slid along her slick, swollen flesh.

She released a breathless grunt of pleasure at his touch. Then another one as she felt the head of his cock nudging at her entrance.

Kent met her eyes in the dim room and she saw love and need and naked tenderness on his face that left her feeling stunned and overwhelmed.

"Kent," she breathed. "Kent, now."

He slid into her, filling her, stretching her, making her groan in response. Then he thrust slowly, deeply, his eyes never leaving her face. And Cali understood what he was silently telling her, understood his love, his commitment, his support, his unalterable presence in her life—no matter how their circumstances might change.

Her eyes burned with emotion, with pleasure, as the rich sensations coalesced beneath her belly. She bent up her legs until her heels were pushing into his ass. And Kent's thrusts grew shorter, more erratic, as her altered position drew him in even deeper.

Kent nudged his arms under her shoulders, lifting her into an embrace. Kissed her clumsily, tenderly, as they panted and moaned into each other's mouth.

Cali's orgasm was building, but it wouldn't crest without help. So she tried to squeeze her hand between their bodies. Had some trouble, since his weight was resting on her hips.

"Kent."

With a muffled groan, he lifted off her enough for her to get her hand into position. Then he lowered himself back into place, so her hand was trapped between them.

It didn't matter. She rubbed at her clit, feeling an immediate relief as the built-up pressure leapt forward from the additional stimulation. Then Kent sank back down into a kiss, his lips urgent, hungry and uncoordinated.

Cali whimpered as she felt herself cresting. Kent was everywhere, all over her—his heat and weight a thrill and comfort both. She slid one of her hands down until she could squeeze the extra flesh on his side, the one soft part of his lean, hard body. Her arms and legs were twitching and jerking as she climbed closer to her peak and she gasped out, "Kent!" as the deep tension was finally let go.

She thrashed and spasmed beneath him, around him and her vision blurred from the pulsing pleasure.

Kent gave a few last, deep pushes into her clenching muscles. Choked out, "Cali. Love you. Cali." Froze for a potent, silent moment.

Then he was coming, throbbing, releasing his coiled need in a rush of transforming pleasure.

He collapsed on top of her and she drew him in. They embraced tightly, desperately, speechlessly – the only sound the mingled texture of their heavy breathing.

Eventually, she shifted until he rolled them both to their sides. He pressed sweet little kisses around her mouth, his softening cock still inside her.

After a long, sated, tender stretch of time, Cali whispered, “Kent. I know you’re with me all the way. But can’t you tell me how you feel about this?”

Kent pulled back. Met her eyes. Quirked his lips. “I’m trying not to get too excited before we know anything for sure.”

“Oh,” she said, giving his side another instinctive squeeze. Then the lingering tension in her heart eased completely in a rush of happiness, as she realized that Kent wouldn’t just accept being a father to their child.

He actually wanted to be one.

And, for the first time that week, she was able to move beyond her nerves and confusion. And began to feel a little excited herself.

They wouldn’t know until tomorrow. But either way things were going to be good.

## About the Author

Zannie Adams writes, reads, and caters to her chocolate-brown cocker spaniel, and watches cooking shows on television. She has lived in eight different states, had far too much graduate-level education, and generally done her best not to settle down. She has been writing novels all her life, but only recently did she begin to write erotic romances—a genre that has allowed her to explore her love of both passion and commitment.

Zannie prefers to spend most of her time writing, but she has to stop occasionally to teach writing and literature at a liberal arts college and to walk her dog. She lives in the Midwest.

Zannie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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