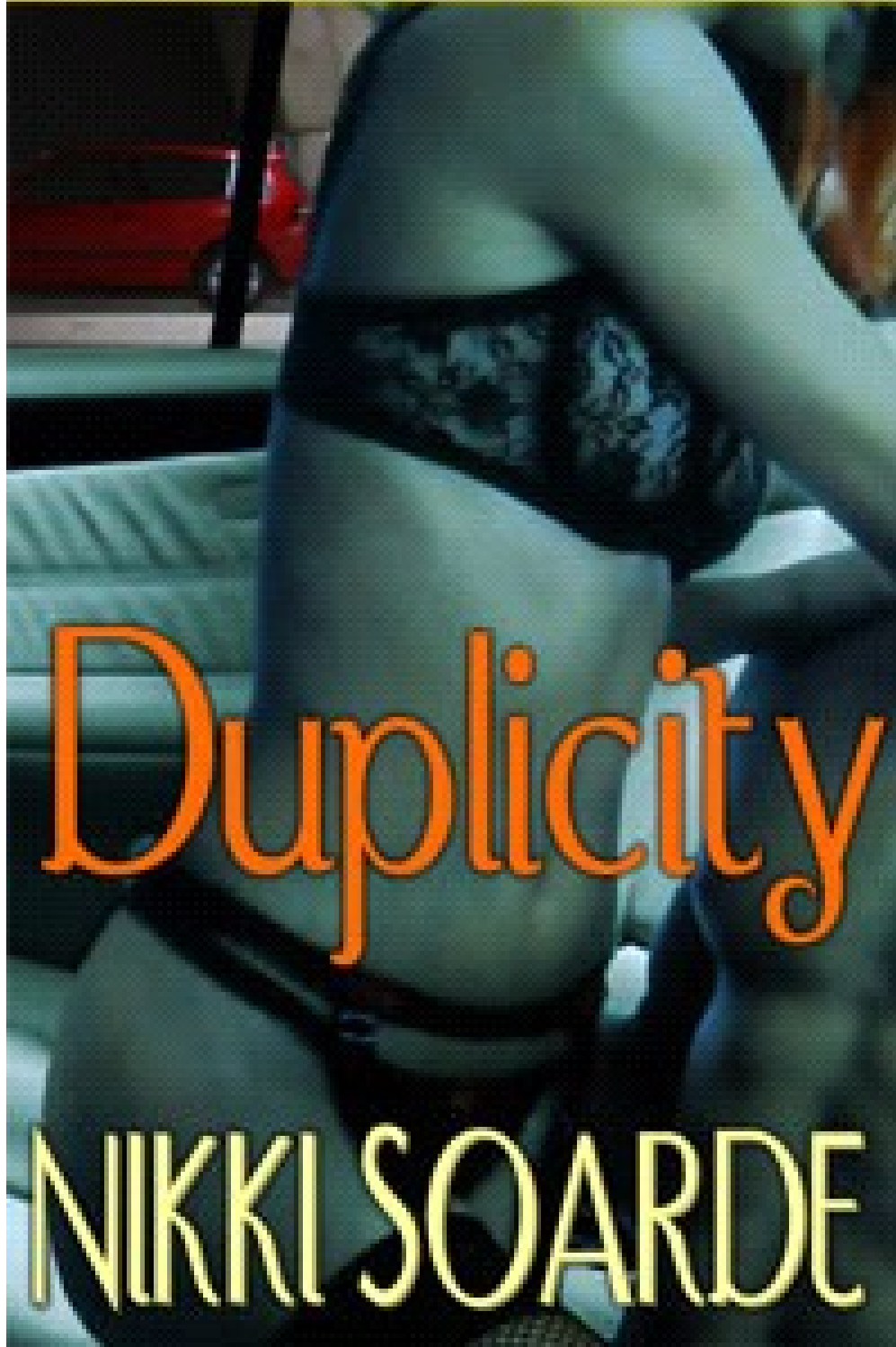


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



# Duplicity

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# **DUPLICITY**

**Nikki Soarde**

## Prologue

"I did it." Sylvia sank down into the chair and propped her elbows on the small wrought iron table. She picked up a napkin and dabbed at the sweat that had pooled between her breasts.

"How did he take it?" Her companion looked up from her latte, her expression cool.

Sylvia motioned to the waiter and ordered a Long Island Iced Tea. She gazed out across the glittering waters of Toronto Harbor, her lips twisting into an enigmatic smile. "He looked like I'd backed over him with a truck."

Her companion chuckled. "Well, I suppose in a way you did."

Sylvia looked down at her perfectly manicured hands, the flash of hot pink fingernails. "You're sure this is going to work?"

"Positive." She took a sip of her coffee. "He just needs waking up. He needs reminding of what's...important. And this is the best way to do it."

The drink arrived and Sylvia took a long pull on her straw.

Her companion considered her. "You trust me, don't you?"

Sylvia shrugged, twirling the ice in her drink. "Of course. It's just that..."

"Just that what?"

"I guess I'm just a little...nervous. It doesn't feel right."

"Don't worry, by the time all this is done, it'll feel just fine." Her companion drained her enormous cup and set it precisely back on its saucer. "If I have anything to say about it, it'll feel absolutely perfect."

## Chapter One

Lee studied her computer monitor and frowned. It didn't seem to matter how hard she stared, how much she concentrated, or how many glasses of iced tea she drank, nothing helped. There was something inherently wrong.

Something about this marketing scheme wasn't working, wasn't...ringing true. Her team had come up with some ideas on Friday and she'd decided to bring the work home for the weekend, turn something vague and insubstantial into something concrete, into another campaign that would boost sales and net hundreds of thousands of dollars for her company. It was what she did best, after all, and what had landed her the big promotion a year ago.

She grinned, her fingers relaxing on the keyboard as she recalled the looks of surprise and outrage on her colleagues' faces—her male colleagues—when her name had been announced as the new manager of marketing. Lee didn't consider herself a feminist, but she did believe that hard work and dedication should be rewarded, regardless of gender. The recognition and affirmation had been welcomed and well-deserved. The green steam spewing out of her competitors' ears had just been a nice little perk.

She sighed, the smile slipping from her face. There was nothing like basking in past glories, especially when confronted by fresh challenges, but basking didn't get her anywhere. If she didn't buckle down and figure this one out, the sun would set on her career and she'd have nothing left to bask *in*.

Maybe iced tea didn't have a big enough kick. Maybe she just needed a bigger dose of caffeine. Maybe a pot of strong hot coffee would put a fresh perspective on things. She stood slowly, allowing her sweaty thighs to gradually separate from the vinyl office chair she'd picked up at a garage sale last month. She stretched out stiff back muscles and ran her fingers through her short mop of hair, lifting it off her neck to allow some sweat to evaporate.

The July heat wave was almost enough to tempt her to turn on her air conditioning. Almost, but not quite. Living in Toronto meant she spent enough time holed up in closed-in boxes, bundled up against bitter temperatures and winter blizzards. She hated to waste the too-short summer trapped behind closed windows breathing recycled air. She walked over to the window and allowed a light breeze to sweep across her skin. She looked toward the kitchen and was just considering the idea of iced coffee when the ring of the phone cut through the moment.

She didn't rush, allowing it to ring two more times before crossing the room and picking up the cordless phone that sat on the counter. It was her day off,

after all.

She clicked it on. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Her temper immediately bubbled. These dang solicitation services... "I said *hello!*"

"L-Lee?" asked a familiar voice. "Is that you?"

She blinked in surprise. "Carter?"

"Oh, good. I..I wasn't sure there for a second."

Lee sat down slowly in her vinyl office chair. Something was off, and it wasn't just the fact that Carter had never called her at home before. They talked at work. They never talked at home. "Is everything okay?"

"Okay?" She heard something rustle in the background. "Uh...sure. Everything's fine."

"You don't sound fine." His voice sounded heavy, dull, not at all like his usual vibrant, mischievous self.

He heaved a long sigh. "Don't I?"

"No. You don't sound fine at all."

"Yeah, well... Maybe I'm not." Another rustling noise. "I just don't know."

Then it hit her. "Are you still in bed?"

His swallow was audible. "Bed? God, no. It's the middle of the afternoon. What would I still be doing in bed?"

"I don't know." She gentled her voice, made it as soothing as possible. "You just sounded tired, I guess."

"Oh. Well..." The moment stretched and Lee *knew* something was wrong. As long as she'd known him, Carter had never been at a loss for words.

"What's wrong, Carter? You called me for a reason. What is it?"

The pause was painful. "I just..." Another swallow. "I didn't know what else to do, who else to talk to. I've never felt like this before."

Her concern was mounting. "Like what?"

"Like I said, I don't know."

She blew out a slow breath, struggling for patience as well as calm. "Tell me what happened. Something must have—"

"Could you come over here?"

Her mouth hung open for a moment before she regained enough composure to speak. "To your apartment?" She blinked, still trying to absorb what he was asking of her.

"Yeah. I'd really appreciate it."

"B-but..." She was struggling for a plausible excuse and had no idea why.

She'd dreamed of having him ask her this question. Why was she hesitating now?

"I need you, Lee."

She began to melt and his next words finished the job.

"I could really use a friend today."

"Sure, Carter." She managed a sympathetic smile even though he couldn't see her. Even though her heart was racing a mile a minute and her stomach felt like lead. And then she looked down at herself and the smile mutated into a grimace. "But I can't leave right away. I...uh...have something I have to finish first."

"Oh." She heard the disappointment in his voice.

"But it won't take long."

"How long?"

She touched her T-shirt and her hand came away damp. She was sweaty and her hair was a mess. She needed a shower and about three hours at a beauty salon. Or at the very least a decent session with the blow dryer. "An hour?" She nodded, confirming it to herself. Forty minutes to transform herself and twenty minutes to drive to his place. "Yes. I can be there in an hour."

"Okay. Sure. That's not that long. Right?"

Her heart twisted for him, with the need to reach out and touch him. "Whatever it is, it'll be fine."

"I know."

"I'll be there soon."

"Okay. Bye."

The dial tone hummed in her ear and she took a moment to catch her breath. She had no idea what was going on, but she knew one thing—if Carter needed her, she'd be there for him.

That's what friends were for, after all. There were a lot of things about Carter that confused her, that she wasn't sure of, but there was one thing she never doubted—his friendship. She might question a lot of things, but she never questioned that.

She sprinted for the bathroom, hoping like hell she had a fresh razor in the cupboard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter stared at the phone for a moment before dropping it on the mattress. He raked his fingers through his hair and rubbed his eyes. Lee was coming. That

meant he had to get up and take a shower. He really should shower. He checked his cheeks for stubble. A day's worth. Not bad. Maybe he could skip the shave.

He hauled himself to a seated position, moved to the side of the bed and swung his feet to the floor. He sat there for a moment, gathering his strength and wondering for the fifteen-thousandth time what was wrong with him. Sure, his girlfriend of three years had broken up with him, but that had been two days ago. He should be better by now. Maybe not over it, but...better. And besides, *so what?*

So what if Sylvia had given him the old heave-ho without warning or any plausible explanation? Well, she'd given a reason, but it hadn't really made sense. So what if she'd walked out the door without looking back, or so much as an "It's been fun." So what if he'd always assumed they had a future together? He was an independent guy. He had a good job and a nice apartment and friends he could count on. Who said he needed a woman at all?

He shook his head and forced himself to stand. He made his feet move and started to walk, even though he had no idea where he was going.

Then again, maybe the problem wasn't that he needed Sylvia, but that he *didn't*. If he thought about it, he had to admit that her *big news* hadn't really hurt that much. Not like it should. And maybe that was exactly the problem. He was angry and upset, but more than anything he was confused, and his lack of emotional reaction only served to add to his confusion. Made him feel even more lost and alone. Maybe that was why he'd called Lee. When he'd picked up the phone he didn't have a clue whom he was calling or why, and then he'd found himself dialing her number and it had felt right.

Nothing had felt that right in a long time.

He found himself in the kitchen of his dinky little apartment. The place was a far cry from the home he'd grown up in but he could hardly complain now. He'd made his choices and he had to take responsibility for them. Responsibility. After all, responsibility and independence were what his choices had been about in the first place.

He opened the fridge and spotted the six-pack of Heineken he'd been saving for a special occasion. He pulled it out and set it on the counter, then grabbed a bottle and tested the weight of it. He managed a grim smile. That felt right, too. He popped the cap, placed the bottle to his lips and took a healthy swallow. Tasted right, too. Well, this was a special occasion if there ever was one.

He did have an hour to kill and a shower would take all of five minutes. What the hell else was he supposed to do? He glanced around the apartment, taking note of the pile of pizza boxes in the corner and the clutter on the coffee table. Dishes littered the kitchen counter and a pair of socks peeked out from beneath the couch.

He supposed he could clean up, but would Lee really care? Sylvia would



have cared, but Lee? He doubted it.

Bottle in hand he trudged off toward the bathroom. And hoped the next sixty minutes would pass quickly.

## Chapter Two

Carter leaned against the doorjamb, shirtless and lanky in a pair of ragged denim cutoffs. The heat had plastered his ash blond hair to his forehead in thick, damp curls, and a few beads of sweat pearled on his chest and rolled down over the ridges of his belly. His broad shoulders gleamed in the late afternoon sun that streamed in behind him.

Lee swallowed past a tongue that suddenly felt thick. She was used to seeing him in chinos or neatly pressed khakis and golf shirts and maybe a pair of the red Converse high-tops that he wore just to be different. She *wasn't* used to seeing him barefoot and bare-chested and glistening with sweat. And she certainly wasn't used to seeing him drunk.

"Hey, Lee," he mumbled.

She pursed her lips in concern and dragged her eyes away from his six-pack abs and the fine blond hairs that dusted his chest. She focused on his face, on the finely drawn cheekbones and wide mouth. He was as sexy as ever, and just as handsome—except for his eyes. His deep green eyes, normally vibrant and sparkling with humor, were dull, shrouded by misery and booze.

He hadn't sounded drunk when he called her. Upset and depressed, yes. Drunk, no. How had things deteriorated so fast? What was going on? "Hey, Carter."

"So...whassup?"

"What's up? You called me, remember?"

"I did?"

"You called about an hour ago."

He frowned and blinked. "Oh right. I did. Jesus. Sorry." He shook his head as if to clear it, and then stepped aside. "Come on in. I had a couple of beers and I guess they went straight to my head." He chuckled as she stepped inside, but there was no humor in it. "Some host I am. I beg you to come over and then ask why you're here."

"That's okay. I could tell you were upset." She stood in the middle of the room, feeling awkward and out of place. She was used to being with him at the office. This felt...strange.

"Yeah, well..." He shrugged. "You want one?"

"One what?"

He motioned to a six-pack of Heineken that was sitting on the coffee table. Right beside two empties and another bottle that had already been half drained.

"A beer."

"Uh...no. No thanks." He'd had two and a half beers in the last hour? *I think you've had enough for the both of us.*

He hooked his thumbs in the waist of his cutoffs, and shuffled his feet. And for just a moment looked for all the world like a little boy who'd lost his best friend. "Well, I hope you don't mind if I do."

With that he turned and walked to a high-backed loveseat in the middle of the room. He plopped himself down and picked up the open bottle. He stared at it for a moment, as if struggling to make a decision before placing it to his lips and tipping it high. The muscles in his throat worked furiously as he drained it.

He set it down and finally looked at her. "Well? You gonna sit down?"

Worry coiling in her gut she walked over to sit beside him. She eased herself onto the edge of the seat and waited for him to speak. This wasn't the Carter she knew at all, and she wasn't sure how to deal with the new version.

He stared blankly at the beer bottle now clutched between his knees.

"I like your apartment," she said when the moment stretched. She brushed her hand across the faux suede finish. A pair of armchairs and glass coffee table completed the ensemble, all done in muted taupes and terra cottas, all sturdy but tasteful. A bookshelf and stereo unit rounded out the ensemble. No knickknacks or artwork lined the shelves or walls, making the decorating verge on Spartan. The only accessories she noticed were a few crumpled newspapers, a stack of pizza boxes and a thin layer of dust. However the overall effect wasn't displeasing. Carefully neutral, undeniably male.

"You know I've never been here before?" she added when he still hadn't spoken. Maybe he just needed a little prodding to get him started, to make him feel at ease.

He shrugged and raked his fingers through his hair.

She sighed in frustration. "Why did you call, Carter?"

He rolled the empty bottle between his palms. "Because you're my friend."

"A dubious distinction, I'm sure." She said it lightly to hide how much that reference hurt. It was true enough, but the trouble was she didn't want to be his *friend*. Over the past year she'd come to know him and realize that she wanted so much more from him. More than he seemed to want to give her. Then she corrected herself, *couldn't* give her.

"But I've been your friend for more than a year now, and you've never called me at home before. Obviously something happened. Why did you call today?"

He turned a bleary gaze her way. He blinked and his eyes seemed to clear. "What do you mean? Sure I have."

"Called me at home?" She let out a strained chuckle. "Uh...no. Only at work. You call me all the time in my office. We do lunch in the cafeteria. We talk at the

water cooler. Sometimes we go for walks around the grounds.”

*We discuss politics and religion, books and movies. We talk about our lives and our dreams. I know you better than I know anyone, and yet I can't get close to you. I'm not allowed to touch you.*

She averted her eyes because she felt as if his gaze might cut through her heart. Softly she added, “We *never* talk outside of work.”

“We don't?”

“No,” she ground out. “We *don't*.”

He turned his gaze back to the bottle. “Oh.”

“So?” she asked, frustrated. “What happened? What's wrong?”

“Nothing really. It's really not that big a deal.” He reached for another beer, pulled it out of the cardboard pack and had just managed to pop the top before she laid a hand on his forearm and stopped him.

“Carter,” she said softly. “I think you've had enough.”

He looked from the bottle to her and back to the bottle again. “Shit.”

She squeezed his arm, trying to ignore the warmth of his skin beneath her hand. The firm plane of muscle, the ripple of sinew. She tried to see him as a friend rather than a *man*. And, as usual, failed miserably.

“Please, Carter. Talk to me.”

He set the bottle back on the coffee table with a sharp crack that made her cringe. “She dumped me.” Abruptly he stood, and strode on surprisingly steady legs to the small galley kitchen.

Lee felt as if she'd been socked in the gut. She couldn't possibly have heard right. “She what?”

He wrenched open the fridge and glared into it. “She *dumped* me. What about that didn't you understand?”

Her mouth hung open for a moment. “But I thought you two—” *I thought you two were going to get married.*

She'd resigned herself to it. Oh she'd made her share of wishes. She'd prayed and pleaded with a God that she was sure would never hear her. Carter wasn't hers and never would be. He belonged to another, and no matter how hard Lee wished or prayed or begged she couldn't change that. She'd learned to accept it, live with it.

And now everything had changed. It felt as if the world had shifted beneath her.

“Yeah. So did I.” He pulled a can of cola out of the fridge and popped the tab. Scowled at it, but then lifted it to his mouth and drank anyway.

Lee stood and moved a little uncertainly into the kitchen. She braced herself against the counter in an effort to steady her own wobbly knees.

He set the can on the counter, and when he spoke his voice was soft, thoughtful. "I was looking at rings and everything, you know? Figured maybe another year and..." He shook his head in frustration. "What a waste of time. She said we were going nowhere. She said..."

He looked up and ran his tongue over his upper lip, wiping away a few beads of sweat that had gathered there. Despite her own shower, the heat had already plastered Lee's blouse to her back. She had noticed that only one window was open, but had no intention of turning her focus away from him now.

"I wasn't exciting enough." He let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Not *spontaneous* enough. Can you believe it? Fucking bitch. I can't count how many times I—"

He stopped and looked up in surprise when her hands cupped his cheeks, her fingers rubbing over a light growth of stubble. She'd never had the nerve to touch him like this before, but outrage and perhaps a trace of protectiveness had infused her with a rare courage.

"She's a fool, Carter." Her tongue felt thick and her pulse pounded in the base of her throat. "A bitch and a fool. You're the most attractive, intelligent, *exciting* man I've ever met, and if she can't see that then—"

His mouth sealed to hers, his lips crushing and demanding, and infinitely exciting. He stole the words from her throat and all lucid thought from her mind. He filled her world. Crowded her senses.

All she could feel was the hard, agonizing pressure of his chest grinding against her breasts and the heat of his skin against hers. He smelled of sweat, tasted of beer and urgency. His arms wrapped around her back and desire pooled in her belly, sweet and heavy as it settled ever lower. Ever deeper.

He plundered her mouth, his tongue hot and aggressive. She could taste his anger, his frustration—and her own desire. She wanted him now—had wanted him, it seemed like forever, but somewhere deep in the recesses of her soul, buried under layers of insecurity and uncertainty, she found one tiny shred of pride. She dragged it to the surface and forced herself to acknowledge it.

She grasped his wrists and tugged at his hands that had embedded themselves in her neatly cropped hair. Their lips parted. Barely.

Her breathing rapid and ragged, she said only, "Carter."

"Hmm?" He drew away just enough to look down at her, his eyes suddenly clear and a deep emerald green—so green it hurt to look at them. "What is it?" He whisked a kiss across one cheek and then the other. "Oh God," he whispered. "You taste wonderful."

One hand cupped a breast.

She stifled a groan of mingled frustration and pleasure. "You don't really want *me*," she said, each word slicing across her lips like a finely honed razor.

"You're just looking for a substitute." She swallowed. "For her."

He hesitated at that, gazing down at her, his eyes smoldering with mingled desire and confusion. "No," he breathed, but she could tell he wasn't sure. "No, I'm not."

She knew she should step away, put some distance between them, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. She'd longed for his embrace for so long. It was like asking a starving man to smell a barbecued steak, but then not allow him to taste it. Asking him to turn his back and walk away from it. It just wasn't possible.

She lifted her gaze to his. "Aren't you, Carter? I mean, we've been friends for a year, and *now* you want me?"

He lifted his hand to her face, traced her cheekbone, ran his fingers through her hair.

She fought the urge to close her eyes and float on his touch.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes searching hers. "I do. What's wrong with that?"

"But we're friends. I don't want to jeopardize that."

He traced the curve of her breast through the fabric of her shirt, the caress light yet decadent. A woman could drown in that kind of touch.

"That's why I want you." His lips were so close to her ear that she could feel his breath. "Because I know you." His lips brushed against her throat. "And I trust you."

*Trust.* She supposed that's what it came down to. Did she trust him enough? Did she trust herself?

He ran his fingers up her arm, the touch surprisingly erotic.

God, if only he didn't smell so good. Despite appearances, he must have showered because his hair smelled of shampoo. And he must have put on cologne because there was a spiciness about him that filled her head. He'd done all that for her.

She breathed deeply, trying hard to think clearly through the haze of desire. She was a big girl, a career woman, for God's sake. She knew what she was doing. Didn't she?

"Lee?" He kissed her forehead, one eyelid and then the other.

Her resolve – what little of it remained – softened.

His hand smoothed over her shoulder and down toward her chest. A thumb brushed across her nipple and she sank a little deeper.

"Please, Lee. I need you." His breath on her face, his hand drifted further downward. It reached the V of her thighs and hesitated. "I've needed you...it seems like forever."

His hand slipped inside the leg of her shorts and she made no protest.

The tips of his fingers brushed the satin of her panties. She closed her eyes and allowed it. He applied a gentle pressure and she leaned forward, against him. Helpless. Drowning. Some remote part of her knew it was wrong, stupid, insane, but she could no more stop him than she could stop herself from breathing. She wanted more. She so desperately wanted more.

"We shouldn't," she mumbled as his mouth closed on her throat. She arched her neck to allow him to feast on her. "I'm afraid..." Teeth scraping. Fingers teasing. A low rumbling moan in his chest.

*Oh God. Oh dear, sweet Jesus. "I'm afraid of what comes next."*

Somewhere on the edge of her awareness she heard, "We can handle it. I just know I want you. I care for you, Lee. And I need you—now." And that was all it took to shatter the last of her defenses.

"Okay." The whispered word could only have come from her, but she didn't remember speaking it. Her mind was a jumble, her senses in turmoil.

His mouth left her throat and he kissed her lips. Hard. She felt his fingers fumble with the buttons on her shirt, and a moment later he'd dragged the half-open garment over her head and tossed it on the floor.

He grinned at her, his eyes flickering with mischief. "Jesus, Lee. Wow." She realized she'd worn her sheerest, laciest, barely there bra. Had she chosen it purposely because she was coming to visit him? She had no idea this was going to happen, but—

She skimmed a hand over the lace—over her own breasts. His gaze followed her hands and her nipples tingled under his stare. "I can't tell you how long I've waited for you to see this." She'd worn it to the office a dozen times, secretly harboring fantasies of a spontaneous tryst in the broom closet, a stolen kiss in the boardroom. But it had never happened.

His Adam's apple bobbed. "Worth the wait." He lifted his gaze and granted her an approving smile. She could tell he still wasn't quite himself—his eyes were clear, but his speech still bore traces of the beer he'd consumed.

But when he traced a finger over the lace, exploring and caressing, she allowed her eyes to drift closed and enjoyed the sensation of feeling desirable, sexy. Of knowing that she meant something to him. That she was a friend, but that maybe—just maybe—she was much more than that.

So when he asked, "Can I rip it off?" she heard herself whisper, "Sure."

One powerful tug sent the forty-dollar piece of lingerie tumbling to the floor in shreds. She never saw it land.

She was too lost in the gentle tug and play of his lips on her breast. She lifted her hands to his shoulders. The skin was smooth, the muscles beneath firm and taut. They flexed against her palms.

She had to grip him hard to keep herself steady as his tongue circled her

nipple and his teeth scraped lightly over rigid flesh. And then she realized his hands had slipped into the waistband of her shorts. Inch by torturous inch, he eased the soft cotton down past her hips, hooking his thumbs in the edge of her panties as he went. The anticipation built, sweet and seductive. She ached to feel his hands against her bare flesh.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders and she wondered if her nails had drawn blood.

When she felt his thumbs trace the crease of her thighs, however, her knees turned to water. She needed more than a good grip on his shoulders to support her.

"I need to lie down," she groaned. "I can't—"

Her shorts and panties slid to her ankles and he wrapped a strong arm around her waist. He pulled her in tight and through the denim of his shorts, she felt the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her.

"Better?" he asked.

There was something strangely erotic about her being naked while he remained clothed. Something...forbidden.

"Mm hmm," she murmured. She ground herself against him, feeling the dampness spread down her thighs.

Still holding his gaze, she dropped her hand to his waist and slid it inside his shorts.

His face registered surprise, but he remained motionless as her fingers dipped deeper, exploring, searching. She felt the soft cotton of his briefs, eased her hand inside and was rewarded with a low groan and a rich curse. She traced the length of his erection, running her fingers up and down the smooth, hard length of it, and then dipping lower to touch his balls.

His eyes rolled back in his head, but then abruptly he bracketed her waist, lifted her high and set her down on the kitchen counter behind her. "Hey!" she shouted as he parted her legs and moved between them. "That's cold. I—"

He was kissing her again and she soon forgot the discomfort when she felt his hand ease between her thighs and into the crease of her sex. She swelled beneath his touch. Thick and heavy and damp.

"You're wet," he said, his voice thick.

"No kidding," she said on a giggle. "Never could put anything over on—" He slipped a finger inside her and she sucked in her breath.

He used his thumb to toy with her clit as he eased in a second finger, building the pressure and urging her toward some unknown height.

"Carter?" she whimpered, uncertain whether it was a protest or a plea.

Apparently he took it as the latter because the next thing she knew he had crouched low and bent his head.



“Oh...no.” She sank her hands into his hair with the intention of pushing him away. Things were happening so fast, she needed to get her bearings. Needed a moment to catch her breath. But when it came down to it, she found that she lacked the strength. Every muscle in her body had turned to froth.

His tongue pushed between her folds and flicked at her center, teasing and torturing until she thought she would burst.

She found her resolve and grabbed him by the hair.

“Hey!” he protested as she dragged him up to her level.

“Take...off...your...shorts.” But when she reached for the waistband she was stunned to realize they were already gone. “How the hell?”

He was grinning and he was nude. Fully and absolutely, the abundant glory of his desire for her revealed. His cock jutted out before him, hard and long and a little intimidating.

She swallowed thickly, staring, suddenly a little afraid—afraid of what was happening and of what was to come. She’d wanted this for so long, and now that she was faced with it she hesitated. The decision, however, was made for her. He stepped forward and the tip of his cock eased inside her.

She drew breath to speak, but the words never made it past her lips.

He gripped her hips with his hands and pulled her against him until she was perched on the very edge of the counter and his erection was buried deep inside her. He covered her lips with his and ravaged her mouth with his tongue, even as his thrusts gained momentum and speed.

It was all happening so fast, the pressure of an orgasm already building. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

She wrenched her mouth away from his and sucked in a huge breath air. “Oh God, Carter. I—”

There was a pounding on the front door and it felt as if time froze. Lee’s eyes flew open and she looked in bewilderment at the door. *Now?* It couldn’t be. Inside she screamed.

Carter, however, didn’t seem to have heard.

His thrusts continued and he kissed her again. Deep and hard.

Lee forgot the intrusion, closed her eyes and lost herself in him, in the urgency of his kiss and the heat of his skin. His hands still rested in the hollows above her hips. His grip tightened as he withdrew for another thrust and—

There was another loud pounding on the door. “Carter!” screamed a voice from the hall. “I know you’re in there. You never go anywhere without that fucking car of yours.”

At last the voice seemed to penetrate through the fog of passion. Carter stopped, broke the kiss and rested his cheek against Lee’s mouth. “Damn it,” he whispered. “I completely forgot—”

"Carter! I want my stuff, and I'm not leaving without it."

"That's her," said Lee, her breath ruffling his hair. "The bitch."

"Yeah. She came for her stuff."

"I got that."

He nodded bleakly.

"Carter!"

"Just a *minute!*" His scream startled Lee so badly she lurched backward, hitting her head on the cupboard behind her.

"Shit!" she muttered, reaching up to rub the back of her head. She felt perilously close to tears.

Carter dropped a kiss on her nose. "I'm sorry." Her cheek. "I'm sorry." Her other cheek. "You can't know how sorry."

"Yes, I can." She rubbed her eyes to clear away the tears that had collected there. Tears of disappointment and embarrassment.

He pulled away, leaving her feeling spent and empty. Naked and vulnerable.

He grasped her by the waist and lifted her off the counter, setting her gently on the floor. He reached down and plucked her clothes from the floor. "Here. Maybe you should—" He glanced toward a door at the back of the apartment.

"Sure. I'll get dressed and get out." She turned to go but he grabbed her arm.

Startled she turned to find him glaring down at her. His expression startled her. "What? Nuh uh. You stay, she goes. Okay?"

She smiled and nodded. "Okay."

"But if you wanna get dressed in the bedroom—"

"Carter! I'm waiting!"

"Jesus." He rolled his eyes and reached for his own shorts.

Lee walked toward the bedroom feeling strangely light, like she was walking on whispers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter pulled on his shorts and did up the button. He glanced up just in time to see the bedroom door close behind her. "Wow," he whispered to himself. What had just happened? When he'd called Lee he hadn't been looking for... that. Maybe he wasn't sure exactly what he had been looking for, but he certainly hadn't called her over with the intention of seducing her. His reaction to her had been as much of a surprise to him as it had apparently been to her. But when she'd walked in, suddenly he'd seen her...differently.

He'd always thought of Lee as pleasant to look at, pretty even. But how was

it he'd never noticed that body before? Those plump breasts and that firm little butt. And that hair. God, he didn't usually go for women with short hair, but it was so thick and so *red*.

Perhaps he just hadn't *allowed* himself to see Lee that way. Maybe he'd been blinded by the *Sylvia-effect*, unable to see Lee clearly through the haze of blonde hair and designer perfume.

He looked toward the door and flinched. She was out in the hall, and he had to face her. He had to get this over with.

At least he had Lee. She was somewhere behind him, a door and a wall between them, but at least she was *here*. And she was strong. He drew on that strength and on the certainty that she cared about him. No matter what.

Squaring his shoulders and bolstering his resolve, he walked to the door. He wrenched it open and came face to face with his insecurities. And his anger.

"Sylvia."

"Carter."

She pushed past him and sauntered in as if she owned the place. Come to think of it he could have sworn he'd given her a key months ago. They were lucky she hadn't just walked in on them mid-fuck. He blinked, considering that image.

Then again...

"The place is a sty, Carter." Sylvia stood in the middle of the living room, hands propped on hips, blonde hair tumbling to her waist, blue eyes blazing. A coral pink sundress hugged a trim figure that teetered on stiletto-heeled sandals. She was a bitch, no doubt. But she was a beautiful one. And sexy as hell.

She crinkled her perfect little nose. "And it reeks of beer."

"Better beer than that damn perfume of yours. You buy it by the quart, right?"

She stood there, glaring at him.

"You're supposed to *dab* that stuff on, you know, not *bathe* in it."

"Oh, isn't that sweet," she crooned. "He's bitter."

He walked around the couch and leaned against the back in the hopes of appearing nonchalant. In truth, he needed the support. "No, no. I..." He swallowed and wished his tongue didn't feel like a two-by-four. He struggled to enunciate clearly. "I'm not bitter, baby. I'm fine. Great even. In fact I should thank you."

"Thank me?" She tilted her head to the side in that way of hers. "Thank me for breaking up with you and breaking your heart?"

He managed a serviceable laugh. "Breaking my heart? Oh come on. You didn't really think I was in *love* with you, did you? I mean, I know you've got an ego the size of Alaska, but that's just a bit pathetic." He was saying it out of

anger, but part of him meant it. And another part didn't. That uncertainty and confusion was what was driving him crazy.

"So you're over me, then," she said.

"Oh yeah." He reached over the couch and picked up the beer bottle he'd left sitting on the coffee table. He popped the cap, took a long swallow, and wished it were something stronger. Like thirty-year-old scotch. "Took all of three minutes after you walked out the door, too."

She sneered. "And that's why you're sitting at home today, drowning your sorrows in beer and pizza." She nodded toward the stack of pizza boxes on the floor in the corner. "You always splurge on Vincenzo's when you're depressed."

"No," he said too loudly. "I'm not drowning my sorrows. I'm just..." He fumbled, his addled brain struggling to come up with a feasible story. Why had he turned to the beer? He'd admitted to himself he wasn't really hurting that badly, so what *was it*? What did—

"He's just having a little party."

Startled, he looked up to see Lee saunter into the room. Her shirt was only half done up and the string on her shorts dangled open. He stared, amazed, as she walked toward him. Without granting Sylvia a second glance she walked directly up to Carter, wrapped her arms around his neck and sealed her mouth to his. Her lips were hot and soft and insistent, and for just a moment he forgot Sylvia standing just a few feet away. Watching them.

He let the beer bottle slip from his fingers. Was vaguely aware of the thud as it hit the carpet and the beer gurgled out.

Lee's tongue made one final swipe across his teeth before she pulled away and gazed up at him from beneath heavy-lidded eyes. "Weren't we, Carter?"

He blinked. "Weren't we what?"

She smiled coyly. "Having a little party." Turned to glare at Sylvia. "A *private* party, I might add."

Sylvia's expression could have curdled the milk in his fridge. "Oh, I see. You found a little bimbo to help ease your pain. You know, to screw you blind. Keep you occupied so you don't have to think about losing me."

He felt an unexpected surge of anger. "Lee's not a bimbo. She's..." He glanced down at her, suddenly unsure. What was she to him? What had she ever been?

"She's a woman," continued Lee for him as her fingers trailed down his chest, "who's very impatient to get back to..." She brushed the front of his shorts, and he hardened again. "...business. So if..." She frowned. "What was your name again?"

"Sylvia. His *ex-girlfriend*."

"Whatever. If you wouldn't mind?" She nodded toward the door.

Sylvia planted her feet and crossed her arms, her face the color of raw steak. "I'm not leaving without my stuff."

Carter was still reeling from the shock of seeing Ms. reliable-take-charge-marketing-exec Lee transform into drop-dead-gorgeous-dripping-with-sex-Lee. He wasn't sure what had come over her, but he couldn't deny he liked it.

Getting into the spirit of things, he wrapped his arms around Lee's waist and bent his head to drop a kiss on her shoulder. "It's in the front closet, hon," he mumbled, his mouth now against her throat. "I stuffed it all in a box." He caressed a breast. "Help yourself."

"Not bad," said Sylvia, her voice tight. "You've almost got me convinced."

"What was that?" He unabashedly slipped his hand beneath Lee's shirt. "Did you say something?" He kissed her hard, caressed bare skin and was pleased to find that she wasn't wearing her bra. He brushed the underside of a breast. "I'm kinda busy here."

"I always knew you were an asshole, Carter." Sylvia whirled and marched toward the closet. She wrenched open the door and grabbed the box. "I just never knew just how big of one."

He heard the front door slam, and breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Wow, Lee. Thanks. That was amazing."

Lee pulled away and tugged at her shirt. Her cheeks had flushed bright pink. "Yeah, well. It sounded like you needed help." She turned around. "Now, where did I leave my shoes?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her back against him.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her eyes wide and strangely vulnerable.

"Having a party. Just like you said."

"But—"

He kissed her and felt her wilt in his arms. "You want to finish, don't you?" His hands moved down to cup her behind. "God knows I do."

She tried again. "But—"

"I'm sorry about that. You know, doing it in front of her? But part of me wanted to shock her. It worked, too. And I can't thank you enough for that."

"And you wanted to prove to her that you didn't need her."

He looked down at her and smiled, relieved that she understood. "Right. Exactly."

She shook her head. "No," she murmured, turning away from him. "I can't do this. I can't."

He caught the hitch in her voice, and knew she was crying. Or close to it. "What's wrong? I don't get it."

She whirled to face him, her expression fierce despite the tears that streaked

her cheeks. "I care about you, Carter. You can't know how much. And you can't know how long I've waited for..." she motioned vaguely toward the kitchen, "... that. But I can't do it. Not like this. I can't let you use me."

"Use you?" He blinked in astonishment, a little fresh anger seeping in around the confusion. "Use you? Where the hell did that come from?"

"Oh come on, Carter. Even after three beers you're smarter than that. You've never noticed me before, not as a woman, anyway. You've never *touched* me. And today of all days, the day after you break up with the woman you thought you were going to marry, *now* suddenly you want to be with me?"

"You didn't complain *before* Sylvia came in." He heard the defensiveness in his own voice, but decided he didn't care. "You didn't even complain *afterwards*. You know, when you came over and started fondling me *right in front of her*? If that's using you, then I'm guilty. I was just playing along with the game you started."

"I know." She wouldn't look at him. "That was my fault and I'm sorry. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

In two strides he was in front of her, gripping her arms and willing her to look at him. "It was a good idea, dammit. Don't be sorry. Just..."

At last she looked up, and the expression on her face cut him. "Just what? What do you want, Carter? What *exactly* do you want?"

He licked his lips and wished for that scotch again.

What did he want? Part of him wanted Sylvia back. And part of him hoped to never lay eyes on her again. He wanted to understand why she'd left, but most of all he wanted the tightness in his chest to ease. He wanted someone to kiss it and make it all better. He wanted someone to stay with him, because most of all he wanted to not be alone.

He was still a stranger here, still struggling to find his place in unfamiliar surroundings, and sometimes it was still scary. And lonely. Sylvia had always been there when he'd needed her, and now she wasn't.

Maybe he wasn't really sure what he needed, but some part of him knew that, whatever it was, Lee could give it to him.

"Just stay," he pleaded. "Please. That's all I want."

She shook her head and eased her arms from his grasp. "I'm afraid that's not enough."

And before he could stop her she had snatched up her shoes and bolted out the door.

"Jesus Christ." He whirled around and ranted at the empty room, "*Women*. Who needs 'em?" And then he stalked to the couch, plopped down and picked up a fresh beer. "I do, dammit," he muttered. "God help me, but I do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sylvia stormed into her apartment, slammed the door and threw the box of clothing and toiletries into the corner. It hit a Waterford vase filled with fresh calla lilies. The bouquet toppled, the vase cracked and water seeped into the Oriental rug.

She saw nothing but red.

"Dammit!" she screamed, scrubbing the tears from her cheeks. Her breathing hitched as she caught another sob in her throat. Her gaze darted about the apartment. "Where did I leave that fucking *phone!*"

It took several minutes of cursing and overturning cushions to locate it, the tip of it peeking out from beneath her white leather couch. She'd fallen asleep with it the night before, and it must have dropped from her fingers.

She snatched it up and hit redial. The other party picked up and she didn't bother to wait for a hello. "You idiot. It didn't work!"

The other end was silent for a moment. "What do you mean, it didn't work?" There was a tense pause. "Insult me again, and I'll stop answering your phone calls."

Sylvia sniffled and wiped her eyes. Her fingers came away smeared with mascara and mauve eye shadow. "Sorry. I'm just a little stressed."

"Okay, now take it slow and tell me what you're talking about. It's too soon to tell if it worked or not. I told you to be patient. I told you —"

"He was with a woman!"

Another silence. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? What do I *mean?* What the hell do you think I mean? When I went over there today to pick up my stuff—just like you said—I didn't exactly find him crying in his beer." She walked to the window and shoved aside the curtain. She stared out over Toronto, over high rises, houses and parks, to the glittering waters of Lake Ontario in the distance. But the breathtaking view did nothing to soothe her.

She sniffled and turned away from the sunshine. "Well, okay, so he was drunk, but he wasn't exactly crying over me. He was screwing some...some... bimbo!"

"Hmm. That surprises me."

"Yeah, it sure as hell surprised *me.*"

"Who was she?"

"How would I know?"

"You've never seen her before?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea who she *might* be?"

"Huh?"

A heavy sigh. "Has he ever mentioned anyone? You know, another ex-girlfriend that he still pines over? A female friend that you were a little suspicious of? Anything like that?"

"No." She walked to the fridge in search of the bottle of wine she'd started the night before.

"Good. That's good."

"Why? What's good about it?" She pulled out the cheap California zinfandel, shunning the crystal stemware in favor of a tumbler.

"Think about it."

Sylvia took an enormous gulp of wine and thought about wrapping her hands around the bimbo's scrawny throat. "I'm too upset to think. You're the big thinker, the idea person, the genius who came up with this stupid plan. Why don't you just tell me what's good about it?"

"Settle down, Sylvia. Don't let this get to you."

"Too late. This whole thing is blowing up in my face. My dumping him was supposed to wake him up to what we've got. It was supposed to leave him reeling and send him off shopping for *rings*. He was supposed to come crawling back to me on hands and knees, with a little black velvet box and a half-carat diamond. He *wasn't* supposed to go and fuck some cute little redheaded bitch with skinny legs and no boobs!"

The silence on the other end was almost tangible.

When it stretched beyond bearability Sylvia sniffled and said, "Hello? Are you still there?"

"Are you finished?"

Sylvia took another gulp of alcohol. "I guess."

"Good. Now listen to me. If you don't know this woman, chances are she's just somebody he picked up in a bar, or ran into at the grocery store or something. She's a meaningless one-night stand. He needed someone to soothe his ego and make him feel like a man. She means *nothing*."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. He'll probably never see her again. Never even think of her again. How can he possibly care for anyone else after he's loved you?"

Sylvia nodded her silent agreement, swallowed another mouthful of wine.

"You just have to be patient and do as I say, and everything will work out according to plan."

Sylvia held up her glass to the light and saw with regret that it was empty. "Are you certain?"

Sylvia could almost hear the smile through the phone line. "I'm positive."



## Chapter Three

“Are you *crazy*?”

Lee trailed a French fry through her puddle of ketchup and drew a sweeping arc.

“Lee, for God’s sake,” said Tammy, over her empty plate. “You had him. You had him right where you want him and you let him go?”

Another condiment pass, another arc and she had drawn a perfectly symmetrical heart. She stared at it for a moment, picked up the remains of her burger and plopped it in the center of the plate, obliterating her artwork. Crushing her heart.

Tammy’s pudgy fingers latched around her wrist. “Lee, talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

“I told you everything. There’s nothing more to tell.”

Tammy sat back in her brass and vinyl cafeteria chair and folded her arms across her ample bosom. In the background glassware clinked and cutlery clattered, the sounds echoing hollowly in the half-empty room. They’d come early for coffee break and missed the usual rush. Not that the place was ever what one could call crowded. The cafeteria was huge, big enough to accommodate three hundred employees comfortably. The decor, done in chrome and vinyl with glass tables and a tile floor, was undeniably beautiful. But it was also cold, sterile. Detached.

Lee gazed outside where lemon-yellow sunshine rained down on the landscape. In the distance, the jagged Toronto skyline was bathed in gold and beyond that glittered the waters of the harbor. The view was magnificent, thrilling, breathtaking. And somehow it magnified her sense of isolation.

She dragged her attention back to her friend.

Tammy’s brown eyes narrowed to skeptical slits. “You told me that Carter invited you to his apartment. You got there and he was upset over his breakup with...” She waved her hand in the air. “...what’s-her-name. He made a pass at you and you turned him down because he was on the rebound.”

“Uh huh. That’s it, in a nutshell.” It wasn’t a lie, exactly. The scene in the kitchen didn’t count. She’d been taken off guard and they hadn’t *completed* the act. She’d turned him down the second time, once she’d regained her senses and seen things more clearly.

Of course it was all a crock, but she couldn’t bear to tell Tammy what had really happened. How could she tell her friend when she could barely face it

herself?

Tammy taped a suspicious finger on the rim of her coffee cup. "Why do I have the feeling you're giving me the peanut version of a coconut-sized story?"

Lee glanced at her watch and then at the doorway to the cafeteria. She should get out of there. Carter would probably be coming down for lunch within the next ten minutes and she didn't want to run into him. Not here. Not ever.

She'd tossed and turned all night, cursing Carter and then cursing herself. How had she let herself be dragged into that kind of situation? Let him take advantage of her like that? Or had she been taking advantage of him? She was the one who had wanted him for the last year, and he'd been the vulnerable one, after all. The one who was hurting. That possibility really stung.

First the scene in the kitchen, and then she'd walked out of the bedroom and behaved like a common...like a...a...slut? That wasn't her at all. She never acted like that.

It was Carter. His mere presence did things to her. But of course, she couldn't lay all the blame on him. She'd done it willingly and now she had to live with the consequences. And with herself. The thing was, she now knew she couldn't live with *him*.

"Good God, Lee," exclaimed Tammy, leaning forward and plucking the leftover burger off Lee's plate.

Tammy had tackled her garden salad and diet soda like a woman on the verge of starvation. She'd wolfed it down in minutes and then immediately started picking at Lee's fries. They were "borrowed" calories, according to Tammy, so didn't count toward her daily tally. In theory she was limiting herself to twelve hundred calories a day in an effort to drop the thirty pounds she'd put on with her latest pregnancy, and of course the thirty she'd put on with the one before that. The fact that Tammy's youngest son had headed off to college nine months ago was a testament to the effectiveness of her diet plan.

Tammy was plump and overbearing. She was mouthy and completely unapologetic for it. She was also a hard worker, full of great ideas, the most productive member of Lee's marketing team. And Lee's best friend.

"You've waited a year for him to notice you, to see you as more than a coffee buddy, or whatever the hell he thinks you are."

"We're friends, Tammy. It is possible for a man and woman to be just friends, you know." *And we're good friends. Or at least we were.*

"Gimme a break. Save it for the girls down in Human Resources."

Strictly speaking, "fraternizing" between employees wasn't forbidden, but it was discouraged.

"And besides," continued Tammy, swallowing down the last of the burger, "we're not just talking about anybody here, we're talking about you and Carter.

You two have chemistry. Anybody who sees you two together can feel the sizzle from three cubicles away."

"Everybody but Carter, you mean."

"Apparently he finally clued in. Why punish him for it?"

"I'm not so sure he *clued in* at all. I think my being there yesterday was... convenient. I was just a warm body – you know, someone to ease the loneliness. An outlet for his frustrations. And a handy weapon to use against what's-her-name."

"You don't really believe that."

Lee pushed back her chair and stood. "Yes I do."

She turned to go; Tammy's hand on her arm stopped her. "Maybe he's having a rough time right now and maybe he didn't say all the right things. But you mean more to Carter than that and you know it."

"Why are you defending him? Usually you two fight like cats and dogs." Tammy and Carter had made a habit of exchanging insults like housewives exchange recipes. Usually the digs were good-natured and lighthearted, but every once in a while, depending on the mood of the day and the topic of conversation, they took on a sharp, serrated edge.

Tammy heaved a weary sigh and the top button on her navy blue blazer popped open. "I'm not defending him exactly. He may not be *my* favorite person in the world, but he makes *you* happy. Dammit, you should see yourself when he walks into a room. You light up like a Christmas tree. And the things you two talk about? I know couples that have been married ten years who haven't covered half the ground you two have. That kind of connection is worth fighting for."

Lee chewed on her lower lip. "Maybe."

Tammy squeezed her arm. "Good. I'm glad you feel that way, because he just walked in the door."

"What?" Lee pivoted just in time to see Carter, flanked by his two usual sidekicks, step into the room.

Tom Archer and Dick Watson were exactly what one expected Information Services techs to be, complete with glasses, canvas sneakers and, yes, pocket protectors. They also lacked any discernible sense of humor and it boggled Lee's mind as to how it was that Carter, who broke every known computer geek mold, had found a niche among such people.

Not that she cared whom he hung around with. Not at all.

Just like she didn't care that he looked amazing today. She didn't give a rat's ass about the white golf shirt that outlined broad shoulders and highlighted a well-developed chest, or about the black jeans that hugged an ass that was probably illegal in twenty countries. She didn't care about any of it. Never had.

Never would. Nope. No way. Never.

"Come on," she nudged Tammy with her elbow, held her head high. "Let's go."

Together they marched toward the entrance to the cafeteria. Lee had every intention of walking right by without saying hello to, or acknowledging Carter in any way. She determinedly ignored the way his gaze lingered on her and the questioning lift of his eyebrows.

Tammy, however, had other ideas. She planted herself smack dab in the center of their path. "Well, if it isn't Tom, Dick and..." Her eyes rested on Carter as she whispered, "...dickless."

Carter's gaze snapped to Tammy. "*Dickless?* What the hell was that for?"

Tammy shrugged. "Just being a supportive friend. You know, saying the things that Lee's too much of a lady to say."

"Oh, that's right," said Carter. "No one could ever accuse you of that. Being a lady I mean." He spoke to Tammy, but his gaze remained on Lee, his heart obviously not in the verbal parry.

"Tammy may be overreacting a little," said Lee, stepping between them but not touching him, "but her heart's in the right place."

"*Her* heart. What about yours, Lee? What kind of place would yours be in at the moment?"

"I don't think mine is the one in question." Her heart that was pounding so hard her chest hurt. She ached to reach out for him, to feel his arms around her.

Carter closed his eyes in apparent frustration. "Lee, I—"

"Forget it." Lee grabbed Tammy's sleeve. "I don't want to talk about this here. Or anywhere for that matter."

"Besides," added Tammy, "we're...uh...late for a meeting."

"That's right." Lee began backing away. "A very important meeting."

"And I'm hungry," whined Tom, patting the concave plane of his gut. "I'm wasting away here. And the smell of those pre-fab burgers is driving me absolutely mad."

"Lee, wait a minute, I—"

Already halfway to the door, Lee tossed over her shoulder, "No more waiting. I waited a year and look what it got me."

And with that she and Tammy roared out, leaving Carter McCrea and his entourage bobbing in their wake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter stood there staring after her. *Waited a year?* What the hell did that mean?

"Jesus, man," moaned Dick, "can we eat, already?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Carter. "You guys go on through the line and I'll get a table. I'm not hungry."

Tom snickered. "Hangover, eh? You and your wild nights."

"And on a Sunday night, yet," added Dick. "Have you no shame?"

"Shut up you two and get your damn food."

"Touchy, touchy," said Tom.

"Gotta walk on eggshells around him today," muttered Dick.

But at last they walked away and left Carter alone with his thoughts.

He found a table by the window and determined *not* to think about Lee and their confusing exchange a few moments ago. It didn't make sense, and no amount of self-examination or analysis would make it make sense. She was a woman, after all, and no sane man could make sense of anything the creatures thought or did.

So instead he concentrated on the view outside the window. He ignored the skyline, instead shifting his attention to the lush lawns, sparkling fountains and swaying birch trees that made up the company grounds. No one could accuse the True North Beverage Company of scrimping. They groomed their grounds and decorated their offices, bought the finest artwork and installed all the high-tech amenities—from ergonomically designed desks and chairs to flat screen computer monitors—all for their employees' use and enjoyment. They provided a gourmet-class cafeteria, in-house daycare and a fitness center complete with pool and aerobics classes. Anyone who walked through the doors was instantly struck by how clean and bright and efficient the company was.

Not that TNBC was all about altruism or particularly cared if their employees were happy. However, satisfied employees were better producers, not to mention the image was an invaluable marketing tool.

A company that produced juice and filtered water couldn't afford to come off as slovenly or careless. Of course it helped that they had the assets to achieve this kind of image.

"What a joke," mumbled Carter as his buddies plunked down their trays and slid into their chairs.

"Joke?" asked Dick, his mouth already full of rice and teriyaki chicken. "What's a joke?"

Carter motioned toward the grounds. "That a company can get this rich, this fast, just from selling water. A product that you can get from any tap for *free*."

"Yeah," agreed Tom. "Life's full of little ironies, isn't it?" He shoved a plate in front of Carter.

Carter stared down at the mound of fries. "I said I wasn't hungry."

"Eat. You've been a real bitch all morning, and you're worse when you don't eat."

"Yeah," mumbled Dick. "You've been spitting nails, and we thought French fries would be easier to dodge."

"I'm not bitchy," growled Carter.

The other two just rolled their eyes and pointed at the plate. "Eat," they said in unison.

Grudgingly Carter picked up a fry and chomped down. "There. Happy?"

"Friggin' ecstatic."

Now that he'd started eating Carter found that he actually did have an appetite. He picked up another fry and silently wished for a sixteen-ounce steak to go with it.

"Okay," ventured Tom after Carter had downed a third of his plate. "Now, why don't you tell us all about it?"

"Yeah," said Dick. "Talk about it with your old buddies. You know...get it off your chest. Unburden yourself. *Share.*"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Oh, really? And I suppose what happened with Lee back there was nothing too?"

Carter bit down on another fry.

"Come on, man," said Tom, "you're gonna be a bear all week if you don't get this sorted out."

"Yeah," added Dick. "First the big break-up with Sylvia super-bitch, and now a fight with Lee?"

"What is it with you and her anyway? She's been batting her eyes at you for a whole year, you're finally free to get into her pants and you screw it up?"

"Yeah, man, what have you been waiting for?"

"Batting her eyes at me?" asked Carter, incredulous. "For a year?"

"Yeah."

"Sure."

Carter stared out the window. Could it be true? How could he have missed it? And then he knew. He sighed and dropped the fry back on his plate. His appetite had abandoned him once again. "I was an idiot," he said dully. "I didn't know she felt that way. At least not for that long." He dropped his head in his hands. "And I screwed up. Big."

If he'd known she felt that way he would have been more sensitive to her feelings. He wouldn't have used her that way to soothe his ego and get back at Sylvia. Right? Would he?

"Well, do you want her?" asked Tom, his voice now low and conspiratorial.  
"I mean...is she fuckable?"

Carter tossed him a lethal look. "Watch it."

"Ooooh. There you go bein' all touchy again."

"Yeah," replied Tom. "Protective even."

"You got it bad, man," said Dick.

"Hopeless," said Tom.

"Not hopeless," countered Dick. "He can fix it. If he really wants to."

"That's right," said Tom. "If he's willing to pay the price."

"Price?" asked Carter, riveted in spite of himself. "What kind of price?"

"Oh, you know..."

"Flowers."

"Chocolates."

"Furs."

"Jewelry."

"Lee's not like that," said Carter tightly. "She can't be bribed."

"Sure she can," said Tom. "All women have a price. It's encoded in their DNA."

"Right. Just take a lesson from our esteemed marketing and publicity departments."

"Huh?" asked Carter. "What does that mean?"

Dick leaned forward and whispered. "It's all in the presentation."

Tom nodded. "Uh huh. Presentation is everything."

## Chapter Four

Lee nestled into her chair and allowed her head to loll against the high back. She closed her eyes and tried to will the tension from her shoulders.

She'd been working on a new campaign for the past week. She had hoped to have the rough draft finished that day and ready for presentation to her team, but hadn't managed to write one original or remotely productive sentence all day.

*Thank you, Carter.*

He'd completely consumed her thoughts ever since the debacle the evening before, and the little encounter at lunch hadn't helped. How could she ever hope to get over him when they worked in the same building, were destined to run into each other in the halls, at the water cooler and in the cafeteria lineup?

And she did have to get over him. That was a given. They couldn't cut it as lovers and now they'd screwed up their friendship. Regardless of what Tammy thought, Lee knew it was hopeless. This just couldn't be fixed. She needed to put it behind her. Walk away and –

The ring of the phone jerked her upright in her chair and made her eyes fly wide open. She snatched up the receiver. "Marketing. Lee here."

"Oh good, Lee. I was afraid I might have missed you." It was Edith Queen, the office manager.

"It's only four o'clock," replied Lee, rubbing her temples. "I never go home before five. You know that."

"Mmm. Anyway, I was hoping to catch you because Mr. Daniels has called a meeting and he's specifically requested your presence."

"Daniels? He's in charge of Human Resources. Why does he want to talk to me?"

"I wasn't privy to that information. Perhaps you should ask him."

"Who else is in on the meeting?"

"I don't know."

"What's the agenda?"

Edith sighed. "Look all I have is a memo. A memo dated yesterday that I somehow missed, asking that I direct the head of marketing to show up in the ninth floor boardroom at four o'clock today."

"Four o'clock? It's ten after now."

"I realize that."



"Jesus." Lee slammed down the phone, and hustled to pack up her laptop. Technically speaking Mr. Daniels wasn't her boss, but he was a tyrant and not someone any employee at TNBC wanted to cross. He was not a people person and the least likely candidate for head of Human Resources that Lee had ever encountered. Of course, according to corporate etiquette that made him the perfect man for the job.

She grabbed up her case and dashed for the door. She'd made it to the elevator and arrived on the ninth floor by the time her watch showed 4:14. She sprinted down the hall and burst into the boardroom. "I'm so sorry I'm late. A memo got lost and—"

She stopped, slammed in the face by a wall of color.

*Flowers.*

There were flowers everywhere.

Red and yellow roses, carnations and alstromeria. Lilies and irises and baby's breath. Row upon row of bouquets lined the table and the shelf that ringed the room. The space brimmed with fragrance, exploded with color.

Lee stood there, stunned and overwhelmed. She drank it in—the beauty, the splendor, the wealth of it. The sheer decadence.

And then gradually, some remote, barely lucid corner of her brain began to wonder where Mr. Daniels was and what had happened to this urgent meeting. Then she heard the door close behind her.

Very slowly she turned around.

Carter. He stood there, hands jammed in his pockets, face flushed, lips pressed together.

He flashed a brief, bashful smile. "Hi."

She blinked, still reeling. "Hi."

"Do you like them?" he asked, his voice soft and perhaps a little strained. As if he was nervous.

"Like them?"

"Yeah. The flowers. Do you?"

"Uh...sure. They're...amazing." She swept her gaze around the room. "And there's...so *many*."

"Good, I'm glad. Because they're for you."

Her head swung around, eyes riveted on him. "For me?"

"Uh huh."

She was still having trouble forming coherent thought, her senses still on overload. "But why?"

"It's an apology."

"Apology? For what?" She felt like she should know, but she just couldn't

quite seem to remember. There were so many flowers.

He smiled, stepped toward her. And then he bent down and very gently took the laptop case from her hand. He set it in the corner and came back to stand in front of her. He stood close, very close. So close that she almost lost sight of the panorama spread out before her.

He cupped her face in his hands, his fingers warm and strong. Was it her imagination or were they trembling? "I want to apologize for being a blind, stupid, insensitive clod."

She licked her lips. "Come again?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe it's easier if you read the card."

She blinked and then turned her attention back to the assortment of bouquets. "Card? There's *a* card? How will I ever find —"

"Don't worry." He dropped his hands and stepped back to afford her a better view of the room. A shy smile tickled his lips. "There's one in every bouquet. You can't miss."

She turned wide eyes back on him. "There's a card in *every* bouquet?"

"Yep. And they're all identical. I wasn't taking any chances."

Lee's heart was pounding in her chest and she felt slightly lightheaded, as if his words had sucked all the oxygen from the room. He'd gone to all this trouble for her? He'd spent hundreds of dollars on flowers and then gone to the trouble of writing dozens and dozens of cards?

She stepped over to the table and chose the closest bouquet, an enormous assortment loaded with dozens of red, yellow and white roses. As she reached for the card that was clipped to the small plastic holder, she realized that a few tears had slipped down her cheeks. She made no move to wipe them away, but ripped open the envelope and unfolded a piece of cream-colored stationery, rimmed by a simple gold border. In the center, in Carter's unique, angular scrawl was written,

*There aren't enough flowers in the world to right my wrong.*

*I used you, and now I'm sorry.*

*I hurt you, and now I feel your pain.*

*It took a night of wanting you beside me to wake me up to the truth.*

*I spent a year looking at you without really seeing you.*

*At last I can see you and you take my breath away.*

*Let me back into your life and I promise I'll never lose sight of you again.*

"Oh my God," she breathed, tears dripping from her chin. "You wrote all this? A dozen times?"

"Twenty-one, actually. I was going for an even two dozen, but the florist ran out of flowers."

Lee pressed a hand to her mouth. "Carter, I..." She looked from him to the flowers and back again. "I don't know what to say."

He moved closer, grasped her hands. "Just say what you feel. Tell me what you're thinking."

She had to remind herself to breathe. "I don't know, Carter. This is so overwhelming. I feel like..." She didn't know what to feel, what to say.

His face was so close, his eyes so green. "Okay, then. Why not show me how you feel?"

He leaned forward and way in the back of her mind a tiny voice whispered, *No! It's still too soon. Too sudden. He spent three years with Sylvia. He needs some space, some time to heal and figure out what he wants. You should just be his friend for a while. Let things happen naturally. Let things...*

But his lips were already crushing hers, her arms latched around his waist, and it was too late for second thoughts.

Oh God, it was far too late.

His mouth was hot and insistent, his tongue curious. The kiss was slow and thorough, overwhelming. Breathtaking.

She broke away in an effort to draw in oxygen, but he wouldn't be discouraged.

His teeth raked along her jaw, nibbled on her earlobe. His hands ran up and down her back, the caress languorous, the warmth of his fingers seeping through the delicate rayon blouse. He traced her spine, her shoulder blades, touched the base of her neck and played with her hair. Shivers skittered over her skin, and her heart quickened. Her hands fisted in his shirt and she felt herself draw him closer. Through a layer of taut muscle, his heart hammered against her knuckles.

"You know," he whispered in her ear, sending a fresh parade of goose bumps down her arm. "You smell wonderful. Better than the flowers."

She smiled and made no protest as his hands slipped beneath the hem of her blouse and moved up to bracket her rib cage. Odd that she didn't remember him pulling the blouse from the waistband of her skirt. But then again, she didn't remember tugging his shirt loose either, and yet her hands were now pressed against the tender skin of his belly. She brushed her thumbs over the ripple of his gut, pleased by the way the fine spattering of hairs lifted at her touch.

She felt the hard ridge of his erection nudging the V of her thighs and ground herself against him. She delighted in the low growl of pleasure that rumbled up from his chest.

"Lee," he muttered, his thumbs brushing the underside of her bra. "You're killing me." And then, before she had a chance to breathe or think, he had pushed her skirt up over her hips and slipped his hand inside her panties. She felt herself swell, his fingers dampen with her need.

He urged her backward and she was fumbling with the button on his trousers when she bumped into the edge of the enormous conference table. Only then did she wake up and remember where they were, realize the enormity of what they were doing.

"Carter." She pushed at his shoulders.

"What?" He nipped at her collarbone, slipped one finger inside her.

"Mmm." Her thighs wanted to part, and her head wanted to loll back on her shoulders, but she stoically reminded herself of what needed to be done. "Carter, please." She wanted it to come out insistent, but it came out as little more than a whimper.

"Please what?" He eased another finger inside, his palm pressed against her.

"Please stop."

"Why? Am I doing something wrong?"

"No," she moaned, frustration mingling with the pleasure. His thumb caressed her clit; pressure built like steam. "God, no."

"Then why?"

"We can't do this. Not here."

"Why not?" He withdrew his hand and she found herself missing his touch. He moved on to her blouse, and had undone half the buttons before she came to herself.

She grabbed his wrists. "Carter!"

At last he focused on her, but his eyes were still clouded with desire.

"Carter," she breathed, "we're at *work*. People are typing and talking and... and *napping* just a few meters away."

Her hands still manacled his wrists, but he managed to undo the front clasp of her bra. Her breasts spilled into his hands. "This is the ninth floor conference room, Lee." He whisked his thumbs across her nipples and they tightened. "Nobody ever comes up here."

"But..." The rest was lost on a purr. His hands were so warm on her body. So possessive.

"How do you think I got all these flowers up here without anybody seeing?"

"But..."

"It's perfectly safe." He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Her hands fell from his wrists and her head lolled back. "Perfectly?" she breathed.

"Well..." His tongue laved a nipple and trailed up her chest, along her collarbone and up her throat, until his lips brushed her ear. His breath made her heart flutter. "Maybe not *perfectly*."

She was lost, her mind fogged with the scents of roses and spicy cologne and

the kind of raw lust that she'd only ever read about in romance novels. She couldn't absorb the implications of his words. Didn't want to. Didn't care about anything but having him inside her. Soon. Quickly. *Now!*

She grabbed his shoulders and dragged him to her. She found his mouth and kissed him hungrily. Her fingers fumbled with his zipper.

His hands abandoned her breasts, skimmed down her rib cage, over the bunched-up wad of material that had once been a neatly pressed skirt, and pushed her panties down past her hips. His fingers dug into her buttocks and the next thing she knew her feet had left the floor.

Her bottom landed on the smooth surface of the polished oak conference table just as she dragged his briefs down to his thighs and his cock sprang free. She wrapped her fingers around him, ran her hand up and down the length, brushed the tip with her thumb.

The word "hot" stormed through her mind along with a host of other impressions.

*Burning.*

His hands fell to her knees and pushed them apart.

*Strong.*

He stepped closer. The first drops of cum beaded at the tip, slicked beneath her palm as her hand slid down the shaft. The tip of his cock nudged her clit and she swelled until she thought she'd burst.

*Full.*

She gripped him harder, squeezed, urged. Pleaded.

*Mine.*

She smiled, drew her mouth away from his and trailed her tongue across his lower lip. She felt the light rasp of a day's worth of stubble. "What are you waiting for?" she whispered. "An engraved invi—"

He drove himself deep, his fingers digging into her ass, holding her firm, filling her. Claiming her.

Pleasure exploded through her like a fountain of light. Colors as vibrant as the bouquets that surrounded her flitted across her vision, pulsing and unrelenting. She gasped for air that seemed to elude her lungs.

He grasped her shoulders and whispered in her ear. "God, you're tight."

"Am I?" she breathed, the waves of pleasure still pounding her. "I didn't—"

"Lie back."

She blinked. "What?"

His hands were on her shoulders, urging her back. He was still inside her, as hot and hard as ever.

Still reeling and somewhat disoriented, she made no protest. Very gently he

eased her down onto the table, the polished cherry wood warming quickly against her skin. He pushed the cups of her bra aside to expose her breasts, smiled and then, when she reached up in a self-conscious attempt to cover herself, grabbed her hands.

"Oh no, you don't." He pinned her wrists to the table on either side her head. "I want to see you."

At first she was uncomfortable with being so exposed and being held immobile. But the heat of his breath, the need in his eyes, and each demanding stroke of his cock combined to drive all inhibitions from her mind.

Shamelessly she arched her back, wrapped her legs around his hips and closed her eyes. His grip on her wrists tightened, his muscles flexing with every thrust as the urgency in him grew. His tempo accelerated and the pressure built inside her again. She strained against his hands, not because she wanted to break free but because her body seemed to insist she *do* something. Go somewhere. *Move!*

Although she wasn't aware of it, some words must have escaped her lips because he hesitated.

He shifted his hands, lacing his fingers with hers, yet still holding her firm. He withdrew from her and then, slowly, eased inside her again as he bent over her and murmured, "What was that, Lee? What do you want?" Slowly withdrew again, eased inside.

She opened her eyes to find his face above her, his fiery gaze drilling into her as he continued his slow, agonizing rhythm. She licked her lips, unable to find words. She didn't know what she wanted, but she knew she *wanted*.

"Is this how you want it?" he taunted, his eyes full of mischief and passion. "Slow and easy?"

She shook her head, and he continued to tease her.

"Then tell me, Lee," he insisted, his mouth a breath from hers. "Tell me what you want."

"I want..." There was a need, an urgency inside her that she had never experienced before. She didn't fully understand it, but it demanded to be acknowledged.

"Yeah?"

His hips pumped and her legs gripped him more tightly. "I want you to..."

"Come on, Lee. Say it." His rhythm picked up slightly and she saw a few beads of sweat form on his forehead. This was killing him, too. A sweet torture. He kissed her hard, drew away. "You want me to...?"

"Please, Carter." She arched her neck and let herself go. "Fuck me!"

That must have been what he wanted to hear because his thrusts accelerated. He battered her, ravaged her, and she only wanted more. She lifted her hips,

urging him deeper, matching every thrust, synchronizing her rhythm to his.

And still she wanted. More. Harder. Faster.

Just when she thought she'd go insane from it all, a powerful thrust sent her spiraling skyward and another orgasm burst across her senses.

He drove himself into her and held himself there as she pulsed and contracted around him.

A low groan burst from his chest and he shuddered in his own powerful release.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee pulled the conference room door closed and tried in vain to brush the wrinkles out of her skirt. She looked and felt rumpled, disheveled and extremely well used. And, to her amazement, she liked it.

Carter grabbed her by the waist and pulled her tight against him. He planted a kiss on her lips and grinned like a lunatic. "That was amazing."

She sank her fingers into his hair, and stared into his eyes. Something about the way he was looking at her made her tummy do a little dip and roll. She gave him a quick kiss and released him.

She glanced at the door and grimaced. "We made a big mess."

"But we're good little kiddies." Those emerald eyes twinkled. "We cleaned it all up."

"What if someone notices that really shiny spot on the table?"

"They'll just compliment the cleaning staff on what a fine job they're doing."

"New kind of furniture polish?"

"Somebody should package the stuff." He grinned, completely irreverent and unapologetic. "They'd make a fortune."

She shook her head in mock disgust, but although she knew she should be worried, she couldn't seem to wipe the smile from her face. "We are so lucky no one caught us."

He whisked a kiss across her lips. "I suppose."

"You suppose? What does that—"

The elevator bell dinged and they sprang apart like they were on bungee cords.

"See you soon." Carter was already sprinting toward the stairs. He paused on the threshold to blow her a kiss and then was gone.

Lee smoothed down her hair and grabbed her laptop case. She was standing in front of the elevator, prim and proper and completely under control when the

elevator doors slid open.

“Oh,” exclaimed Tammy. “There you are.”

Lee breathed a sigh of relief that she didn’t even know she’d been holding. “Hi, Tammy.” She stepped into the lift and punched the button for five. “Going down?”

She stood beside her friend and watched the parade of numbers. She caught herself smiling and determinedly wiped the goofy expression from her face.

“Okay,” said Tammy, her voice slow and cautious. “What’s going on?”

Lee didn’t look at her. “Going on? I had a meeting. If you didn’t know that how did you find me?”

When Tammy didn’t respond, Lee hazarded a glance in her direction. Tammy arched one finely tweezed brow. “Since when do meetings with Human Resources leave your clothes rumpled and your hair a mess?”

Lee sniffed and turned back toward the doors. “You know Daniels. Meetings with him have more in common with the WWF than they do with Wall Street.”

“Uh huh.”

Lee said nothing and the silence stretched. At last the elevator ground to a halt and the doors opened. They stepped off and Lee walked briskly to her office, Tammy hot on her heels. Lee stepped inside, but it was Tammy who shut the door firmly behind them.

Tammy stood there, hands propped on hips, eyes blazing. “Okay, spill it. What really happened up there? I didn’t hear about any meeting, and didn’t see Daniels or anybody else for that matter. So what does that mean?” She arched her eyebrows. “Hmm?”

Lee took her time, setting the laptop case on her desk and sitting down in her chair. She smiled, opened her mouth to speak—and then clamped it firmly shut again.

Part of her wanted to tell Tammy everything, spill the whole scandalous story, down to every flower, every touch of his lips, every earth-shattering orgasm. Tammy knew exactly how she felt about Carter and would, no doubt, be ecstatic at this little development. And yet...

Another part of her was a little scared to verbalize it. What if Tammy criticized her for taking such a stupid risk at the office, or cautioned her against moving too fast? She didn’t want to hear about the possibility of getting hurt. Didn’t want to think about it.

What if saying it out loud jinxed the whole thing? What if it had all been a dream and speaking the words would make it all disappear in a puff of smoke? As if it had never existed at all. She couldn’t lose this. Not now. Not after waiting so long.

And then there was the part, the hidden, barely acknowledged part of her



that reveled in the thought of having a secret. A deep, dark, steamy little secret that was hers and no one else's. Except for Carter of course. It made her feel special, and just a little...rebellious.

She smiled again and said only, "Like I said, I had a meeting." She opened a desk drawer and grabbed her purse. "Now, I appreciate your concern, Tammy, but I really need to get going. I have something planned for tonight."

She strode toward the door and yanked it open. "And I really don't want to be late."

\* \* \* \* \*

The clock on the dash read 11:37.

The car was hidden, tucked into a dark spot just beyond a pool of lamplight. The back door of TNBC was across the street, a hundred feet away, but illuminated by a security floodlight. Lee's Golf was backed in tight, the trunk propped open. Right beside Carter's Honda Civic.

She'd been at his apartment an hour ago, drawn there by curiosity and intuition, perhaps. She'd been parked across the street, studying the lights in his windows and considering, when suddenly all the lights had flicked off and moments later his car had pulled out of the lot. Intrigued, she'd followed him—at a discreet distance, of course.

Imagine her surprise when he'd ended up here. From there her interest had grown.

She lifted a small pair of binoculars to her eyes and watched as the duo emerged from the back door with still more flowers. Grinning and laughing and looking for all the world like a pair of miscreant teenagers, they set the bouquets brimming with lilies and roses into the back of Carter's car, and then fussed a bit before carefully closing the lid. They moved to Lee's trunk, did some mysterious arranging and then lowered the lid on that one as well.

The cars were rife with color, the backseats and even the passenger seats, brimming with more bouquets than she'd ever seen in her life. She wondered where they had come from, why they were there. The curiosity was so thick it hung in the car like a cloud, suffocating her.

She watched as Carter moved to the back door of the building and removed the block of wood that had propped it open. The door swung shut with an ominous clang that she could hear even at this distance, but the pair didn't seem to notice.

Carter had caught Lee up in an embrace, their eyes locked as Lee plowed her fingers through his hair. Her lips moved, but her words remained a mystery as she drew him down for a kiss.

The observer decided she'd seen enough.

She lowered the binoculars and turned the key in the ignition. The engine revved to life but the couple across the street didn't acknowledge the noise in any way. They were so enthralled with each other, so caught up in their infatuation that a freight train probably could have run them down and they never would have heard it coming.

She pulled out of her spot and drove slowly down the street, mulling over what she had seen and deciding exactly what she needed to do next.

## Chapter Five

Carter pushed open the heavy glass door and sauntered through the TNBC lobby.

Glass and marble gleamed in the early morning sunlight, and a bouquet of white roses graced the reception desk. The flowers were fresh, but to him the simple white bouquet appeared somewhat anemic, washed out, devoid of color. It paled in comparison to the explosion of color he'd witnessed the day before. An explosion that had nothing to do with dozens and dozens of flowers.

He grinned to himself, remembering the exhilaration, the pure, raw pleasure of it. He hadn't planned for it to happen that way. The flowers had been a peace offering, exactly as the card had said. They hadn't been intended as a bribe, or some sort of attempt at seduction. But when he'd kissed her there, in the boardroom surrounded by roses and the hint of risk, the rush of pleasure had been so intense it had startled him. He'd had the unseemly impulse to make love to her right there and then, without waiting for the "perfect" moment or, worse yet, the "convenient" moment.

And for once in his life he'd followed his impulses, and he didn't regret it.

Not at all.

Still grinning, he strode past the security guard posted near the desk and, like he did every day, offered a friendly nod. Usually the guard returned the nod cordially enough, but without cracking a smile or any noticeable change of expression. Carter figured the guy had aced "How to maintain a cardboard cut-out countenance" in security guard school. Either that or he was bored stiff. Literally.

Today, however, the guard didn't follow accepted protocol. Carter's greeting jolted him like a cattle prod. He snapped to attention, grinned broadly and replied with a boisterous, "Hello, Mr. McCrea."

"Uh...hi," replied Carter, slowing his gait. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"Oh yeah," said the guard, shoulders squared like a marine's. "Very nice. But not nearly as nice as *yesterday*." A slow, sly smile spread across his lips and then, to Carter's utter confusion, he winked.

Carter picked up his pace and said over his shoulder. "Right. Yeah. Thanks. Gotta, uh go." He reached the elevator bay, and was thankful to find one open and waiting for him. He stepped on and just before the door closed he caught sight of the guard again, head cocked to the side, grinning like a halfwit. Watching him.

Carter was still puzzling over it when he stepped off on the fifth floor, greeted by harsh fluorescent lighting and acres of acoustically engineered partitions. He had just rounded the first cubicle when the cell phone in his pocket rang.

"Hello?"

"Carter?"

"Yeah Mom." He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. His mother hated it long, and nagged him constantly about getting it cut. "It's me."

"Well, where have you been? I've been calling this number for hours and there was no answer."

"The phone was off, Mom. I've told you a dozen times that I don't turn it on until I leave the house in the morning." Mothers and technology. He rolled his eyes and skirted around Edith Queen who was standing between him and Lee's office. He smiled apologetically; she glared.

"Whatever," replied his mother. "I can't keep track of all those numbers."

Carter bashed his leg against a desk and swore under his breath. "Look Mom, like I said I'm at work, so—"

"I just wanted to invite you and Sylvia over for dinner on Sunday."

Carter stepped across the threshold of Lee's office and quickly shut the door. No Lee.

He rubbed his temple where a headache was already growing. "Uh Mom, about Sylvia..."

"I have this lovely beef roast and I thought I'd make lemon meringue pie. I know how much she loves my lemon meringue pie."

"Mom—"

"I know you kids love to barbecue in the summer, but what's the point of air conditioning if you can't run the oven, I'd like to know. I mean when I was young—"

"Mom!" Before he had a chance to think up a believable lie, he plunged on. "Sylvia and I broke up."

The silence raised the hair on his arms. "Pardon?"

"You heard me. Sylvia dumped me three days ago."

"She did not."

He rolled his eyes again. "Yes, she did."

"That's crazy. She loves you very much and—"

"Yeah, well, she didn't love me enough, okay? She dumped me and we're history."

In the silence that followed he could hear his watch ticking. "What did you do to her?"

"What?"

"You heard me. If you hurt that poor girl, I swear —"

"Why do you assume it was my fault?"

"Carter." He understood the unspoken nuances in that word perfectly. He didn't like it, but he certainly understood it. He also knew there was no point in arguing with it.

"Look, Mom, think what you want, but I'm telling you, she just up and dumped me for no good reason. So, no, we won't be coming to dinner on Sunday."

"You should apologize to her."

"For *what*?"

"For whatever you did."

"I told you I didn't *do* anything."

"I don't care what you did, or didn't do, you make up with her."

The throbbing in his temple reminded him of the last Rolling Stones concert he'd attended. "I don't think I can." *I don't know if I want to. Or do I? I just don't know.*

"Well, you sure as heck better try. Sylvia's a perfectly nice girl. One of the nicest you've ever brought home. She knows how to cook, and she likes my cats. Not to mention she put up with you for almost three years. That's a big investment, one you don't just throw away."

"I didn't throw it away." Three years down the toilet. *Three years.*

She didn't seem to hear him. "At the very least, that kind of loyalty should be rewarded. You should buy her a nice big diamond. No woman can say no to that."

"You want me to bribe her into marrying me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. That's not what I said."

"Mom..."

"Once you've spent a few nights without her, you'll see. Then you'll understand how special she was. How much you need her."

"Mom, please..."

"I left your father once for a week. What a mess. He was a complete mess. He begged me to come back. If I remember correctly I think..."

The door opened, in stepped Lee, and Carter felt something inside him give.

He broke into his mother's monologue. "Look Mom, I gotta go. I'm at work, remember?"

"You call her."

"Bye, Mom."

“Call her!”

He clicked off and sank into a chair, closed his eyes. He heard the office door click closed.

“Oh God. Mothers.”

He sensed, rather than heard Lee’s approach.

“You’re early today,” she said, her hands settling on his shoulders. Her fingers dug into muscles bunched tight with tension and he sank a little deeper into his chair. “You don’t usually swing by until ten.”

“I...uh...” Her thumbs dug in behind his shoulder blades, her palms warm through the cotton of his shirt. “...was anxious to see you.”

“You saw me last night.” She found a knot, kneaded it with her thumb.

Behind the lids, his eyes rolled back in ecstasy. “That was last night. Forever.”

They’d spent the evening sneaking bouquets of flowers out of the building and into Lee’s apartment. Exhausted, they’d flopped down on her couch and laughed over the fact that she barely had enough table and floor space to accommodate them all. They’d shared a pizza and a bottle of wine, but they hadn’t made love again.

He wasn’t sure why. They just hadn’t gotten around to it.

Her fingers worked and the knot unraveled. Her hands slid up over the crest of his shoulders and down toward his chest. He felt her lips brush his ear, her breath on his neck. “What did your mother want?”

“Grandchildren.”

Her chuckle was low and throaty. Sexy. Her hands smoothed down over his belly. “Tell her you need more practice first.”

He opened his eyes and watched her hands creep toward his belt. They were small hands, delicate, with neatly trimmed nails and clear polish. Not the blood-red claws he was used to watching skim through the hair on his chest. He always thought that was attractive, a real turn-on. Red for sensuality. Red for passion. But this was exciting too.

*Maybe more so*, he thought as she reached for the buckle. Her hand brushed across his fly and the blood rushed to his groin.

He closed his eyes in anticipation, savoring the experience of having her seduce him.

“Carter,” she whispered, as the belt slid through the buckle.

“Mm?”

The button popped open. “Do you know what you do to me?”

He smiled. “No.” Delicate fingers and soft palms touched the skin of his belly and stole inside his briefs. He stifled a groan. “Why...don’t you tell me?”

She withdrew her hand and, disappointed, he opened his eyes. But she was only shifting position. She moved around in front of him, stood there for a moment, affording him a provocative view of her trim waist and enticing hips. She wore navy blue capris today that hugged toned thighs and revealed delicate ankles. He hadn't seen how they fitted her ass yet, but he could easily imagine.

He looked up to see her gazing down at him. She smiled then, the expression hinting at both affection and puzzlement. "I don't know," she said at last, slowly lowering herself to a kneeling position. She rested her hands on his knees and pushed them apart.

He licked dry lips as she moved between his legs and traced a delicate line down the ridge in his briefs.

"I just know that I'm different with you."

"D-different?"

She tugged the front of his briefs down to reveal his cock, rock-hard and throbbing.

He gripped the arms of the chair as if to anchor himself to reality. He still had trouble believing this was happening.

"Mm hmm." She touched the head of his penis and drew a little circle with her fingertip. She looked up at him from behind half-lidded eyes. "You can't tell me you haven't noticed."

"Uh...well...I suppose." His breath was coming in short little pants as her exploration became more direct, her caresses more assertive.

"I don't know why," she continued as her hand wrapped around him and squeezed lightly. "But you bring out something in me—something basic." Another enigmatic smile that made his heart pound. "Something almost... primeval."

He swallowed, overwhelmed by the images that word brought to mind.

She touched his balls. "And I'm not sure what to do about it."

He struggled for oxygen. "I'd say go with it. You know...discover your inner savage."

"You would, eh?"

"Oh yeah. I sure would."

"Would a savage do this?" She bent her head, but instead of taking him into her mouth she traced a teasing line with her tongue from the base of his cock to the head, where she licked away a fresh bead of cum.

His head fell back. "Oh yeah. I think so."

"How about this?"

And just as she felt her sweet lips touch his cock someone in the next room yelled out, "Dammit, where is that file?" And then there was a loud bang, like a

drawer being slammed.

Lee hesitated and then abruptly pulled away.

Carter opened his eyes. "What? Why did you stop?"

She was kneeling there, staring at his lap like it had suddenly sprouted an unsightly tumor. "Jesus," she muttered, pulling up his briefs and tugging at his zipper. "I can't believe I did that."

His pants were still half undone when she stood and walked to the office door. She checked the knob and swore again. He heard a click.

"Forgot to lock?" he asked, hoping that this would remedy the situation and they could get back to business.

"Yeah." She walked back into the room, hesitated beside him, but then headed to her desk and sat down.

He fought the urge to pout. "Aren't we going to...you know...finish?"

She stared at him. "Finish? I can't believe I even started!" She propped her elbows on her desk and held her head in her hands. "And the door wasn't even locked. God, I don't know what's gotten into me. It's like I've completely lost control."

"I know what it is."

She lifted her head. "You do?"

"Uh huh." He nodded knowingly. "It's primal-lust-itis, and there's only one cure."

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh? And what's that?"

"Giving head three times a day for a solid week."

Her lips twitched. "And you're willing to make that sacrifice?" She pressed a hand to her breast and batted her eyelashes. "For me?"

"Of course." He pulled down his briefs to reveal just how willing he was. "For you, Lee, *anything*."

She laughed. "Put that thing away before someone sees you."

He didn't bother to hide his disappointment. "The door's locked now. There's no reason not to."

"There's a million reasons not to."

"Come on," he coaxed. "Why not?"

"Oh, come on, Carter. Do you really have to ask?"

"We did it here yesterday." He heard the whiny tone in his voice, but the interruption had left him feeling cranky. Dammit, his cock was throbbing like a son of a bitch.

"That was yesterday, and it was on the ninth floor. This is today, and Evil Edie is just on the other side of that door."



He resigned himself and began doing up his pants. "Edith? The office manager?"

"Yeah. She gave me a funny look when I came through."

"That's not so strange, is it? I mean, she hates you, has ever since you got promoted into this office."

"I know, but this was...different." She shrugged her shoulders. "Can't put my finger on it."

"Actually," he said slowly, "come to think of it, she gave me the evil eye on my way through this morning, too."

"She hates you, too, you know. Ever since you spilled your drink on her at the Christmas party."

He shrugged it off. "Edith has no friends, no hobbies, no life. She hates everybody who does. Just on principle."

"Maybe. Plus I know she's never approved of your morning visits in here." She picked up a pen and began scribbling on her blotter. He couldn't see what she had written. "I must be feeling paranoid, but I swear the security guards were looking at me funny, too."

Carter sat up a little straighter. "Security guards?"

"Uh huh." She frowned. "Why?"

But the ring of her telephone cut off his reply.

Lee picked up the phone. "Hello."

She didn't speak again for a full minute. When she did respond her voice was tentative, tight. "Yes." She glanced at Carter, swallowed. "I think I can find him."

He pointed to himself and mouthed, *me?*

She nodded and began gnawing on her lower lip. Not a good sign.

"Yes sir. Half an hour. We'll be there."

She hung up and looked at him, her face drained of all color. "Oh God. We are *so* screwed."

"What? What is it?"

"Daniels. He wants to see us in his office in half an hour."

Carter's stomach tightened painfully. "Us? As in you and me?"

She nodded.

"But why? What possible reason could he have for wanting to talk to us?"

But of course he knew the answer to that. What he didn't know was how Daniels had found out. No one knew what had happened. No one had seen them. Had they?

"At least we've got a half hour," he said softly.

“Why? What does it matter?”

He glanced at his crotch. “It’ll take that long until I can walk out of here without hiding behind a briefcase.”

“Oh.” But she didn’t smile.

Neither did he.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee sat across from Mr. Daniels’ desk and allowed the sweat to collect on her palms. A drop of it pearled between her breasts and slipped down to tickle her tummy. She curbed the urge to reach out in search of Carter’s comforting hand. He was beside her, mere inches away, but she didn’t dare risk it. Daniels was due any second.

She couldn’t get over her behavior, her blatant sexual advance of just a few minutes ago. She’d gone with instincts, given in to seditious sexual urges without a second thought, and no thought to the risks or consequences. And that wasn’t like her at all. She’d had lovers before and she thought she’d felt passion. But this was different. She’d never been so completely lost in someone, so completely absorbed in lovemaking that she’d forgotten where she was, what she was doing.

The whole thing was a little unnerving, even frightening, but she couldn’t deny that it was also exciting. And infinitely arousing.

“What the hell is going on?” The tension in Carter’s voice grated across her nerves and dragged her back to her current reality.

“He’s trying to make us sweat.” She wiped her palms on her capris. She’d chosen her wardrobe carefully today. No skirts for a while. She didn’t need any more temptations.

“It’s working.” He glanced toward the door. “I swear the guy’s a former Nazi. I think—”

The door opened and Carter’s head snapped around like it was on a string. Lee heard the door close and a moment later Daniels walked into her field of vision. He rounded the desk, sat down, steepled his fingers and stared at them. He didn’t speak.

Lee returned his gaze, but soon dropped her eyes. Even under the best of circumstances, Daniels was difficult to look at. His large, bald head, perched atop a rotund torso, always made her think of a giant egg—Humpty Dumpty before the fall. His eyes, set deeply in the folds of his face and shaded by a bushy unibrow that etched a solid black line across his forehead, were difficult enough to see, let alone actually focus on.

She didn't have to see his eyes today however, to know that they were shooting laser beams at her. She could feel the heat on her cheeks.

"You wanted to see us?" ventured Carter. The brave one.

"Frankly, Mr. McCrea, I've seen more of you than I care to." He leaned back in his chair and virtually growled the next words. "In this lifetime or the next."

"I don't understand," said Carter.

Lee clasped her hands together and wrung them.

"Do *you* understand, Ms. Saunders?"

Lee lifted her gaze and squared her shoulders. Hands on armrests. Legs crossed. "No. I can't say that I do. And frankly I'd appreciate if we could get this meeting under way. I have a team meeting in a few minutes and —"

"Well then, perhaps this will help clarify things." Daniels opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out what appeared to be a remote control.

Lee and Carter exchanged a puzzled glance as Daniels aimed the remote at a small television on the far wall. The screen jumped to life and then they heard what sounded like the whir of a videotape.

The images that flashed across the screen froze the blood in her veins.

Carter opening the buttons on her blouse. His hands beneath her skirt, her panties slipping to the floor. Easing her back onto the table. Unsnapping her bra. Pushing her legs apart.

She covered her eyes, unable to bear the rest. The angle and the forest of flowers obscured the view enough to spare her the agony of giving Daniels a full frontal, in-your-face view of her pussy. He was, however, treated to a decent view of her bare breasts, and of course Carter's incredible ass.

She hazarded a glance through her fingers and corrected herself: Carter's incredible ass in motion.

*Oh god.*

"Security cameras," said Carter, his voice dull. "I never noticed any in there before."

"Installed three months ago," replied Daniels. "Because that area is used so little we thought it...wise."

Carter didn't reply.

Lee shifted in her chair. "Uh...could we turn that off? I think you've made your point."

Daniels swiveled his chair toward the television. "Oh, I don't know about that. I kind of like the part where you mop up the cum with McCrea's socks and stuff them into your laptop case." He nodded. "Very resourceful. I was impressed with the shine on the table."

Lee felt sick.

But at last he hit a button and the screen went black.

Daniels braced his elbows on the desk and leaned forward, his face dark with fury. "There are no words to express my outrage at this flagrant and distasteful misuse of TNBC property. We're all adults here, not a pack of hormone-ravaged teenagers. I, and the rest of the TNBC executives, expect better from our employees. We expect..."

He droned on and Lee stared at the floor, but on the edge of her vision she caught a glimpse of a twitch at the corner of Carter's mouth. She had to stifle the unseemly urge to giggle.

*Nerves.* It had to be nerves.

At last Daniels paused for breath, allowing Carter to jump in. "It wasn't intentional. We didn't *plan* for that to happen."

Daniels glowered at him. "That's enough out of you. The fact that you illicitly transferred an entire truckload of flowers to that room seems to negate that argument."

"But I—"

"I don't want to hear it. You are officially on probation, Mr. McCrea. If I hear that you so much as blow a kiss in Ms. Saunders' direction on company property you'll face a two-day suspension." He leaned further forward. "Without pay."

Carter's face flushed with anger. "You can't do that."

Daniels leaned back and crossed his arms. "Watch me."

"That's hardly just cause, and it's an infringement on our human rights."

"Start acting like a human being and maybe I'll treat you like one. For now I think barbarian is more accurate, don't you?"

Lee looked on helplessly as Carter clenched his fists. She felt disconnected from the situation, as if it were happening to someone else. It couldn't be happening to her. She had worked too hard to get where she was in this company to let something like this get in the way. What had she been thinking?

But of course she hadn't been thinking at all. She'd been following her impulses, allowed herself to be led by her heart and, of course, her libido. And that was exactly the problem. She couldn't let it happen again.

"This is ridiculous," growled Carter. "I won't—"

"You're excused," announced Daniels. "Please get back to work and don't discuss this with anyone. It's bad enough the security guards had access to the video. I caught the lot of them crowded into the security office leering over it this morning." Daniels shuddered. "It's been confiscated, but I don't want this being discussed over coffee and Danishes in the cafeteria."

Lee and Carter stood, and Lee finally found her voice. "I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"It certainly won't. You, however, Ms. Saunders, will remain. I've excused

your partner in crime, but I'm not quite finished with you yet."

Lee froze, blinking, her stomach in knots. She threw a desperate glance toward Carter, but other than a sympathetic glance and a shrug of his shoulders, what could he do?

She nodded and slowly resumed her seat, remained immobile as she listened to Carter's retreating footsteps and the soft thud of the door closing.

She gripped the arms of the chair to keep her hands from shaking.

"Ms. Saunders, I'm extremely disappointed in you."

Already she felt like a wayward teen faced with a parental lecture, and she resented him immensely for that. "I made a mistake, sir, and I've apologized. I'm only human, after all."

"I'm afraid you're wrong."

She blinked. "Pardon?"

"You're not 'only human'. As a manager you don't have that luxury. Your conduct must be above reproach, impeccable at all times. TNBC expects nothing less, and I *thought* you were the type of person who could uphold that kind of standard."

Despite the embarrassment and the fact that she knew full well she'd made a mistake, a tiny bit of anger began to creep in around the edges of her humiliation. She hadn't exactly committed a mortal sin, hadn't endangered any lives or even publicly jeopardized the image of the "company." She hardly felt this sort of flogging was warranted.

"If you're seeking a pound of flesh," she said tightly, "I'm afraid I'm a little short on muscle tissue."

"I don't think that kind of sarcasm is warranted."

"Oh? Then what kind of sarcasm is?"

"Ms. Saunders—"

"Look, Mr. Daniels, I have a stellar reputation at this company. I work hard, come up with good ideas and almost never take a sick day. I would think that would be worth something. This time, I made a mistake but I've admitted it. I've been suitably reprimanded and warned and I've made my apologies. So, unless you have something specific to say, beyond exaggerating my humiliation, I suggest you get on with it. Either that or excuse me and let me get back to work."

"All right, then. I'll get to the point." Daniels' cheeks were flaming. "You're officially suspended without pay for two days." He looked down at the planner laying open on his blotter. "Effective immediately."

Lee had to scrape her jaw up from off the floor. "*What?*"

"You heard me. I don't believe I need to explain myself."

"You most certainly do! Carter wasn't suspended. He was put on probation

with a warning. How is it that I warrant such treatment?"

"For one thing, as I was *trying* to explain, you're in a management position, and thus subjected to a stricter code of conduct."

Lee's heart felt like a freight train in her chest, every inch of her seemed to be vibrating with rage.

"And for another thing, you're a woman, and thus the onus of putting a stop to such behavior falls on you."

Lee went very still. She could almost swear her heart had ceased its runaway train antics and stopped altogether. She couldn't possibly have heard right. Keeping her tone quiet and careful, she said, "Please tell me I misheard that last statement."

"Perhaps you should get your hearing checked, Ms. Saunders. I tire of repeating myself."

"Are you implying that as a man, Carter isn't fully responsible for his actions? Are you saying that his sex drive is so strong that he can't possibly be held accountable or expected to control it?"

"No." But she could swear he looked uncomfortable. "That's not what I'm saying at all."

"Oh, I think it is. I really can't see any other way to interpret it. And if so then—"

Abruptly he stood. "This meeting is over. You will leave the premises immediately and not return until Thursday morning. There will be an appropriate deduction made on your pay stub. Do I make myself clear?"

She stood and in a slow, measured tone replied, "Perfectly." She gathered her dignity about her like a tattered cloak, turned and swept out of the room.

She closed the office door behind her, but then her feet stalled. For a moment she forgot where she was going, what she intended to do. The rage fogged her brain so completely that it took Daniels' secretary asking her what was wrong, to wake her up and remind her to excuse herself and set her feet in motion.

She reached the elevator and had pounded the button four times before she thought of Carter and had the presence of mind to wonder where he'd disappeared to. She'd half expected to find him waiting outside Daniels' office. Irrational or not, his abandonment merely served to fuel her fury.

By the time she burst into her office to retrieve her purse she could feel the blood simmering in her veins and the steam spurting from her ears. She scanned the room in search of her co-conspirator, ready, eager to lay into him and blame him and his entire gender for dragging her through the muck of their sexism.

He wasn't there.

"Damn him," she muttered as she strode across the room and wrenched open her desk drawer. She grabbed her purse, briefly considered calling Tammy

to fill her in, and then decided she'd better wait until she could speak in something well below a shriek.

She stormed from the room, not bothering to lock her office door behind her.

## Chapter Six

Carter leaned against the hood of Lee's car and peered through the murky half-light of the four-story parking garage. Lee's VW Golf was on the second floor, the last in a long line of Tempos, Tauruses and Tercels—the middle management section. The Mercedes and Beemers lined the opposite wall, the side of the garage that looked out over the fountains and flower beds and was shaded from the late afternoon sun.

Daniels' car was over there somewhere, all shiny and rust-free, and probably paid off. Daniels was the type who paid cash for big ticket items like that. The anal-retentive prick.

Carter squinted and scanned the line of cars.

Silver Beemer? No. Too much power.

Red Audi? Too much style.

Charcoal gray Mercedes sedan? Bingo!

He was still grinning when the door to the stairwell swung open and Lee stepped out. She was looking down, rummaging for something in her purse as she walked with quick clipped steps toward his end of the garage. He could hear her mumbling something to herself, but couldn't quite make it out. She obviously hadn't noticed him yet.

He waited, watching her. He admired the subtle swing of her hips and the way her breasts shifted as she walked. She wore a silk blouse with the top two buttons undone. He no longer had to imagine what lay beneath, and was startled to realize that he remembered thinking about that before. Often.

"Carter?" She'd drawn up short, purse still clutched in her tight little fists, her eyes blazing. "What the hell happened to you?"

"I—"

"I came out of Daniels' office and you were gone. And then I went to my office and you weren't there either. I needed you dammit, and you weren't there!" She stepped closer, close enough that the silk of her blouse brushed his chest. "Dammit, for once in your life could you be there when *I* need you? You wouldn't believe what Daniels said to me. That man is a pig-headed, sexist, Neanderthal..."

She struggled to complete her insult and he took the opportunity to grab her shoulders and drag her up against him. He fused his mouth to hers, thrust his tongue past her lips and was pleased to feel the tension in her shoulders ease. In fact she melted against him, all liquid heat and dizzying desire. She must have



dropped her purse because he felt something fall on his shoe. With that barrier eliminated she shifted her hips, tilting them forward until his erection was pressed firmly against her mound.

She tunneled her fingers through his hair, held his head firm and he heard himself groan as she took the initiative and deepened the kiss.

A tiny voice in the back of his mind simultaneously asked him what the hell he thought he was doing and screamed at him to stop. He'd already jeopardized her job with this kind of juvenile delinquent, sex-starved behavior. He had to stop this now, before they did something else they'd regret.

It took the effort of will of a Titan, but he managed to drag his mouth away from hers.

"What?" she breathed, her lips shiny and wet and sexy as hell. "What's wrong?" And then she moved in to sink her teeth into his throat.

"Uh..." He struggled to remember his mission. "We shouldn't do this here. We..." Her fingers had moved to the front of his trousers and were massaging him. He muffled a groan. "We should go... somewhere."

"Why?" She was nibbling on his ear. God, he loved that.

"Why?" he croaked out. "Because you're already suspended. Another incident and they could have grounds to fire you. Maybe both of us."

Suddenly she stopped, dropped her hands from his crotch and abandoned his earlobe. He missed her lips already.

She glared at him. "You know about that? How could you know about that?"

He struggled to think clearly, past his lonely lobe and throbbing cock. "His secretary was out, so I eavesdropped through the intercom. At least I did until she waltzed back in and I had to do some fancy talking and get out of there."

"You sneaky bastard."

"I was worried about you. I was —"

"I thought you'd just gone back to work and hadn't given me another thought."

"Are you kidding? When I heard about the suspension I had to stop myself from crashing through the door and punching Daniels' lights out."

He was rewarded with a fleeting smile. "How very...barbaric."

He shrugged. "Just call me Conan."

The smile in her eyes was displaced by licking flames. "He would have deserved it."

"Damn right."

"It was your fault too."

"All my fault."

"Well..." She stepped closer, grabbed a handful of his shirt. "Maybe not all."

He could feel her nails through the material, scraping across his nipple. It hurt. Just a little. Just enough to make his groin ache. "So, you wanna go somewhere and plot our revenge?"

"Nuh uh." She tugged him down and whisked her tongue across his lower lip. "I already have something in mind."

"Oh?"

"Mm hmm." She stepped back and, her hand still embedded in his shirt, pulled him with her. "Just follow me."

Feeling a little like a love-starved puppy, he followed her across the lot. Right to the gray Mercedes. He stared at it. "Daniels?"

"Uh huh." She reached into the pocket of her navy capris and pulled out a nail file. "Think you can pick the lock?"

He stared at her, trying to decipher what he'd just heard. "Pick the lock? You're kidding, right?"

"No. Didn't you tell me once you'd stolen a few cars in your misspent youth?"

"Uh...yeah. But that was a long time ago."

"Were you good at it?"

"I never got caught."

"Then you were good at it."

"But I'm reformed now."

"Uh huh." She held out the file. "And I'm a vestal virgin."

He frowned, glanced around and spotted a video camera. "What about the security cameras?"

"The lens on that one's broken. I noticed it two weeks ago and complained. They still haven't fixed it."

He licked his lips, stared at the file. "But why? You want to steal it?" That seemed a little extreme, and completely out of character for Lee.

"No, I don't want to steal it. I want to fuck you in the backseat."

He blinked in astonishment. "That's...insane. He'll know we were in there. He'll...he'll smell it!"

There was that coy smile again. "Exactly. With a little luck we'll leave a big, ugly stain, the smell will permeate that calfskin leather and he'll have to get it professionally cleaned to get rid of it. But he won't know where it came from, or who did it."

"He'll suspect. Jesus, who else would do it?"

"He'll suspect but he won't be sure. Short of DNA testing he'll never be able to prove it." She pressed the file into his palm. "Will he?"

A thousand objections came into his head. What if someone walked in and

saw them? They could both lose their jobs. They could be charged with B&E or public indecency or...something. Simply put, they could be in a shitload of trouble. It was a stupid risk.

It was perfect.

"Okay." He grabbed the file and knelt beside the door. "I haven't done this in a long time. It could take a while."

"It's early." Her hand settled on his shoulder, squeezed. "We can take all day if we want to. God knows I've got nowhere to be."

He smiled and bent to his work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee sank back into plush upholstery and buttery calfskin. She took a moment to put her head back, close her eyes and breathe in the decadence. Her fingers brushed across the pleated leather folds and she had to stifle the urge to dig her nails in deep and tear a hole in the fabric.

*How dare he!* she ranted silently, repeating the mantra that had been running through her head ever since leaving Daniels' office. How dare he put the weight of blame on her shoulders! To believe that as a woman she bore the onus of responsibility for either seduction or refusal was archaic, Medieval, *Philistine!*

Did he believe that if a woman dressed a certain way she invited rape? Did he honestly believe that men were so primitive that they had no power to overrule their hormones?

Carter pushed aside the lapels of her blouse and eased his hand inside the cup of her bra. She smiled, and lost herself in the gentle tweak and play of his fingers on her nipple.

*Then again, maybe not.*

"What are you grinning at?" he asked, his breath raising the fine hairs behind her ear.

She opened her eyes, ran her tongue along his jaw. Nibbled on his earlobe. She knew he loved that. "Who said I was grinning? Maybe it was just a satisfied smile."

"I know grins," he said, palming her breast more firmly. She arched her back like a cat. "And I know smiles. And that was definitely a grin." His tongue trailed down her throat. "And an evil one, at that."

"Evil?" She tried to laugh but it came out as more of a purr. She reached for the hem of his golf shirt and slid her hands beneath the material. The muscles twitched and rippled under her fingers. The more she got to know those muscles, the more she loved them. "My mother always called me her little angel."

Suddenly his hand shifted. He'd undone her zipper and reached through the open fly. He was inside her panties before she'd completed the last sentence. She sucked in her breath and whimpered something unintelligible as he parted the folds of her sex and caressed her clit.

"Her little angel?" he asked, his voice husky and low. "An angel with black wings, maybe." His fingers were inside her. "And getting blacker by the minute."

"Carter..." She said, her voice a plea, although she wasn't sure what she wanted. She wanted his shirt off. She wanted to touch him, wanted him to touch her. She wanted –

"Damn," he growled, his fingers fumbling with the button on her capris. "Why did you have to wear these things today? A skirt is so much easier."

Giggling, she reached for the front of his khakis. "Tell you what..." She popped open the button and undid the fly. Again. "Next time I'll wear a skirt..." She sneaked her hand inside his briefs, wrapped her fingers around his cock. "If you will."

He glared at her, his breath coming hard and fast as she squeezed and teased and milked him. But then she heard a soft snap as the button popped off her pants. He bobbed his eyebrows. "Be careful what you ask for, babe. You just might get it."

She opened her mouth for a retort, but he cut off her words. He crushed her lips beneath his own, assaulted her with his tongue as his fingers drove deep inside her. Withdrew, drove in again.

She parted her legs but was soon frustrated by the encumbrance of her clothing. With a groan of desperation, she withdrew her hand from Carter's briefs and reached for her own waistband. But he grabbed her wrists.

"No," he said, "that's my job."

Blinking and bleary-eyed she watched as he peeled off his shirt and wadded it up into a ball. He pressed it against the door on the other side of the car and pushed her back against the crude pillow. Instinctively she reached for his chest, tracing her fingers over the hair-spattered waves of muscle as he worked her pants and panties down over her hips and thighs and dropped them to the floor.

His trousers hung open, his briefs pushed just below his hips, and she thought he'd be much more comfortable if he took them off. That was her job. She should really –

He bent his head and laved her with his tongue, causing little bursts of light to shoot across her vision. At first his caresses were slow and deliberate. He massaged and stroked, exploring and teasing with torturous precision. His tongue eased inside her and his fingers applied pressure in all the right spots until she felt herself swell almost to bursting.

Suddenly she pushed him away.

"What?" he asked, his eyelids heavy. "What's wrong?"

"I want to do this together," she breathed.

He bobbed his eyebrows. "That felt pretty together to me."

But he must have understood her meaning because in the next moment he shifted to the center of the seat. He straddled the small rise that divided the two bucket seats and grabbed her by the waist to lift her toward him.

She clung to his shoulders, straddling him. She perched high on her knees, grasped his cock and, very slowly, impaled herself on him. Inch by delicious inch she sank down until he was sheathed completely inside her.

"Sweet Jesus," he murmured, echoing her own sentiments. "Can I get deeper?"

She wasn't quite sure that was possible but spread her legs a little further in an effort to comply. She settled further into his lap. When she felt him nudge something deep inside she knew that he'd filled her completely.

She raised herself up and then ground herself down against him again. She did it again, and again, gradually increasing her tempo as she felt his sweat collect beneath her palms. His shoulders became slick and sweat beaded on his forehead. Through the fog of her own desire, she watched the play of emotions that flitted across his face. His lips parted slightly and his chest heaved with every ragged breath.

With a low moan he grasped her buttocks, his fingers digging in almost painfully as he urged and guided her toward finding a rhythm that pleased them both.

The blood pounded through her veins and thrummed in her center. The pressure built and grew. She closed her eyes and allowed her head to fall back on her shoulders as the first waves of pleasure began lapping over her. When his mouth closed over her breast and his teeth raked across her nipple, she felt as if something inside her ripped open. She couldn't withhold the exclamation of ecstasy that burst from her throat.

She pulsed and contracted around him in an orgasm that seemed to extend beyond believability. At last the sensations subsided and she wilted over him, her forehead pressing against the cool leather of the seat back, her breasts crushed against his chest.

"Oh God," she moaned. "I think maybe backseats are underrated."

"Mm," was his only response.

"Did you come?" she asked, unable to raise her voice above a whisper.

"Oh yeah." He let out a throaty chuckle. "I guess you were too busy to notice."

"Mm." She drew in a soft breath and blew it out slowly, watching as it ruffled the fine hairs on his shoulder. Her tongue flicked out and tasted the

saltiness of his sweat. "You know, you have great shoulders. I really love great shoulders."

Again that throaty chuckle. His hands skimmed down her back and over her buttocks and squeezed. "And you've got a great ass."

It was her turn to chuckle. "You sweet talker, you."

He trailed his fingers up over the crest of her hips. "And your hipbones. God, they're sexy."

"Mm." Tiny shivers skittered over her skin at the gentleness in his touch. "Better."

"And your tummy." He tickled her belly. "It's so flat and soft. Taste's great, too."

She began to squirm. "Hey, that tickles."

But he didn't let up. His fingers continued their tantalizing path, dipping lower until—

She sucked in her breath when his thumb slipped between her thighs and exerted fresh pressure on her clit. "Hey!"

"And your pussy," he whispered, ignoring her. "Soft as its namesake."

He began massaging her, using tiny tight little circles that made her gut quiver. "Carter..." She tried to squirm away, but realized too late that he'd wrapped his other arm around her and was holding her firm.

"Mm? Don't you like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it." She was having trouble speaking as her breath was now coming in short little gasps. "I just..."

"You just what?"

The massage circles were getting faster and firmer, and she felt a little dizzy, as if all the blood were rushing from her head.

"I just...I don't think I can..."

"Sure you can." He was merciless, and almost against her will, her hips began to undulate against him once again. She felt him harden inside her. "Just let it happen. Just—"

This time the orgasm came fast and hard, without warning, crashing over her like a tsunami that stole her breath and left her weak and spent. It wasn't as long and drawn out as the first, but it was twice as intense. She opened her eyes to find herself draped over him like a damp towel. "I..." She licked her lips and lifted her head. "I think I blacked out there for a second."

He kissed her then, hard and long and deep, and she felt his body shudder slightly beneath her. His fingers plowed through her hair and he drew her away just far enough to whisper. "We should probably get outta here."

"Uh huh." Slowly she unsheathed herself from him and sat bare-assed on the

supple leather. "In a minute. Just give me a second to catch my breath." She felt a damp spot grow beneath her and smiled.

She watched as he began gathering up her clothes. He held up her panties. "What do you say we leave his wife a souvenir?"

She arched her eyebrows. "In the glove compartment?"

"How about stuffed into the folds of the passenger seat?"

"I think your wings are a little dark, too, Mr. McCrea."

He just grinned and leaned over to reach into the front seat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Neither of them noticed the figure that slipped from the shadows and sneaked toward the stairwell. The figure that sported a wicked grin that stretched from ear to ear.

## Chapter Seven

Tammy reached for the cream and added a generous dollop to her enormous pail o' coffee. She took a sip and grinned over the rim of the steaming mug. "Well, it certainly sounds like you've made progress."

Lee cradled her own mug between her palms and savored the heat that crept into her flesh. The air conditioning in the cafeteria could give an Eskimo frostbite. "Progress? I guess you could call it that."

"Why? What would you call it?"

Lee shrugged, took a sip of scalding caffeine. She had filled Tammy in on all the sordid details of her recent encounters with Carter. Short of an orgasm count and a play-by-play description of Carter's technique, Tammy was now fully up to speed on the Carter-Lee saga.

"Come on, Lee, out with it. You've been pining over him for a year. You complained constantly to me about how much you want to be close to him, to touch him. Now you've touched him more than Madonna touches herself, and still you're not happy?"

She gave a noncommittal shrug. "It's not that I'm not happy. It's just..."

Tammy waited patiently, sipping from her mug and regarding Lee with undisguised puzzlement.

"Is it the ex? Is he still mooning over her?"

Lee considered that for a moment. "No," she said slowly. "It has nothing to do with her."

"You don't sound so sure."

"No, I am. I think. I mean, maybe we should talk about it. You know...to get it out in the open. Clear the air. But she just hasn't come up." She shook her head in frustration. "Maybe we should talk about a lot of things. I just don't know."

Tammy took a sip of her coffee and said absently, "Maybe it's because you didn't see him all weekend. I wouldn't blame you if you're feeling neglected."

"No." She set down her mug. "It's not that." Or at least it wasn't the only reason. "He had a family commitment he couldn't get out of and he wasn't ready to invite me along yet. I understand that. It's just that—" She blinked. Rubbed her eyes, and blinked again.

"What?" asked Tammy, craning her neck to see what Lee was staring at. "Oh, that." She chuckled and turned back to concentrate on her coffee.

"Am I seeing things?" breathed Lee, "Or does Mr. Daniels have a black eye?"



“Oh yeah. He’s got a real shiner there all right.” Tammy shoved aside her half-finished plate of cottage cheese and reached for Lee’s untouched cherry Danish.

“But...how? He’s not exactly the type to get mixed up in barroom brawls.”

“Word around the water cooler this morning is that he got into a fight with the missus. She gave him that as a going away gift before she stormed out of the house.”

Lee dragged her gaze back to Tammy as her tummy sank toward her ankles. “His wife left him?”

“Apparently.” Tammy wiped a speck of icing from her lips. “Perfect, isn’t it? He had it coming.”

Lee pressed a hand to her temple. “I didn’t want to break up his marriage. I just wanted to teach him a lesson.” She looked up just in time to see Daniels striding toward her. “Oh God.” The heaviness in her stomach had converted to outright nausea. “Oh God, oh-God-oh-God. Here he comes.”

“Just play it cool. He can’t prove a thing.”

Daniels stopped by her table and she turned a shaky smile his way. “Good morning, sir.”

He said nothing.

“I’m...” She licked her lips. “I’m glad to be back today. I have a big project that—”

He dropped something in her coffee, whirled on his heel and strode away.

She blinked after him. “What the hell was that?”

Tammy was already fishing in her coffee with a spoon. It took only a moment for her to come up with her prize. She frowned at it. “It’s a button. What the heck does a button have to do with anything?”

Lee stared dumbly at the navy blue button cradled in Tammy’s palm. She only managed a strangled, “Shit,” before they were interrupted once again.

“Ms. Saunders?”

Lee looked up, this time into the stern countenance of Evil Edie. The office manager rarely strayed from her turf, usually choosing to eat at her desk rather than consort with the minions whose lives she strove so hard to control. Her presence in the cafeteria was startling enough, but for her to actually approach Lee and initiate a conversation approached the surreal.

“Uh... Yes, Mrs. Queen?”

“I assume you have something to do with this...this...abomination?”

For a moment Lee thought she was referring to the purple polyester pantsuit that Edie had poured herself into that morning. But she quickly decided that was impossible. As accurate as the description may be, Edie couldn’t possibly be

talking about herself.

"A-abomination?" stuttered Lee. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, don't play dumb with me. I know you and Mr. McCrea...*consort*..." She said the word as if it tasted of wormwood. "...on a regular basis. I have no doubt that not only do you *know* about this, but that you had a hand in putting him up to it."

"Mr. McCrea? What does this have to do with Carter?"

"You just tell him that this sort of behavior is completely unacceptable. I know there's no direct rule against it in the dress code, but there must be a rule against it somewhere!" Her hands flew out in exasperation. "And if there is, I promise you, I'll find it."

With that she stomped off toward the exit doors. Lee stared after her, her head reeling and her coffee growing cold on the table in front of her. "What the hell?"

And then she heard the snickers and hoots of laughter. Tammy grabbed her wrist and with a giggle of her own, directed Lee's gaze toward the cafeteria entrance.

Lee stared, unable to believe what her eyes were telling her. "Oh. My. God."

"Lee?" wheezed Tammy in between snorts and chuckles. "Do you know something about this?"

"He said he'd do it, but I didn't believe him. Good God, the man's insane."

"He really has very nice calves." Tammy was holding her stomach as if afraid it might burst open from the peals of laughter she was holding in. "The plaid, however, doesn't do a thing for him."

Tray in hand, flanked by his two cohorts, Carter stood there and soaked in the attention. He scanned the crowd and when his gaze alighted on Lee he broke into what could only be described as an evil grin. He strode toward her, the heavy wool tartan swishing about his knees.

"Hi, Lee." He turned his neon grin on Tammy. "Tammy." Back to Lee. "Sorry I missed stopping by this morning, but I thought maybe we should cool it since...well...you know."

"Yeah," snickered Tom. "You know."

A woman whose name escaped Lee swept past. "Nice legs, Carter. You should show 'em off more often."

He flashed her a grin over his shoulder. "Thanks." He turned back to Lee. "Your skirt's nice, too. I like the pleats. It's very..." His eyes twinkled. "...flirty."

"Carter." Lee tamped down the urge to grab him by the ear and haul him to her office. "What do you think you're doing?"

He nodded toward his tray. "I'm taking a coffee break."

"In a kilt."

"It's really very comfortable."

Dick nudged Carter with his elbow. "Ask him what he's got on underneath. Go ahead, ask him."

"I'd rather not." Lee never diverted her gaze from Carter. "This is ridiculous. You know that, right? I never intended for —"

"What's ridiculous about it? I'm Irish. I have a right to respect my heritage."

"Kilts are Scottish."

Carter rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Lee caught a flash of purple in the far corner of the cafeteria. Apparently Edie hadn't left after all. "Look, we can talk about this later. I think —"

"How about over lunch?"

"We can't. You know what Daniels said."

"Not here. I'll take you out. I made reservations at the Hunt Club."

"*The Hunt Club?*" That particular restaurant was arguably the most expensive and exclusive establishment in town. "Are you nuts?"

"Daniels has no say in what we do on our own time. There we can talk. You know...really talk."

She gazed up at him, those words echoing through her mind. Talk. The one thing they hadn't really done since that first encounter in his apartment. Despite physical sharing and the intimacy that came along with it, despite the fact that she was finally experiencing things she'd craved for over a year, she'd missed it. She'd missed talking with him. She was beginning to feel like she'd gained a lover but lost a friend, and wasn't sure she liked it better that way.

Maybe she could have both after all.

She felt Tammy's hand on her forearm. "Come on, Lee. You can't turn down an offer like that."

She hadn't needed the prompting. "Okay. Meet you there at noon?"

"You got it." With a wink and a smile Carter turned around and motioned for his two buddies to follow.

"Let's get back to work," said Lee, gathering up her coffee cup and tray.

Tammy agreed and soon they were strolling toward the doors. Lee glanced at Carter as she walked past and noticed that he had the cell phone to his ear and a pained look on his face. She overheard just enough of the conversation to understand why.

"Yeah, Mom. That's what I said. The Hunt Club."

He rolled his eyes.

"No, I'm not selling my car to pay for it."

Lee was still chuckling when she sat down behind her desk and flicked on her computer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee felt like she'd stepped into a dream, a fairyland of shimmering crystal, gleaming silver and flowing white linen. Carter grasped her hand and led her deeper into the fantasy.

They stood beside the maitre d's station and waited patiently to be served.

"What do you think?" he asked, his voice hushed, almost reverent.

"I think I feel like one of those swine-at-a-soiree you hear so much about."

He squeezed her hand. "Are you kidding? We fit right in." He looked down at his own dubious attire and grinned. "Well, maybe you do."

"May I help you?"

The maitre d's approach had been silent, and despite his solicitous tone, the question made Lee's pulse jump.

He must have noticed because he dipped his head and apologized for startling her.

"Reservation for McCrea," said Carter. "I called yesterday."

"Yes, sir," said the maitre d', his eyes settling briefly on Carter's kilt. When he returned his gaze to Carter's, the smile that haunted his lips was at once deferential and patronizing. "Of course, sir."

After a quick check of the reservation registry he led the two of them to an intimate corner of the restaurant. The table was large enough for six, but set for only two. An elaborate arrangement of carnations and baby's breath spilled from a large crystal bowl in the center of the table, the bouquet acting as a sort of buffer between them and the rest of the room.

Carter insisted on holding her chair for her. The maitre d' conceded and with a final look of cool disdain, informed them that their server would be with them shortly.

"Asshole," muttered Lee when she was sure he was out of earshot.

"I know," said Carter, adjusting his kilt. "I saw him checking out my calves. Jealousy is so unattractive."

Lee chuckled and settled a little more deeply into the plush armchair.

The waiter arrived almost immediately, poured two glasses of ice water, listed the specials and took their order. They decided to start with a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and a plate of escargots. At last, they were alone.

Lee breathed a sigh of relief and reached for Carter's hand. "Wow. This is

almost like the dates I used to imagine with my dream guy." She glanced at the bit of plaid that was peeking out from beneath the tablecloth. "Well, almost. I never thought I'd date a guy in a skirt."

Carter leaned back and draped his arm over the chair back. "What's wrong? Am I too much man for you?"

She let out a soft snort of laughter.

"You're tempted, aren't you?" He waggled his eyebrows. "You know what's under there, and it's so easily accessible. Just lift a little bit of material and voila! Your own private fantasy land."

"Yeah. That's it. I can't think about anything else."

He nodded knowingly. "I knew it. That was exactly the plan."

She rolled her eyes, but couldn't keep the smile off her face.

Suddenly he shifted his chair closer, close enough that their knees brushed underneath the long tablecloth. He leaned in and asked earnestly, "So, who was your dream guy, Lee? Your fantasy date. I mean when you were a kid. Whose posters were on your wall when you were sixteen?"

"Hmm," she said, settling into the familiar rhythm of their conversation and realizing how much she'd missed it. "That's tough. There were so many heartthrobs back then. There was —"

"Well, looky who's here."

Lee's gaze snapped up at the sound of the familiar voice. She blinked in surprise.

Sylvia, looking perfectly turned out in a white linen mini-dress, strappy sandals and just a touch of mocha-mist lipstick. She looked elegant and stunning and Lee loathed her on sight.

Carter withdrew his hand from hers and reached for his water. "Hey, Sylvia. Fancy meeting you here."

Sylvia raked her eyes over Lee, her gaze so scathing Lee was surprised the blood didn't drip down her cheeks.

"You again." Sylvia sniffed, wrapping her hands a little more tightly around her beaded handbag. "Well, at least you're fully dressed this time."

"Actually," said Lee with a coy flutter of her eyelashes. "I'm nude from the waist down. Aren't these tablecloths a wonder?"

Sylvia gawked at her for a several seconds while Carter snickered into his serviette. But gradually her eyes narrowed, and then she laughed. A little too loudly, and far too long. She made a show of wiping nonexistent tears of glee from her eyes. "Oh that's rich. You really had me going there. But then I remembered..." She tossed a half-smile in Carter's direction.

"Remembered what?" Lee noticed that his hands resting on the table were clenched.

"Oh...nothing."

"Sylvia," said Carter tightly. "Either say something worth hearing or leave us alone. I only have an hour for lunch, you know. And—"

"I remembered Carter's aversion to public displays of affection." She shifted her purse from one hand to the other. Her eyes resting on Carter held a storm of emotion. "It was like pulling teeth to get him to so much as hold hands in the movies, let alone actually kiss at a party."

Lee's first reaction was to laugh at the ludicrousness of such a statement, but Carter's retort halted the chuckle in her throat.

"I kissed you at your cousin's wedding, didn't I?" His tone was distinctly defensive, his cheeks flaming.

Lee stared in wonder.

Sylvia pursed her lips. "Only because my sister cornered you for a picture."

Carter's fingers tapped a rapid tattoo on the table and he glanced over Sylvia's shoulder. "Whatever. Do you mind, Sylvia? I think our wine is here."

A waiter appeared with an ice bucket, but Sylvia's eyes never strayed from Carter. For a moment Lee almost thought she was going to cry, but then abruptly she whirled and left without another word.

She strode to the far side of the room and joined a table occupied by two other women. She sat with her back to the room.

Lee and Carter remained silent while the wine was poured and a basket of fresh bread was placed on the table between them.

The waiter left and Carter reached for a steaming wedge of pumpnickel. He tore off a hunk, dipped it in the dish of flavored oil and shoved it into his mouth.

"Is that true?" asked Lee, studying him.

He chewed, swallowed. "Is what true?"

"That stuff about you not liking to kiss in public."

He shrugged, took another bite.

"Come on, Carter. Answer me."

"So what if it is true? What does it matter?"

"It matters because it doesn't make sense. If it bothered you then, why doesn't it bother you now?"

He laid the remainder of his bread on a plate and stared at it.

"Well?" she prodded.

"I'm not really sure, but..."

She waited, drumming her fingers on the table and tossing covert glances toward Sylvia. Even with her back to Lee, her presence was distracting, irritating. How could she and Carter really talk about anything with his ex-girlfriend less

than thirty feet away?

He began slowly. "It was different with her. I'm not really sure how or why, but..." He picked up the bread and began systematically shredding it onto his plate. "Okay, this is going to sound like I've got paranoid delusions, but when I was in a restaurant or a theater or something with her I always felt like everybody was watching us."

"Really?"

Another enigmatic shrug. "She's like that, you know? She walks into a room and heads turn. Everybody looks at her and she loves it. It was like..."

"Like she fed on it?"

"I guess so."

Lee considered that for a moment. "I guess I can't blame her, you know. I mean most women would kill to have that kind of effect on men." *God knows I would.*

"Maybe," he said over a tiny mountain of breadcrumbs. "I guess I wouldn't have minded so much if I hadn't felt like I was just another one of her accessories." At last his fingers stilled and he lifted his gaze to Lee's. "When we were alone it was great. We had fun and I always enjoyed being with her. But when we went out..." He shook his head, flitted his gaze to the far side of the room where Sylvia sat quietly. She didn't seem to be joining in conversation with the other women.

"When we went out, sometimes I felt like I was just part of her ensemble. Like her handbag or her shoes. Like I was the other half of some perfectly matched set. Like my main function was to help make her look good."

Lee studied him for a very long moment, amazed at the insight and wondering if he'd just realized this now. Or had he known it even then? "So you tried to keep your distance from her in public. You tried to break up the set a little bit."

His smile was hesitant, almost shy. "Yeah. I guess you could put it that way."

She lifted her hand, tentatively resting it on his. "But you don't feel that way here? With me?"

He stared down at her hand, resting so gently on his. She felt the rough edges of his knuckles rubbing against her palm and the warmth of his gaze on her skin. "No," he said his voice tinted with surprise. He turned his hand so that his palm was flush with hers and their fingers entwined. "I guess I don't."

Lee nodded. She squeezed his hand and wished she could hang on to this moment, wrap it up and tuck it away somewhere safe and warm. He'd shared something personal with her, something that exposed his emotions and hinted at his vulnerability. He trusted her and that knowledge made her chest swell with

warmth.

He squeezed her hand and chuckled. "I think, though, she made it worse by making such a big deal out of it. Sometimes she'd get so ticked off at me because I wouldn't be glued to her side every minute we were at a party. But if she'd left it alone and hadn't nagged me about it, I think I would have spent more time with her." He winked. "I might even have played footsies under the table with her at her cousin's wedding."

"What?" Lee chuckled. "Did she want you to and you wouldn't?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, she was half drunk that night and hornier than a March hare in heat. She wanted to play footsies, all right. Actually she wanted to do a hell of a lot more under that tablecloth than a little toe-tickling. She was wearing a short skirt and a G-string." He reached for his wine. "You get the picture."

"But you didn't want to?"

"Nuh uh, and man was she pissed. She said I was being selfish, if you can believe that."

Lee looked over toward Sylvia and caught her looking back. Sylvia whipped her head around and made a show of laughing uproariously at something one of the other women had said. "Mm," said Lee slowly. "Is that so? Well—"

She stopped when she felt Carter's hand on her knee. She hadn't worn nylons that day and the feel of his hand on her skin sent an unexpected sliver of heat spearing through her. His hand crept up her leg and the heat trickled down between her thighs. "Carter," she breathed. "What are you—"

His fingers sneaked under her skirt and brushed across the satin wedge at the juncture of her thighs. His fingertips whisked across her clit and she had to brace her elbows on the table to support a body that had suddenly lost all cohesion. She could swear her bones were dissolving.

She tried to shift in her chair but he was relentless.

He applied a gentle pressure and against her will her thighs parted a scant few inches. Not much, but enough to allow him to begin massaging her through the satin. He pressed firmly, stroking her in tight little circles that sent shockwaves surging through her gut and down her legs.

She stole a glance at Carter and saw that he was sporting a wicked grin. "Please," she rasped out between the few ragged breaths she was able to draw. "You should stop."

He pressed a little harder.

She groaned under her breath. "You really should stop."

He leaned in close enough that his breath tickled her ear. "You don't really want me to."

She swallowed thickly. "Y-yes I do."



"I don't believe you." His fingers eased in through the leg of her panties and she jerked in surprise when he slipped inside her. "If you're not enjoying it, why are you so wet?"

"I...I just..." Through eyes that had dimmed with desire she tried to scan the room. "The people. What if someone—"

"Your escargot," announced the waiter who had appeared out of nowhere.

Lee was dimly aware of the aroma of butter and garlic, and of the waiter's eyes on her. If only she could lift her hand she'd grab Carter's wrist and make him stop. Maybe.

It was just that it felt so good. So delicious And forbidden.

"Should I pour more wine?" the waiter was asking.

"No thank you," said Carter, his fingers slipping in and out of her in a building rhythm. "We're fine."

The waiter took a step back and then hesitated. "Are you all right, Miss? You look a little flushed."

Lee licked her lips. "I'm...uh..." Carter squeezed her clit between two fingers and she sucked in a breath of anguished delight.

"She's fine," supplied Carter. "Just hungry."

Lee felt her eyelids droop. He was rolling her clit gently between his thumb and index finger. "Yes. Hungry."

"Pardon?" persisted the waiter. "You were mumbling."

*I was? I thought I spoke so clearly.* "Sorry," she said. "Just hungry." Two fingers inside her. Or was it three? "Mmm."

"We're fine," said Carter, his voice a command. "So if you don't mind."

At last the waiter turned to leave. Or at least she thought he had. She couldn't see. Could barely think.

"See," whispered Carter, his lips against her ear. His fingers rubbing, squeezing, torturing. Merciless. Relentless. "No one knows."

He was inside her again, reaching so deep. Sliding out. Reaching in again. Further. Harder.

She tilted her hips ever so slightly. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered at herself. Couldn't believe she was allowing this. Encouraging it. But when he plunged still deeper her mind descended into chaos. Her mind swirled only with raging urgency, desperate need.

She wanted, desired, *demand*ed. She couldn't have stopped now if the tablecloth had fallen away and revealed all. Her head felt heavy, her senses screamed.

The blood pounded through her veins, thrummed in her center. Building.

His thumb ground against her clit and the orgasm rushed at her from the

ground up. She came against his hand, pulsed around his fingers. She felt as if she would burst, the agony of holding in her cry of pleasure seemed to heighten the sensations. Prolong the moment. She felt like a pressure cooker on the brink of exploding, as wave after wave of pleasure roared through her.

Gradually the tide ebbed and her heart slowed. She reminded herself to breathe and then realized her eyes were closed. She opened them to find Carter grinning at her. Like a fucking lunatic.

His fingers were still inside her.

"That was cruel," she whispered, but she made no move to push away his hand.

"I didn't hear you complaining." With a final, farewell squeeze, at last he withdrew his hand.

"I couldn't." She noticed that her fists were still clenched, and had to make an effort to relax them. "How could I complain when I could barely breathe?" She took a sip of wine and had to make an effort not to spill it.

He leaned closer and kissed her cheek. "You're welcome."

"You'll pay for that. I swear you will."

"Right," he said, his tone distinctly smug. "Sure I will." Abruptly he stood.

She felt an odd surge of alarm. "Where are you going?"

"To the washroom. I think I should wash up before we tackle the snails." He chuckled. "Don't you?"

And with that he walked away.

Lee noticed that Sylvia watched him cross the room.

## Chapter Eight

Sylvia sat down at the table and smiled benignly at her companions.

"Are you okay, Syl?" asked Trina. Her father was some big executive at a big software firm in some big building downtown. At least Sylvia thought so. Her friends' fathers were all bigwigs somewhere. How was she supposed to keep them all straight?

"Yeah," she said with a covert glance over her shoulder. "I'm fine. Why?"

"It's just that you've been so quiet today," said the other one. Kirsten? Was that her name?

Trina popped a final morsel of bread into her mouth. "It's not like you at all."

Sylvia shrugged. She'd never had such a hard time keeping her mind focused at a social function. Usually small talk rolled out of her like champagne from a fountain, bright and sparkling and pleasant, but today all she'd been able to think about was Carter and that...that...woman. It felt as if her brain had turned to sludge.

"You sounded so eager to go out," added Trina. "Like this lunch was some kind of emergency or something, and then we get here and..." She waved her hand.

Kirsten finished for her. "And then you act like a lump." She reached for her purse. "How about shopping? That always perks you up."

"Yeah. Sure." *What were Carter and that woman talking about anyway?* "Whatever."

"Okay, Syl," said a voice. "Why don't we wait for you outside?"

"You were going to pick up the tab, right?"

They were whispering, getting all close and cozy and it made her crazy. "Yeah. Sure. Whatever."

"Good." Trista laughed. Or was it Trina? "Come out front whenever you're ready."

"And make sure to give the waiter a good tip. He was cute."

Her two friends were halfway to the door before Sylvia realized what had happened. They'd saddled her with the bill and she'd let them. Irritated, she reached for her purse. But then she stopped. She'd almost forgotten. She was here for a reason. She had something she needed to do, and with the departure of her lunch companions, at last she had the opportunity to do it.

She pulled out her American Express and motioned to the waiter.

*Watch out, Carter. Here I come.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter popped the last morsel of filet mignon into his mouth and savored the succulent combination of tender beef, pepper and spices. It had been a very long time since he'd eaten this well. He meant to savor it.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught Sylvia looking at him. Again.

Lee tapped her plate with her fork. "Okay, I'm officially annoyed."

He blinked, returned his gaze to Lee. She really looked stunning today. The ivory blouse she wore offset her brilliant red hair, and the afterglow of her orgasm had left her cheeks rosy and her eyes wide and dreamy. "At Sylvia?" He reached for the last of his wine. "Don't worry about her. She's just jealous."

"How can she be jealous if she's the one who dumped you?" Her jaw clenched and the muscles in her cheeks worked. God that was sexy. "Besides, it's not her that I'm annoyed at."

Incredulous, he set down his glass. "Me? You're annoyed at me?"

"Yes. If you wouldn't keep acknowledging her, maybe she'd ignore us and finish her damn lunch."

"Acknowledging her?"

"Yes. Just forget about her for a while. Pretend she's not there."

He snorted. "Look, Lee, I know this isn't easy, but it's pretty hard to just forget about someone I spent three years with. It's not that easy."

She looked away from him, her jaw set. "I know. It's just...difficult to deal with. I feel like I'm sharing you."

"I'm here with *you*, aren't I? And I did something for you that I never did for her. Doesn't that count for something?"

Lee turned back to him and asked a question he'd been dreading. "So what did you see in her, anyway?"

"What?" he asked, all innocence. "Who?"

She rolled her eyes. "Sylvia, you moron. What was so special about her that you stayed with her so long? I mean, she's beautiful. That much is obvious. But there must have been more, right? There had to be more."

Carter's gaze shifted to the far side of the room, studying Sylvia's back as he considered the question. "Of course there was."

"Well?"

He watched as Sylvia lifted a glass to her mouth and he tried to remember.

"Carter? Do you have an answer?"

He did, but not a complete one. "When we first started dating I was going through some...changes. I was having kind of a tough time, and she was there for me. Believe it or not, I don't think I could have made it through without her support." As to the rest, he'd spent too many years trying to avoid the question. How was he supposed to come up with something plausible now?

"Oh. What kind of changes?"

"It's a long story," he hedged. He trusted Lee, but not with that. Not yet. "Another time, okay?"

She accepted that in silence. "What about afterwards?"

"Afterwards?" *The Question, Part B*. The part of the test he'd fail. "You mean why did I stay after things settled down? You know, I'm a little fuzzy on that myself. I'll have to think about it." He flashed her a pseudo-grin. "Can I get back to you? Maybe via an interoffice memo?"

"Sure," she said, making a weak attempt at a smile. For a moment he worried that he'd lost her, but then she reached for his hand and he knew it would be all right. "Not that it matters. You're here now."

He nodded, relieved. "Yeah, I am." He leaned in and planted a blatant kiss on her cheek. "Speaking of here, should we stay?" He waggled his eyebrows, hoping. "We could skip coffee. Go right to dessert?"

She seemed to consider that. "Mm. No." The corners of her mouth curved, ever so slightly. "There's one thing I still want before we leave."

"Oh? Cheesecake, maybe? Or they make a great chocolate truffle torte."

Her smile widened, and something glinted in her eyes. Something he didn't quite understand. "No, that's not quite what I had in mind."

He opened his mouth to ask her to clarify but never got a chance to speak.

Lee brushed her hand across the table and he heard a soft clink as something hit the carpet. "Oh damn. I dropped my fork."

"They'll get you a new one." He lifted his arm to call for the waiter, but she caught his wrist and dragged it down.

"No, no. That's okay. I'll get it."

She bent down. "Shoot. It kinda rolled under the table."

"Rolled?" Incredulous, he watched her inch her way off the chair. "How does a fork *roll*?"

But she didn't respond. In fact he could no longer see her. She'd disappeared beneath the tablecloth.

"Lee?" he whispered, just a little self-conscious now. "What are you doing?"

"Just looking for something." She was silent for a moment, and then he heard her whisper, "Oh. I think I found it."

"Found wha—" At the touch of her hand, he almost jumped out of his chair.

She was fondling his balls, caressing the tip of his penis.

"So, it's true," she said, her voice barely audible over the low buzz of restaurant noise and the rush of blood through his ears.

"What's true?" He licked his lips, grasped his fork and knife in a death grip.

"What they say about kilts. You know...what men wear underneath them?"

"Oh that. I—"

"Hi, Carter."

His gaze snapped up to find Sylvia standing before him, safely on the far side of the table. Thank God.

He cleared his throat. "Hi. Are..." Lee had pushed the kilt up his thighs and was stroking his cock with her tongue. "Are you fucked?" He shook his head. "*Finished*. I mean, are you finished?"

Sylvia frowned, but appeared to dismiss the slip. "Yes. I'm just leaving. My friends are waiting outside."

"Oh. Good."

Lee was massaging the insides of his thighs, tickling his balls with light scratches from those neatly trimmed nails.

Sylvia's eyes blazed. "Good? You're glad I'm leaving then? Is that it?"

A tongue laved his cock from base to tip and then back again. She stroked his balls with her fingers. He had to concentrate so hard on speaking. "No. I didn't mean that." She pressed her thumb against the area just in front of his anus and he almost vaulted from his seat.

Sylvia sniffed, shifted her purse from one hand to the other.

"So where's your date?"

He tried to think. He couldn't tell her the truth. "Uh...washroom." That was good. Quick thinking.

"Oh," said Sylvia, fidgeting with her purse strap. "Is she nice? Do you like her?"

He had to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head. "Oh yeah. She's very...uh..." Her tongue flicked over the tip of his cock while her fingers continued their torturous massage. "...talented."

Sylvia nodded. "So I guess you're glad I left, eh? You were probably just itching to screw around with..." She waved her hand at Lee's vacant chair. "...*her*. All you needed was an excuse."

He blinked, tried to focus on her words, but Lee had taken him into her mouth and her tongue was doing wicked things. Evil things. "An excuse?" He shook his head to clear it. "Look Syl, you left me, remember? What do you care who I'm with?"

She squared her shoulders. "I don't. It's just that I..."

Despite his best efforts he completely lost track of what Sylvia was saying.

Lips sliding up and down his cock. Mouth sucking. Fingers teasing. Blood pounding. God, he just wanted to close his eyes and lose himself, but Sylvia was still there. She was no longer speaking, but she was still there.

"Why are you here again?" *Oops*. Had he actually said that? "Lee will be back soon. Was there something you wanted to say?"

"No. I mean...yes." She blinked those big watery blue eyes, and he could swear she looked confused. "I forget what I was supposed to say."

"Huh?" Lee squeezed his balls. Her teeth raked down the length of him, hinting at pain. Promising pleasure. "You...*forgot*? What does that mean?"

One of Lee's hands reached around to grip his ass and urge him forward on his chair. He had no idea what she had in mind, but was in no mood to argue. He shifted forward, making the movement as nonchalant as possible.

"Nothing. I just hope you remember what we had together, Carter. We spent three years together. That's a long time. Don't forget that. It's important."

"Important. Right." Lee's mouth was doing sinful things, and her fingers were touching places that he didn't think had ever been touched before. "Don't worry," he ground out as the pressure built in his groin. "I remember." She slipped a finger just inside his anus in search of his G-spot. He had to stifle a groan. "I remember everything."

Suddenly Sylvia tilted her head to the side. "Carter, are you drunk?"

Very slowly, he shook his head. He was so hard he was afraid he'd shatter. "Nope. Not a bit."

Sylvia frowned. "Hmm." But then she turned away. "Goodbye Carter. Remember what I said."

He moistened his lips, intending to respond, but Sylvia was already walking away.

Thank God, because at that moment he ripped open and a mind-blowing orgasm blasted through him. He came, pumping himself dry as his body thundered with a rare, raw pleasure.

At last he sat there, empty and spent, trying to catch his breath and gripping the table in an effort to remain upright.

"Shit," murmured a voice from under the table. "This blouse was expensive. I hope the drycleaner can get this out."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You need a napkin?"

"Sure."

He handed her one and heard her soft, throaty chuckle. "I see what you mean about the skirt thing. Very handy."

"Mm." He took a drink of water, willed his hands to stop shaking. They were

very handy, indeed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sylvia settled into the front seat of her car, fastened her seat belt, shoved the key into the ignition. And burst into tears.

She leaned her forehead against the steering wheel and sobbed openly. It took a full five minutes for her to get herself back together again. At last she found a tissue, mopped up the evidence of her failure, and reached for the cell phone.

She punched in the familiar number.

"Well?" asked the other end. "What did she say?"

Sylvia blinked. "Oh shit."

There was a prolonged silence. "What does that mean?"

She twisted the tissue around a finger. "I was just so upset. I...I couldn't remember what you'd said." She closed her eyes in misery. "I blew it. Dammit, I'm so stupid."

"Yes, well, that goes without saying."

Despite her dismal mood, Sylvia bristled. "You know I don't like—"

"You didn't talk to her, did you?" The voice was laced with disgust. "You were supposed to follow her into the ladies' room and talk to her."

Shame overrode outrage. "I know. I forgot." She thought she was supposed to talk to Carter. Or maybe she just wanted to talk to Carter. She missed him so much. Her first instinct was to go to him. Not to *her*.

"Well, then what did you do? Did you just sit there and look pretty? God knows you know how to do that."

Sylvia sniffed, sat up a little straighter. "No. I talked to *him*."

"You idiot! You were supposed to go in there and tell her to stay away from Carter. Tell her that he's bad news and that he's only going to get her into more trouble. You were supposed to threaten her with going to Daniels about doing it in his car. You were supposed to scare the shit out of her."

"I know," she whispered again. "I forgot."

"I know women like that. Women who move in on men on the rebound are slime. They're gutless and easily manipulated. If you'd scared her enough, she'd be gone tomorrow."

"I'll go see her at home. Wouldn't that work? You can tell me where she lives, can't you? You can find that out."

"Mm. I don't know."



"Please. I'll remember this time. It's just that when I saw them together it made me so crazy. If I can get her alone..."

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea. Let me think about it."

Sylvia gripped the phone so tight she was surprised it didn't shatter. Better the phone than that redhead's skull. Maybe.

"Patience, Sylvia," soothed the voice. "You'll get him back."

She took a deep breath. And then another.

"Just trust me."

## Chapter Nine

Lee picked up the coffee cup and frowned at the dark ring on her blotter. She hated when she had to resort to taking “working breaks” but today it had been inevitable. She cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder.

“Yes, of course I’m swamped. I’m drowning in work, Tammy, and it’s all your fault. I don’t care if you’re harboring Ebola, I expect you to pull your weight on this team. God knows I’ve made enough sacrifices, and I expect my people to tow the line as well. I swear, when I was —”

She was interrupted by a fit of laughter laced with deep racking coughs. “Good God, Lee,” rasped Tammy. “Stop it already. Your Edie impersonation is just a little too convincing. Are you trying to kill me?”

“Of course.” She doodled a heart on her blotter. “Didn’t I ever tell you about that million dollar insurance policy I took out on your life?”

Tammy groaned. “The way I’m feeling, you might just be in the position to collect.”

“Stop exaggerating. It’s a cold. Colds don’t kill people.”

“Right. People kill people.” Another round of coughing left Tammy gasping for breath.

Lee pursed her lips and tapped her pen rapidly on the blotter. Tammy never got sick, and the sudden onset of such a severe cold didn’t sit well with Lee. It worried her.

“Speaking of killing people,” ground out Tammy, “are you looking for help taking down the ex? I could breathe on her for you.”

Lee allowed herself a smug little smile at the memory of the previous day’s adventures. “No, that’s okay. I don’t think she’s an issue anymore.”

“Oh, really? Did —” She sneezed, sniffled. “Did you two finally get into it? You and Carter, I mean. Did you, you know...talk about how he feels about her?”

The smile fell away as Lee stared at the heart scrawled so carelessly across the expanse of white. Very slowly, she drew an arrow through its center.

“Lee?” persisted Tammy. “You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“So? Did you talk?”

“Yeah,” she said remembering the way Carter had avoided answering her, skirted around certain subjects. An understanding shoulder at the beginning of a

relationship hardly explained a three-year commitment. But perhaps it wasn't a big surprise that he couldn't pinpoint his reasons. Not everyone was prone to self-examination, after all. She'd just give him time to get around to it. "We talked about it a little."

"A little?"

The silence was too thick. Lee felt the need to cut through it. "We didn't cover everything, but something happened, something that tells me he's over her." She began coloring in the heart with a red pen. Surely he wouldn't have taken a chance like that, risked being "caught in the act" with Sylvia just a few feet away. That spoke volumes, right? It didn't mean he was trying too hard. It didn't mean he needed to prove something.

"Definitely," she insisted. "Over her."

"Oh. Okay then. As long as you're sure."

"Uh huh. I'm sure." Lee glanced at her watch. "I mean we still have a few things to talk about." *A few?* Who was she kidding? Despite her efforts, ever since their newfound intimacy they hadn't managed to hold a conversation that lasted more than five minutes, let alone talk about anything as deep or personal as how they were feeling about what had led them there. Or each other. The second they saw each other they both turned into sex-starved, eight-armed octopuses. She'd convinced herself that it was to be expected. Their physical relationship was still so new. They were still adjusting.

They'd grow into it—eventually.

Lee set down her pen, squared her shoulders. "But as far as I'm concerned Sylvia is a non-issue."

Tammy coughed, but Lee suspected it was more than a symptom of her cold. "Good. Well, as long as you're sure."

"I'm sure. Now I really need to get going. I've got an appointment."

"All right. Don't work too hard, okay?"

"Are you kidding? That's what I pay you for."

Tammy was still chuckling when Lee hung up.

Glad that she'd managed to cheer up her friend, and hoping the little bit of good humor would do Tammy good, Lee grabbed her briefcase and headed for the door. She had a meeting scheduled in fifteen minutes, and with a little luck it wouldn't last too long and she'd still have an hour to spend with Carter for lunch. After the highbrow lunch of the day before they'd decided to walk down to the Harbour Front and grab a hot dog from a street vendor. The area along Toronto's waterfront, dotted with shops, restaurants, boardwalks and parks would be the perfect spot for their very first picnic.

The thought made her smile.

She stepped out of the office and, as was her habit, headed for the

washroom. She noticed Edie staring at her over a mountain of file folders, and as usual the coldness in Edie's gaze sent a little shiver skating down her spine.

She slipped into the washroom, glad to be out of Edie's line of sight.

Two minutes later she stood at the sink, checking her makeup in the mirror while the water warmed to a comfortable temperature. She was just reaching for the soap when she heard the washroom door open.

She thought nothing of it and didn't bother to look up, however the sound of a bolt sliding into place did command her attention.

Her hands still under the tap, she turned her head to see what was going on, and almost jumped out of her skin.

"Sylvia?" She stepped back from the sink, her hands dripping all over the cold tile floor. "What are you doing here?"

Sylvia took a step forward, and then another. She looked cool and comfortable in a light cotton sundress and sandals, but her eyes burned hot. "I want you to stay away from him."

Lee studied her for a moment, trying to decide whether to laugh or cry at the ludicrousness of it. In the end she merely shook her head and stepped over to the paper towel dispenser. "You know, Sylvia, Carter told me once how you could play the drama queen when you wanted to. I don't think I really believed him." She ripped off a towel and began drying her hands. "Until now."

Sylvia took another step forward. "You think I'm kidding? Do you think I don't mean it?"

"Sure you mean it." She dropped the towel into the waste basket. "I just don't care."

Sylvia opened her mouth to speak but Lee rode over her like a well-tuned tank. "I don't care if you and Carter had the most passionate love affair since Antony and Cleopatra. I don't care if you've now decided you made a mistake breaking up with him. I don't care if you cry yourself to sleep at night, and I *really* don't care what you think of me."

Sylvia finally closed her mouth that had been dangling open.

"Is that it? Did you suddenly come to the realization that Carter was worth keeping and now you want him back? Or was the whole breakup a ruse to get him to make a commitment to you?"

The color that flooded Sylvia's cheeks was answer enough.

Lee didn't even try to keep the smugness out of her voice. "I see. Well, you know what? I don't even care about that. What I *do* care about is the fact that Carter and I have a really good thing going. We were good friends and now we're great lovers, and I intend to keep him, thank you. So if you can't deal with that, then—"

"I'll tell Daniels."

Lee blinked, uncertain of what she'd heard. "Pardon? You'll tell Daniels what?"

"Either you break it off with Carter or I'll tell Daniels that you fucked Carter in the backseat of his car. And when I tell him that *you*'ll be out of a job."

For just a moment Lee couldn't breathe, was convinced all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. How could Sylvia possibly know? But what really mattered was, would Daniels believe her?

And then she remembered the button.

"He already suspects it was us," she reasoned. "You won't be telling him anything new."

"But he doesn't have proof, does he? An eyewitness would fit the bill quite neatly, don't you think?"

"You're an eyewitness? You saw us that day?"

Sylvia clenched her fists. "No, but I know someone who did."

Lee tried to digest what she was saying. "And they're going to tell Daniels?"

Sylvia lifted her chin. "No. But they told me all about it, and I'll tell Daniels."

Lee stared at her as the implications of this sank in. Who could it be? Who could possibly have seen them? Why did they care? And why—*why* would they have told Sylvia?

Sylvia continued, "I know how much this job means to you. I know the kind of hours you put in. Are you willing to lose that? Hmm? Are you willing to sacrifice your career, your income, your *reputation*?"

But gradually, as Lee listened and absorbed what the other woman was saying, the shock was replaced by something else. Very slowly it was washed away by an advancing tide of outrage. Lee had never responded well to threats or ultimatums. To her a threat like this one had always been like waving a giant red flag in her face. It was a challenge—a dare. And Lee never backed down from a dare. She just didn't have it in her.

She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. "You know what, Sylvia? I don't care."

Sylvia gaped. "But your job! Daniels would—"

"I don't care what Daniels would or wouldn't say. I don't care how you know about the incident in the garage or how you know about Daniels. What I do care about is Carter. I care about him more than I care about my job or my reputation. And I certainly care about him more than I care about what Daniels or the rest of the TNBC executives thinks of me."

"But—"

"So go ahead. Toddle on over to Daniels' office. Make an appointment. Spill your guts and throw out your accusations. But you know what? Even if you have the guts to do it, which I don't think you do, I don't think it'll matter. Daniels

doesn't know you. You don't work here. Who the hell are you to tell him *anything* about the people who work for him? Why should he believe you? Why would he believe a secondhand account from a second-rate nobody. Because that's what you are, Sylvia. A nobody. A pretty, petite, blonde *nobody*."

Sylvia stared at her as the color leached from her face and her eyes brimmed with tears. "I am not a nobody. Carter loved me. I know he did."

*Ah*, thought Lee. She'd struck a nerve. "Did he? I really wonder about that. Why did he give you up so easily if he really loved you?"

Sylvia blinked furiously, took a step back. "You're bluffing."

It took Lee a moment to get her bearings. "You mean about Daniels? Just try me."

When Sylvia spoke again, her voice was little more than a tortured whisper that echoed off the cold bathroom tile. "You won't last. You'll never cut it with his mother."

That made Lee do a double take. "His mother? What the hell does his mother have to do with anything?"

Sylvia didn't seem to have heard her. "You don't have a clue how to deal with her. She'll eat you alive, and when she does Carter will come crawling back to me." She turned and clicked open the deadbolt. She pulled the door open just a crack. "You'll see."

And with that she was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you like mustard?" asked Carter, a pair of jumbo hot dogs perched precariously in one hand. "Seems to me I should know, but I can't remember. Sorry."

Lee had been so quiet and distracted ever since they'd left the office. He'd begun to entertain the totally irrational notion that she was angry at him about something, and along with that came the ingrained male urge to apologize. Constantly.

She plucked the hot dog from his hand. "No. No mustard, thanks. Just hot peppers." She spooned her own condiment down the length of the wiener, grabbed her can of pop and headed for a park bench just a few feet away. She settled down and crossed her legs, set the hot dog on her lap and stared out across the harbor.

Carter joined her and silently munched on his lunch while watching the sailboats that flitted across the waves and the gulls that wheeled above them. The water glittered in the early afternoon sun, a sultry blue blanket dusted with

diamonds.

"It's beautiful today," he ventured. "Perfect actually. Just like you."

"Mm." At last she picked up her hot dog and took a tentative bite.

He rolled his eyes. So much for the romantic approach.

"Do you know how you're gonna vote in the municipal election? Martin's the favorite, but I think he's pretty full of himself, you know?"

"Sure."

Scratch intellectual. He stuffed another hunk of wiener into his mouth, and grinned. "And then there was the time I got arrested for dancing naked on the steps of Parliament. It was no picnic, I'll tell ya, but the public indecency charge was a breeze compared to spending a night in jail with a gaggle of sex-starved drug dealers."

"Mm. That's nice."

Carter chuckled to himself and was just considering the pros and cons of picking her up and throwing her into the water when suddenly she turned to him and blurted out, "I want to meet your mother."

His appetite abandoned him like a rat fleeing a sinking ship. He balled up the remainder of his hot dog and frowned at her. "Is that why you've been so distracted? You're worried about meeting my mother?"

She squared her shoulders. "I'm not worried about it. I just think I should meet her, that's all." She tore off a tiny piece of bun and considered it. "Don't you? Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"I dunno." He turned a wary gaze on a hungry seagull that had ventured a little close. "Is diving headfirst into shallow water a good idea? Or how about skipping through a mine field? Dental surgery without anesthetic? If those scenarios appeal to you, then sure, it's a good idea. What the hell, let's tailgate a Pinto while we're at it."

Lee glared at him, the breeze flirting with her hair and whipping it into a fiery red froth about her head. "You're exaggerating. No one's that bad."

"You haven't met my mother."

"But I need to." She reached out, lay a hand on his. "I want to."

He shook his head in confusion. "Why? Did you suddenly develop masochistic tendencies? A death wish? What brought this on?"

She pulled back her hand. "Are you afraid to introduce me to her? Are you worried that she won't approve? Is that it?"

He had to make an effort to unclench his jaw. "No. I don't need my mother to approve my girlfriends, if that's what you're getting at. I'm just trying to spare you some anguish, that's all." He turned his gaze back out over the water. "It's just that Mom can be...difficult. I'm her only child, and it took her six years to conceive me, so she's kind of...protective." He picked up his drink. "Every girl

I've ever brought home has been through it, and it's not pretty, Lee." He took a sip and savored the fizz as it slipped down his throat. "In fact sometimes it can get damn ugly."

She shifted closer to him on the bench, laid a hand on his knee. "Then I'll just have to work extra hard to put her at ease, won't I?" She eased her hand up a couple of inches, squeezed his thigh. "I can win her over. You know I can."

He gazed down at her hand, feeling himself harden already at the implied intimacy. "Why is this so important to you? Why does it have to be now?"

There was so much more to it than just meeting his mother. Like a row of dominoes, meeting dear old Mom would lead to all sorts of other revelations, and he just wasn't sure he was ready for that yet. And even if he was ready...he glanced at Lee...was she? What would she think of him when she found out? Would it make a difference? Would it matter?

She leaned closer, her breath on his neck sending little shivers skittering down his arm. "I'd just like to get it out of the way. You know how I hate procrastinating." Her tongue flicked at his earlobe. "The sooner I meet her, the sooner I can stop thinking about it."

"Mm." He slid his hand inside the lapel of her bolero jacket and traced the curve of her breast. She felt so good, so natural against him.

Maybe he should just get it over with. Just like a trip to the dentist, sometimes the anticipation was much worse than the actual experience. And sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes the dentist still hurt like hell.

He concentrated on Lee, on the scent of her perfume, the softness of her hair. "I think I need more convincing."

She shifted closer to him on the bench, her hand inched higher on his thigh. "You really have to get over this phobia of public affection, Carter." She groaned when he squeezed her nipple. "It's getting to be a probl—"

He sealed his mouth to hers and swallowed her words. Her mouth was on fire, and it wasn't just due to the hot peppers she'd been eating.

She moaned and arched against his hand that was doing evil things beneath the jacket.

Her hand drifted toward his crotch.

He forgot completely where they were, and would have fucked her right there in the park if she hadn't placed her hand on his chest and pushed him gently away.

He blinked, trying to clear his vision of the haze of lust.

Lee was smiling at him. And then with a subtle tilt of her head, indicated that he should look over toward the harbor.

He shifted only his eyes, but soon picked out the little boy who stood a few feet away, eyes wide and staring, a hot dog clutched in a set of soft, pudgy



fingers.

“Oops,” he whispered.

Lee giggled and they both watched as a woman strolled up to the boy, tossed them a look of undisguised contempt, and dragged her son away by the collar of his Spiderman T-shirt.

“Not much better than dancing naked on the steps of Parliament,” he mumbled. “I’m getting into some nasty habits.”

Lee tilted her head. “Huh?”

“Never mind.” He sighed and sat back on the bench. “You really want to meet her? Really?”

“Really.”

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck and considered everything. Lee. His mom. His past. His future.

A headache had already begun to build at the base of his skull, and he knew it would only grow. Maybe the only way to get rid of this particular headache was to tackle it head-on and take his medicine like a big boy. He looked at Lee. Maybe he was underestimating her. If she could deal with Daniels, then surely she could deal with his mother.

And hopefully she could deal with the truth.

“Okay. How about tomorrow night? I’ll call as soon as we get back to the office.”

She beamed. “Perfect.”

He nodded and reached for his soda. “Yeah,” he muttered under his breath. His cock was still throbbing, only now it was in time to the beat at the base of his skull. “Fucking perfect.”

## Chapter Ten

Lee stepped out of the car and paused to tuck her blouse a little more snugly into the waistband of her jeans. "Are you sure this is okay?" She did up one more button on her sleeveless cotton shirt, and regarded the red brick edifice warily. Despite being obscured by a curtain of weeping willow branches and a forest of lilac bushes, it was daunting. Carter had grown up here? The place belonged in the pages of *Victorian Mansion Monthly*. "I mean ...jeans? For a first meeting with your mother?"

Carter stepped closer and reached for the button she'd just done up. "It's cool tonight and you asked me what I was wearing." He popped the button open. "You should be comfortable." He slipped a finger inside and traced the lacy edge of her bra. "And you should be yourself."

She leaned into him, allowing him to slide his hand beneath the satin and cup her breast. Her nipple hardened beneath his exploring fingers. "So do you think she'll like me?"

His fingers stilled and he took a little too long to respond. She lifted her gaze to his. "Carter?"

He withdrew his hand. "We should go in."

"You didn't answer me."

"No," he said, grasping her hand and leading her forward. "I didn't."

She balked, tugged him back. "Well, I'd like you to."

"Yeah. Sure. She'll love you. Now can we get on with it?"

"Well, that's a lovely attitude."

He blew out a breath and she could see him making an effort to relax his shoulders. "Look, Lee. This was your idea. I don't really care how my mom feels about you. It's what I think that counts, but I know family is always an...issue, so we've got to deal with it. If you think you're going to have her fawning over you and picking out china patterns I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. I thought you understood that."

Lee blinked, allowing the words to percolate through the layers of armor she'd donned in preparation for tonight. "And how do you feel about me, Carter?" The words were out of her mouth before she realized they'd formed on her tongue. She hadn't meant to speak them, and they'd come out as little more than a strangled whisper. But they were out there, and now she had to acknowledge them. If not to him, at least to herself.

Carter stepped closer. "What? I couldn't hear you."

She squared her shoulders and tamped down her uncertainty. For now. "Forget it. I just—" She stepped forward, but then hesitated. "I'm just curious about something."

"Yeah?" His tone conveyed impatience.

"Has your mother hated all your girlfriends?"

He stared at her, his expression tightly controlled. "Pretty much. Hated them on principle. You know, women trying to steal her son..." He shrugged as if that said it all.

She narrowed her eyes. "Hang on a second. Pretty much? What does that mean?"

She could almost see him squirming inside his skin. "It means there were one or two that she didn't hate on sight."

"One or two?"

He licked his lips. "Well, okay. One."

"Sylvia."

"Bingo." He tugged her forward. "So now you know. My big ugly secret. My mother liked my ex-girlfriend, and you've got a pretty, petite pair of shoes to fill. Will that make this easier?"

They reached the front door and pressed the bell. Lee didn't have time to wonder that he was ringing the bell at his own home. "I don't think so."

The door swung open, and Lee plastered on her best, fakest smile. She extended her hand. "Hello, Mrs. McCrea. It's so nice to meet you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have a beautiful home, Mrs. McCrea." Lee leaned against the island in the center of an expansive kitchen.

Polished copper pots hung from the ceiling and stainless steel appliances gleamed along the far wall. In actuality, "beautiful" didn't begin to cover the little she'd seen of this house so far. Lavish, extravagant, decadent—these were the words that came to mind. And Carter was at home here, among all this. She was just beginning to absorb that fact.

Carter was working the cork out of a bottle of Chardonnay while his mother fussed over the stove.

She was a tiny woman, tastefully dressed in a flowing chemise that flattered her petite five-foot-nothing figure. Carter had obviously gotten his angular jawline and emerald green eyes from her. But not his hair. Her hair was a startling raven-black. Lee wondered idly if it matched her heart.

She shifted on her stool. "I mean it. You could have a spread in *Better Homes and Gardens*."

Jane McCrea added a dash of something to a sauce on the back burner, and continued stirring. She didn't bother to glance at Lee as she responded. "We've already been featured in *HomeStyle* and *Toronto Life*. Both this house and the one in Vancouver."

Lee arched her eyebrows and glanced at Carter. *The one in Vancouver?* Carter was concentrating on the cork.

Jane looked at Lee. "I don't suppose you subscribe."

Lee tried to smile as she shook her head.

"Mm." Back to the sauce. "I have no intention of doing it again. The whole thing is rather tedious, having people tracking over my clean floors and upsetting my babies." As if he knew she was talking about him, a white Persian roughly the size of a small collie brushed up against his mistress's leg and meowed. Jane plucked something out of another pan and bent to feed her pussy.

*Cat!* Lee corrected herself, but couldn't keep the sinister smile off her face.

"You find that amusing?"

Lee's gaze snapped back to the other woman.

"Perhaps you think it's eccentric that I dote over my pets. Or maybe you're just a cat hater."

"No, no. Not at—"

"Because you wouldn't be the first, you know. I remember—"

"Mom." Carter held out a glass of wine. "I really don't think Lee needs to hear the Crystal story."

She accepted the wine from him. "I wasn't talking about that."

"Right." Carter handed Lee her glass and she took a healthy sip. "Of course not. But maybe we could talk about something else. Something a little less... incendiary."

Jane sipped from her wine and set it down on the counter with a soft clink. "I suppose you're right." She continued stirring, but rested her gaze on Lee. "So you're a manager down at that...place. Is that right?"

"Yes," said Lee, relieved to be back in more familiar territory. "I manage a marketing team."

"Your career is very important to you then, I suppose."

"Yes." Lee took a sip from her wine, but despite the alcohol felt her nerves begin to jangle. She glanced at Carter, but he was merely leaning back against the counter, sipping his wine. His smug smile spoke volumes: *You asked for it. You're on your own, babe.*

She cleared her throat and turned back to Jane. "I worked very hard for that

promotion and I think I'm good at my job."

"Worked hard? What does that mean? Put in a lot of hours?"

"I guess you could say that."

"So your career is your priority. No time for cooking and cleaning then I suppose. Those things would be too mundane for someone like you. They would be too...tedious." Her tone sliced across Lee's nerves like a bread knife.

"I do a little bit of cooking, but I confess that I hired a cleaning service a while back."

"A little bit of cooking? What does that mean? Frying eggs and boiling water, or—"

"No." Lee felt a little heat begin to creep into her cheeks. "My repertoire is a bit broader than that."

"Oh? What are your specialties?"

"I make a pretty good lasagna."

Jane scowled. "My cats could make a *pretty good* lasagna."

"Oh really?" retorted Lee. "Can they whip up a million dollar marketing campaign and present it to a room full of skeptical and stingy executives, all the while maintaining decorum and not sweating through a half-inch layer of deodorant? Can they manage a half dozen cranky and extremely temperamental artistic personnel, keep them from killing each other, all the while coaxing them to continue turning out one stunning promotional plan after another?"

Jane opened her mouth to speak but Lee wasn't finished. "I don't measure my self-worth by how well I can scrub toilets, or how many kinds of canapés I can whip up for a dinner party for thirty, Mrs. McCrea. I hold myself up to a standard of good work ethics, honesty and creativity. I don't think that you understand how—"

"How long until dinner's ready?" interrupted Carter, his tone subtle but commanding.

Jane turned a hard glare on her son. "A good twenty minutes yet."

Lee stepped forward, thankful for the change in topic and wondering what the hell had gotten into her to goad the woman that way. "We could set the table. My mother did teach me that much."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's been set for hours."

Lee glanced at the large maple table on the far side of the room. It was bare.

"In the dining room," said Jane, her exasperation apparent. "Of course."

"Oh."

"Well then," said Carter, "we've got plenty of time for me to give Lee a tour of the house that she so admires. I'll be sure to point out all your decorating triumphs." He reached for Lee's hand, but she hesitated.

“Shouldn’t we help with the meal?”

“Are you kidding? Mom wouldn’t let us within three feet of one of her wooden spoons, let alone one of her culinary creations.” He turned a thousand watt smile on his mother. “Right Mom?”

She didn’t smile back. “Fine. Go ahead and give her that tour, but be seated in the dining room by seven. I don’t want to have to come hunting for you.”

“Yes sir!” barked Carter with a smart salute and an impertinent grin. He grabbed his wine and began to lead Lee from the room. “Seven it is.”

Lee followed him from the kitchen, across the gleaming oak floor and the thick Persian runner that lined the staircase. When they reached the second floor Carter led her down a long hallway lined with paintings.

“Hey,” she said. “Are these, like, family portraits or something? I’ve never known anyone who—”

He pulled her into a room and slammed the door behind them. She barely had time to register the fact that it was a bedroom before Carter had pressed her back against the door and begun devouring her throat.

She battled an odd combination of shock and arousal. “Carter?” she breathed. “What the hell are you doing?”

His hands were already under her shirt. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

He unsnapped her bra and began massaging her nipples. She responded in spite of herself and the next words came out on a low moan. “B-but what about the tour?”

“This is my old room.” She caught a fleeting glimpse of an enormous sleigh bed, velvet-draped windows and a stone fireplace before he undid her buttons and the shirt fell open. “How’s that?” He latched his mouth onto her breast and sucked. Hard.

“But—” He unsnapped her jeans and pushed them down past her hips. He sneaked a hand inside her panties and it felt like all the blood in her body had congealed between her thighs. “Th-that’s not much of a tour.” He worked her clit. “Oh God.”

“Fuck the tour.” He abandoned her and began working at his own jeans.

Astounded by her own level of arousal, Lee’s chest heaved with every breath. She watched in wonder as Carter dropped his jeans to his knees and his cock sprang from of his briefs.

Impossibly, she felt her desire build, but when he stepped toward her she pressed a hand to his chest. “This is crazy, Carter,” she said with a tongue that felt too thick for her mouth. “Your mother is just downstairs. If she—”

He cupped her cheeks in his palms and brought his face so close to hers that she shared his breath. “Please don’t stop me, Lee. I want you.” He kissed her, quick and hard and deep. “God, I want you. I want you like I’ve never wanted

anything.”

His erection pressed against her stomach. She felt a bead of cum trickle down her belly.

“Please.” His voice was almost pleading.

“But why?” she insisted. “Why now?”

“I don’t know.” He began peppering kisses over her cheeks, across her nose. She felt him slip her panties over her hips, down her thighs. They fell to the floor. “Seeing you take on my mother just now, the way you defended yourself...it was...” His tongue flicked at her ear. “I don’t know. You had this fire in your eyes, this...passion. Like a she-wolf or something.” He nibbled, raked his teeth down her throat. “It was a turn-on. A major turn-on.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, dug her nails into his back. She knew they should stop, but couldn’t find the resolve to make it happen. She wanted him, too, the urge so intense it seemed to well up from her soul. Basic. Primal.

“But what if she wonders where we are?”

He whispered in her ear. “We’ll just have to be quick.”

“Quick.” She rubbed herself against his cock, savoring the hardness of it. Drinking in his passion. She felt drugged, giddy. “This is risky, you know. If she —”

He grabbed her by the waist and lifted her, impaling her on his shaft like some sort of sacrificial lamb. He pressed her back against the door, the cool wood warming as the sweat from her body soaked into its pores. She said nothing more, merely opened herself to him. She wrapped her legs around his hips, clung to his shoulders, and allowed him to use her, ravage her, take her.

He lifted his face to hers and she bent her head to seal their mouths together. His lips were fevered, his tongue hot and furious. He dug his fingers into her ass, held her firm as he plunged into her. His attack was savage, fierce. Every time he thrust into her, her back rammed against the door, making it knock softly against its moorings. He tasted of wine. He smelled of desire. And sex.

She sank her fingers into his hair, hooked her ankles behind his back. She anchored herself to him as he pounded her like the surf pounds the shore. Incessant and merciless.

Her nipples grew raw as his chest hair rasped over them and sweat slicked their skin. His rhythm increased, his thrusts grew stronger. Harder.

Faster.

Because she needed to breathe she broke the kiss and let her head fall back. She was becoming tender between her thighs and where her back banged against the door. She’d probably have bruises tomorrow, but she didn’t tell him to stop. Didn’t want him to.

He was so deep he nudged her womb.

His cheek rasped against hers as he nuzzled her neck, whispering things that a week ago would have embarrassed her, even offended her. Instead they fueled her passion.

"God, you're a sweet fuck."

"Am I?" she whispered back over the rush of blood and the slap of flesh against flesh.

"Oh yeah." He nipped at her ear, hard enough to make her whimper. "And you've got the hottest, wettest pussy..." She didn't hear the rest, she was so lost in him, in what he was doing to her.

"Carter," she pleaded, her voice louder than she intended.

A delicious pressure built in her center, growing heavier with each thrust. Her breath came in short, desperate gasps, until...

He slipped a finger inside her anus and drove in hard. The added pressure was enough to send her careening over the edge.

She came in a flood of heat, light and color. She tightened her thighs around him and drew him deep, allowing her contractions to pulsate around him, milk him toward his own climax.

"Christ," he breathed, slamming her back against the door. Again. And again. "Oh...*Christ!*"

They remained there, panting and sweating as moisture trickled down the insides of Lee's thighs.

"Jesus," said Carter. "Oh Jesus."

"Is that a good curse or a bad curse?"

He answered her with a deep, reckless kiss.

"Oh," she said when she'd caught her breath. "I see."

He still didn't move.

She made herself speak. "I need to clean up."

"Bidet," he whispered. "En suite. Bathroom. Behind me."

*Of course.* She nodded and at last he withdrew, setting her feet gently on the floor.

He pulled up his jeans. "I'll go keep Mom busy. Tell her you had a feminine emergency or something."

"Fine. Great."

Lee bent down to retrieve her clothes and he reached for the doorknob. He paused and looked at her, his eyes full, as if he were about to speak. But then he only nodded and stepped out into the hall.

She stared after him, and wondered...



\* \* \* \* \*

Carter stood in the doorway to the kitchen and watched his mother. She was bustling about, adding a pinch of this, stirring that. A pan with an enormous rib roast sat steaming on the island under the watchful and calculating gaze of a sleek silver tabby. The cat looked ready to pounce and feast, but either it was too well-fed or too afraid of its mistress's wrath to breach the boundaries of its training.

God, he hated those cats. But more than that he hated the way his mother doted over them. He supposed it was to be expected. After all, who wouldn't need a little company, rattling around in an old mausoleum like this one? He knew he shouldn't begrudge his mother that little bit of companionship, but part of him grieved the fact that she'd chosen to seek it in the form of soft fur and claws rather than human company. Or better yet, male company.

Her obsession with the animals also added to her aura of eccentricity. If she wasn't filthy rich, she would have been labeled as plain old batty. A nutty old lady with a house full of cats.

"You just going to stand there staring?" she asked. "Or are you going to talk to your mother?"

"I could carve the roast."

"It's still resting."

"Why? Tough aerobics class with the potatoes?"

She stopped what she was doing and turned to glare at him. "That *means* that the juices need time to be reabsorbed into the meat." Her jaw clenched. "You know that."

He sighed, walked over to the island and pulled out a stool. "Lee will be down in a minute. She had some...woman stuff to look after."

His mother laid down her spoon and studied him as she wiped her hands on a dishtowel. "What the hell are you doing, Carter?"

He arched his eyebrows at the uncharacteristic use of profanity. And then, for one hideous moment, he wondered if she knew. Could she have heard something? But he dismissed that notion as ludicrous. The walls were a foot thick and the floors made of solid oak and maple. The Rolling Stones could put on a concert in his room and she'd never hear a thing. He relaxed.

"I'm waiting for dinner. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"I mean," she said through clenched, perfectly polished teeth, "what are you doing with her?" She tilted her chin toward the door.

"I thought that was obvious." Actually he hoped it wasn't. He had to stifle an impertinent grin.

"To me it's obvious that you're acting out, screwing around to get back at Sylvia for breaking it off with you."

"Oh ho!" He clapped his hands together. "We're making progress. At least you finally admit that Sylvia was the one who dumped *me*."

She struck an indignant pose. "I never doubted that."

"Right. Whatever." He plucked a loose bit of meat off the roast and popped it into his mouth. "And I'm not just trying to get back at Sylvia. Lee is pretty and strong and funny and smart and...I like her." He chewed slowly, swallowed, considered that. "A lot."

"Just so long as you understand what you're getting into."

He blinked, trying to slough off the disturbing thoughts and images that had been crowding his mind. They'd been recurring with alarming frequency the last couple of days. Images of waking up beside Lee in the morning, sharing breakfast, trudging off to work together. Coming home together. Being together. Always. Thoughts of how he'd feel if he couldn't see her anymore and the horrible ache that set up in his chest.

Upstairs, just a few moments ago, he'd come so close to saying it—the big "L" word, the big commitment. It would have meant acknowledging it, both to Lee and to himself. But God, he wasn't ready for that yet. He'd just gotten his heart trampled on. He'd barely had time to pick it up and dust it off. Was he really ready to stick it to the wall and paint a target on it again? Already?

He had the odd sensation that Lee had the power to hurt him badly, perhaps more so than Sylvia. Definitely more so. He felt more vulnerable with Lee, more...exposed. And that scared him.

No. It terrified him.

"Carter?" His mother had crossed the kitchen. She stood mere inches from him, and he could smell the Chanel No. 5 she always wore. "Did you hear me?"

"What? Uh...no. Sorry."

"You need to understand what you're getting into. You had better face the facts."

"Facts? What facts?"

His mother shook her head, her expression suddenly sympathetic. "The fact that the woman upstairs is only interested in one thing."

"My body?"

To his astonishment his mother chuckled, laid her hand on his arm. "Well, okay. Two things."

"Oh? And what's the other thing?"

"Oh Carter. Haven't you learned? Have you forgotten already?"

"She's not interested in my money, Mom. She doesn't even know I have any. Why the hell would I be working down at TNBC if I had a multimillion dollar trust fund?"

She stepped back, dropped her hand to her side. "Why indeed?"

"I'm not going there again, Mom. We've been through that." *And how.* The uproar that ensued after he'd announced his intention to leave home, rent his own apartment and actually get a job had been a scene of rare and colorful fury, and not one he liked to revisit.

He'd needed to assert his independence and prove to himself that he could make it in the world without the security blanket that millions of dollars of old family money afforded. Such a concept had been beyond her and she'd viewed it as nothing short of lunacy. He'd come crawling back, she'd predicted. The prodigal son returning home in tatters.

Well he'd proved her wrong. And while some might argue that he'd always known he had that safety net strung up a few feet off the ground, and the risk hadn't really been that great, to him it had meant something. It had meant everything.

He squared his shoulders and concluded, "And Lee is *not* interested in money. She's just not like that."

"For God's sake, Carter, everyone's interested in money. Why would she be so driven in her career if she wasn't interested in accumulating money, and lots of it?"

He licked his lips and racked his brain for a response. She had a point, and yet... "Like I said, she doesn't know about it. This house was a complete shock to her. She had no idea."

"Don't you remember Daphne?"

His spine stiffened. "She's nothing like Daphne."

His mother ignored him. "Daphne played you for the fool, remember? She had you so convinced that she knew nothing of your family. She told you she loved you because you were so smart and funny, and because you were on the university volleyball team, and all the while she'd done her research. If it hadn't been for my figuring out her little scheme you might be paying alimony even now."

He slumped against the island. "Like I said, Lee's not like that."

"Uh huh. Maybe. But you don't really know that, do you? You'll never really know."

He threw up his arms in exasperation. "Well then I'll never fall in love, because I'll never be able to trust anyone!"

She moved in again, her stance intimate, solicitous. "You could trust Sylvia."

"Why? Because she comes from money too or because she screwed me over?"

That stopped her, but only for a moment. "She broke up with you to wake you up, honey. She was getting tired of waiting for you to make up your mind."

He traced a circle on the island. "I was going to get around to it. Eventually." Then he snapped his gaze to hers. "Wait a minute. What do you mean? How could you know that?"

"I know Sylvia. I've known her since she was a little girl. I wouldn't have set you two up if I hadn't. And because I know her, I know she was still head over heels for you when she broke it off. Besides," she shrugged, "it's what I would have done."

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. She was confusing him. Reminders of Daphne had been painful. He'd been so sure, fallen so hard.

If what his mother said was true then what Sylvia had done was despicable. She'd been devious and manipulative. But...she'd also been in love with him. She wanted him for him, nothing else. Of that he had no doubt.

"You should at least call her," persisted his mother. "Talk to her before you write her off completely."

"I don't know."

She stroked his hair, and for the first time in years she was his mother again. Not the woman who nagged and whined that he didn't call her enough or that he was wasting his life down at that silly job, but the woman who had kissed his cuts and tucked him in at night. "Just talk to her. What's the harm in talking to her?"

"But Lee..."

"You've been dating Lee for what? A week? You knew Sylvia for three years. Don't you owe her one more conversation? Don't you owe her that much?"

"I guess." It made sense. Should he really throw that away so easily? He had loved her once.

He blinked.

Hadn't he?

"So you'll call her? Talk things through?"

He was beginning to think he loved Lee too, but it was different somehow. If only he could figure out how.

"Carter?"

"Mm," he said, trying to placate her while he sorted through his own confusion. "Maybe." He drummed his fingers on the countertop and gradually the fog seeped away. And then, in a single blinding flash, he saw it all clearly. At last he understood. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I'll call her." They did have something to talk about. Something very important and it couldn't wait. It couldn't wait one more day.

"Good." His mother stepped back, her tone now clipped and bright. "Now

let's get this dinner over with so that—"

The slam of the front door echoed through the cavernous house like a klaxon.

"Lee!" Carter vaulted off the stool and dashed for the door, cursing himself. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen, dammit. He'd planned to take her upstairs and very gently explain everything. Help her to understand where he'd come from and why he'd changed his life. That knowledge was supposed to help her get through the Spanish Inquisition-style supper that his mother typically conducted.

At least that had been the plan. That was what the tour ruse had been about, but of course he'd let his hormones run away with him. As usual he'd let his heart rule his head and he'd let himself be distracted from what was important.

In other words, he'd screwed up. Again.

Still muttering four-letter words, he wrenched the door open just in time to see Lee slam the car door and rev the engine. He glanced at the row of hooks beside the closet and confirmed that the key he'd hung there when they arrived was missing. "Dammit!" He rushed outside but the car was already screaming out the driveway.

"Lee!" he screamed again. But it was no use. He watched helplessly as his little Honda Civic disappeared around a bend in the road.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee shot through a traffic light, took a hard right and zipped up the on-ramp. Her hands wrapped around the wheel in a death grip, she swung into the stream of traffic and gunned the engine. Traffic on the Gardiner Expressway was light tonight and after a few kilometers of weaving and merging she hit a stretch of open highway. She intended to take advantage of it.

Her foot flattened the accelerator and the peppy little Civic darted forward as the tachometer edged toward red. The wind screamed through her hair and the radio screamed in her ears, but she heard none of it.

*Liar!*

He'd lied to her, over and over, in so many ways. On so many levels.

He was rich. Filthy, stinking rich! He had a multimillion dollar trust fund, and he hadn't thought to mention that? Hadn't trusted her with it? Well, okay, so he hadn't exactly told her he was poor and she'd never outright asked him if he was loaded, but it was a lie just the same. A lie of omission.

And Sylvia was rich, too. Somehow that had never come up. Not that it mattered, Lee supposed. She didn't care if that pretty, petite little blonde slept on

a mattress made of money, it was irrelevant to Lee. As of this moment, she was done with Sylvia and Carter. She wanted nothing to do with either of them.

She wouldn't even think about them.

She passed a lumbering transport truck, and the speedometer edged up another notch.

A Civic? He had millions of dollars in the bank and he was driving a fucking little Civic? What was up with that? Not to mention the job. Why was he working at TNBC? Was this his idea of slumming it? Mingling with the masses? He should be cruising the Mediterranean, or jetting across Europe, sipping champagne and licking caviar from his finely manicured fingers. What was he doing here? Why was he fiddling with computers, kowtowing to men like Daniels? And making Lee love him?

*Shit!*

She lifted a hand to scrub the dampness from her cheeks. He didn't deserve her tears. Hell, he didn't deserve her. She was just going to forget about him, dammit. Glancing at the speedometer, she decided she wasn't going to get herself killed over him either.

She eased off and took the next exit off the highway. Maybe a little city driving would cool her off, and maybe she'd find somewhere to have a drink. Alone.

She pulled up to a red light and slipped the gear shift into neutral.

*Sylvia.*

So he was going to talk to her, maybe try to work things out. Well, bully for him. Bully for both of them. She wished him luck. Actually she wished him a slow torturous death in a swamp somewhere in Bolivia.

What had he wanted from Lee anyway? Why had he come onto her that first day? What had been his real agenda?

Sylvia had told him that he wasn't spontaneous enough, not exciting enough. Well, he'd certainly conquered that little obstacle, hadn't he? Maybe he'd just needed Lee for practice. He'd needed to work on his technique, his spur-of-the-moment screwing skills. A little "love on the edge" prelude for his kinky reunion with the filthy-stinking-rich love of his life.

*Damn him!*

She heard the honking and suddenly noticed that the light was green. She gunned it and lurched forward. So what if she abused his car? He could afford another one. Hell, he could afford a whole fleet of them.

She took a left and then a right, and then in a flash she realized where she was. She'd inadvertently stumbled into Tammy's neighborhood.

*Perfect.*

Lee was pretty sure Tammy kept a decent stock of brandy in her cupboard.

Maybe a gallon or so of strong booze and a friendly ear was exactly what Lee needed.

In fact she was sure of it.

## Chapter Eleven

Carter shrugged his shoulders and tugged at his jacket. It had been years since he'd worn Armani, and he was just now remembering why. No matter how finely tailored or how well-cut the material, it had never felt right. It had never seemed to *fit*.

But he'd worn it tonight because for this little encounter he'd wanted to feel in control, imposing. Powerful. And there was no denying Armani screamed wealth and power.

He stared at the door to apartment 24A, the penthouse at Lakeside Suites Luxury Condominiums. He took a deep breath and rang the bell.

It took all of five seconds for the door to swing open and a delicate little body to plaster itself against him. Her arms wrapped around him with the strength of a python, and a mini-tide of tears instantly soaked his lapel.

Confused, he returned the hug and patted her back sympathetically.

"Oh Carter," she sobbed. "Thank God. I thought I'd lost you."

"Uh..." *Pat, pat, pat.* "I just needed to talk to you." He had to practically lift her feet from the floor in his efforts to get into her apartment and close the door.

"I'm so sorry I did that to you," she continued, arms still latched around him. "I didn't want to break up with you, I really didn't. But she said it was the only way." At last she pulled away and gazed up at him with mascara-stained eyes. "And now you're back. I'm so glad you're back."

"She?" he asked, but then of course he knew. It had to have been his mother's idea. Suddenly it all made sense.

Sylvia didn't seem to have heard him. She had moved into her expansive living room with the cathedral ceiling and the white leather furniture. She stood over her glass and marble coffee table, a champagne flute in each hand. A bottle of bubbly was chilling in a silver ice bucket.

"I thought we should celebrate," she said, beaming. "You know how I love any excuse for champagne. I broke it out the moment you called, but I thought I'd let you have the honor of popping the cork."

Carter took a deep breath and moved forward. This was going to be harder than he thought.

She settled herself on the couch. "You look nice, Carter," she said, still clutching the flutes. "You don't wear that suit enough. It really flatters you."

Carter sat down beside her. He made no move to reach for the bottle.



"You should wear it to the wedding next month. You know my Aunt Deirdre is getting married on the fourteenth. It's her fifth time, but she doesn't believe in scrimping. It's going to be amazing, I'm sure. Maybe you wouldn't mind dusting off the Jag for the occasion." She smiled brightly. "Please?"

He puffed out a breath, already sorry he'd let her go on so long. "Sylvia..."

"Yes?"

"I'm not here to rekindle our relationship."

"What do you mean? Of course you are. Your mother called just a little before you did, to tell me what you said, and that I should expect you."

He tamped down his anger at his mother. He'd explained things to her, but he must have been too late. She had already called Sylvia, damn it.

"No, Sylvia. That's not why I'm here. My mother jumped to conclusions when I told her I was coming to see you, and I'm sorry about that."

"Then..." Dammit, her eyes were already starting to fill. "Then why are you here?"

"I came to explain some things. I came to apologize, and —"

"Apologize?"

"— to say goodbye."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee stared up at the pristine white façade that stretched almost to the stars. Floodlights illuminated the high rise, the fountains and the gardens. The place smelled of roses, stank of wealth.

"Good God," she said. "It's like Cinderella's castle. Sylvia lives in a fairytale!" She put her hand on the door latch but Tammy gripped her wrist and held her back.

"I really don't think this is a good idea, Lee." Tammy let go and placed her hands back on the steering wheel. Lee had begged and pleaded with her until she'd relented and agreed to drive Lee to Sylvia's. They'd taken Carter's car. It only seemed fair.

"Why?" asked Lee. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, for one thing, you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk! I'm just...highly motivated." Her vision was swimming and her head throbbed, but she wasn't about to let that stop her. She needed to tear a strip off someone, and Sylvia seemed like a damn good candidate.

"You had four brandies," insisted Tammy. "You're drunk and you're not thinking clearly."

"Oh, I'm thinking clearly enough. I know who's to blame for all this, and it sure as hell isn't me."

"Is Sylvia really to blame? How is this her fault?"

"She broke up with him and... It just is, that's all. It's hers *and* Carter's faults." She paused, uncertain of her grammar. "Fault? Whatever." It may be Carter's fault, but at that moment she couldn't face him, couldn't even think about it. So Sylvia was a good substitute, a good target. Or at the very least, she was the best available.

"I just think you're angry at the wrong person, that's all. You need to talk to Carter, not Sylvia. You really need to sort this out with him."

"I will." Lee sniffled, swiped a hand across her nose. "Later. But first I—"

She caught her breath, stared, and launched out of the car. "Damn him!" she screamed, staring at the fiery red Jaguar in a visitor parking spot.

"What?" asked Tammy who had joined her on the asphalt. "What's wrong?"

"A Jaguar. He owns a goddamn Jag!"

"What? Who owns a Jag? What are you talking about?"

"Carter." Lee pointed at the license plate. *CARTER 21*. "Carter's here!" She turned watery eyes on Tammy. "He didn't waste any time, did he? He's probably up there right now, hands all over her, getting ready for a good make-up fuck. Well, we'll just see about that."

She stomped off, struggling to keep the undulating ground under her feet. She tripped over a stone that had jumped into her path, and would have hit the pavement if not for the hand that caught her elbow.

"Thanks," she muttered, then glanced up at her friend. "Come up with me."

Tammy's eyes went wide. "Oh. No. I couldn't."

"Please!" Lee gripped her T-shirt. "You're right. I'm not real steady, but I need to get up there. Just get me to the door." She swiped at another batch of tears that had breached her defenses. "You're my friend, Tammy. Please? Just get me that far."

Tammy let out a long, low groan and then muttered something that Lee couldn't quite make out.

"You're determined to do this."

Lee nodded.

"Okay," she said at last. "But just to the door."

"Right." Lee surged forward. "Just to the door."

Two minutes later Lee stood outside the door to unit 24A. They'd easily bypassed the secure entrance by sneaking in when a resident on his way out had thoughtfully held the door for them. The elevator had whisked them to the penthouse floor and now, almost too quickly, Lee was about to face her nemesis.

Bolstered by booze and the solid feel of her friend's hand in hers, she rang the bell.

Tammy tugged at her hand. "Let me go, Lee. I've gotta go."

But Lee hung on, had no intention of letting go. If she'd ever needed her friend, it was now. A moment later the door swung open, and the vision before her took her breath away.

"Lee?" said Carter as all the color leeches from his face. "What are you doing here?"

God, he looked amazing, decked out in Armani and Gucci and God knew what else. The dark suit hugged his shoulders and accentuated a narrow waist and firm stomach. His hair was carefully tousled and gelled to look like he'd just tumbled out of bed, his jaw shadowed by the day's growth of beard. He looked like he'd stepped directly out of the pages of *People Magazine*. Or perhaps *Lifestyles of the Rich and Richer*. Either way it just made her hate him more.

"Surprised, Carter?" she slurred. "Did I *interrupt* something?"

"Where's Sylvia?" asked Tammy from beside her.

Carter shifted his gaze to Tammy, blinking as he absorbed her presence. "Locked herself in the bathroom," he said. "I just hope she doesn't slit her wrists or something."

"Oh," said Tammy softly.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" sneered Lee. "Or are you too cowardly to face me?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Carter a little too quickly. "Come in. Maybe you can help me talk her out of the bathroom." He stepped a little further into the room, leading them forward.

Lee dragged Tammy with her, still unwilling to let go of that supportive hand.

"Watch your step. I tried to clean up the glass but I may have missed some."

"Glass?" Lee blinked to clear her vision.

"Yeah. When Sylvia gets upset she sometimes...throws things."

But Lee barely heard him because just then she caught sight of the champagne bottle chilling on the coffee table. "Oh," she nodded, understanding. "So we interrupted your little reunion celebration, did we? Well, I'll just say my piece and be on my way. If you think—"

She stopped when she felt Carter's hands gripping her shoulders. "Lee, this isn't what you think."

"Oh, really? It never is, is it? Nothing is ever what it seems."

He frowned. "Are you drunk?" Then he looked to Tammy. "Is she?"

"Yup. Plastered."

"I'm not drunk," protested Lee. "I'm just—"

"Highly motivated," finished Tammy. "I know."

Carter reached up to stroke her cheek. She wanted to jerk away, but his other hand held her firm. Or was it his eyes? It was so hard to know. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you through this."

"What does that mean? You meant to let me down easy, is that it? Or were you just hoping for one last practice session before you dumped me and rushed back to dear, sweet Sylvia?"

He stared at her, his eyes wide with confusion. Oh, he was good. Very convincing.

"Practice session? What does that mean?"

"You know..." She waved her hand vaguely in the air. "Sylvia wanted you to be more spontaneous, so you needed me to work on your technique."

His mouth dropped open. "Jesus Christ. Is that what you think?"

"Don't bother denying it. I figured it all out. It all makes perfect—"

"Lee, I love you."

The words slammed into her like a wall of water. "Wh-what?"

"You heard me. I love you. I love you. If I say it a million times will it be enough?"

"You *love* me?"

"Yes. Isn't that what I said?"

"B-but...You're telling me this, *now*?"

"I just figured it out a few hours ago, while I was talking to my mother. Suddenly it all made sense."

She wanted to believe him, God, how she wanted to. "But *now*?"

"I needed to get your attention."

She saw him cast a quick glance at Tammy. And out of the corner of her eye Lee thought she saw tears glistening on her friend's cheeks.

"Well, it worked. I just don't understand why—"

"I came to tell Sylvia it was over. For good. And I needed to explain to her why I stayed with her for as long as I did." He whisked a thumb across her cheek, and then stepped away. "It was a mistake, and it took being with you to wake me up to that fact."

A little piece of her fortress wall crumbled. "It did?"

"I wasn't *practicing* with you, Lee. It's more like I was practicing with Sylvia, and you were my finale."

"Oh, Carter." She felt the tears pressing at the backs of her eyes. She wanted to knock down all the walls, fall into his arms, give herself over to him and let his

words and his kisses wash away the doubts, but she fought it. She'd been fooled before.

"I couldn't be spontaneous with Sylvia because I knew it wasn't right. I think I was always holding back, even though I wasn't really aware of it. I wasn't completely comfortable, so never let myself...go. With you, I felt so free. Like you said in your office that day, I'm different with you. It was easy to give of myself, to give over everything, and that was why it was so easy to shed my inhibitions."

She hugged herself, suddenly feeling the chill of the air conditioned atmosphere, and aching for a pair of warm arms to chase it away. "But if it wasn't right with her, why did you stay with her for three years? Why did you stay with her at all?"

"Because I was *easy*."

They both whirled around at the sound of Sylvia's voice. She stood there with mascara-stained cheeks and bedraggled hair, in a dress that looked like she'd used it for a tissue, and she still looked gorgeous.

*There is no God.*

Sylvia sniffled. "No man has ever called me that before in my life."

"You didn't let me finish," said Carter. "I didn't mean that like you think I did."

But then Sylvia smiled, a thin watery smile, but a smile nevertheless. "That's okay, Carter. It took a few broken champagne flutes and a good solid crying jag in the washroom, but I finally figured out what you were trying to say."

"And what was that?" asked Lee, doing her best to sound aloof while inside her heart was thundering.

Sylvia moved over and rested a hand on Carter's forearm, the gesture one of understanding rather than possessiveness. "A relationship with me was very... uncomplicated. He didn't have to worry about whether I was interested in his trust fund, or whether his mother was going to try to slit my throat in my sleep."

Carter chuckled. "Yeah. You've pretty much got it."

"We come from the same background," continued Sylvia, "We know all the same people and got invited to all the same parties."

Carter's gaze rested on Sylvia. "A relationship with Sylvia was simple and easy and...secure. She was a piece of my old life that I needed to hold onto. Like a favorite teddy bear." He turned to look at Lee. "I think I outgrew that need a long time ago, but I didn't realize it. Or didn't want to admit it, or...whatever."

He framed Lee's cheeks in his hands and smiled. "I think I needed more of a challenge. And I think I found it."

Lee found herself in his arms then, his chest strong and hard against her cheek, his arms wrapped firmly around her. "We still have things to talk about,

you know," she said between snuffles. "You still have some things to answer for."

He stroked her back, nuzzled her hair. "I know, and I'm sorry. I'll tell you whatever you want to know. I'll explain everything."

Sylvia cleared her throat. "Uh, if you guys don't mind, I may have come to terms with some things, but this is a bit much, even for me."

Lee pulled away and smiling, wiped the fresh tears from her eyes. "Right. Maybe Tammy wouldn't mind taking your car back to—"

"Tammy?" Sylvia knit her brows. "Who's Tammy?"

"My friend." Lee turned, intending to introduce Tammy to Sylvia. But all she found was an empty room. "What the—"

"Where'd she go?" asked Carter. "She was here a second ago."

And then they heard the crunch of glass and a muffled curse.

"Tammy?" Lee strained her eyes and just made out a chubby silhouette behind the curtain. "What are you doing?"

Very slowly, Tammy stepped away from the window, and they all cringed at the shriek of outrage that erupted from Sylvia's delicate throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here's another ice pack." Carter handed it to Lee, who exchanged it for the one that had grown warm on Tammy's eye.

Carter sat on the far side of the room, determined to observe the two friends and not interfere. He was afraid that if he got too close to Tammy he'd be unable to control his own urge to pummel her. Either that or hug her. He hadn't quite made up his mind yet.

"Am I gonna have a shiner?" asked Tammy. "That Sylvia packs quite a wallop."

Lee didn't answer her. Instead she sipped from the coffee that Carter had bought for her on their way back to Tammy's. She popped the last Tylenol.

"Lee?" Tammy's voice was tentative. "Are you still speaking to me?"

"Why did you do it? What were you thinking?"

Tammy sighed, closed her eyes. "Do you know how hard it was listening to you pine over him all the time? I could have put up with it, you know, if I hadn't been so sure you two were right for each other." She opened her good eye and shrugged. "I decided to help things along because I knew for damn sure that neither of you would figure things out."

"So you befriended Sylvia." Lee clutched the paper coffee cup between her palms.

"Yeah. It took a couple of months, but it wasn't too hard to get her to trust me. And she never suspected my connection to you."

"So you manipulated her into breaking it off with Carter."

"Mm hmm. It really wasn't that hard to convince her. She was desperate, looking for any way to steer Carter towards buying her a diamond."

"And then you told her to threaten me with going to Daniels?" Lee's voice had edged up a notch and Carter had to curb the urge to go to her and wrap an arm around her shoulders. She needed to deal with Tammy on her own.

Lee was incredulous. "What could possibly be the advantage in that?"

"You told me that you and Carter still needed to talk about some things. You said Sylvia was a non-issue, but I knew differently. You needed a kick in the pants to get you to confront him about Sylvia and..." She shifted the ice pack and winced. "And other things."

"So you sent her to threaten me?"

"I know you, Lee. I knew you'd never back down, especially in the face of a threat like that one. I figured you'd see the threat about Daniels, as well as Sylvia's obvious interest in Carter, as a challenge to be met and overcome. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

Lee stared at Tammy for a moment and then slumped back in her chair. She tossed a weary look at Carter. "She's right, you know. That was exactly how I saw it."

"Besides," Tammy removed the ice pack and struggled to a seated position, "there was no real threat. I was the eyewitness and I never would have backed her up."

"You saw us?"

Tammy blushed. "Yeah. I knew something was up and followed you after you stormed out of your office that day. When you ran into Carter I couldn't tear myself away."

"What about Carter's mother?"

"That was all Sylvia's idea. I had a mother-in-law once. I never would have tossed you into that den of lions."

Lee closed her eyes and Carter took that as his cue. "Come on, Lee. It's late. Time to go."

Tammy turned a worried gaze his way. "Do you hate me?"

"I'm still on the fence about that one." He walked over to Lee and grasped Lee's hand, urged her to stand.

Tammy accepted that in silence. "How about you, Lee?"

Lee's smile was thin. "I probably should, but I don't. You were doing it for me. How could I hate you for that?"

"I just wanted you guys to be happy. Both of you."

Lee bent down and kissed Tammy's forehead. "We'll talk at work. Come back when you don't need to hide behind sunglasses."

"I'll do that."

Carter slipped an arm around Lee's waist and guided her firmly toward the door. They stepped out into a clear summer night, the sky ablaze with a billion points of light. They paused on the step, enjoying the caress of the breeze and the simple pleasure of being together. Her body felt so delicate, so fragile. How was it that she was so strong?

"That's a beautiful car," said Lee suddenly, eyeing his Jag. "If you have that, why do you drive a Civic?"

"The Jag was a gift from my father for my twenty-first birthday." He turned his face to hers. "The Civic I paid for myself with my earnings from TNBC."

He was startled to feel the gentle touch of her fingers on his cheek. "That's important to you, isn't it? Making it on your own."

"Yeah. I mean, I'm not stupid. I have no intention of renouncing my inheritance. But I had to make sure I *could*, you know? Or else I'd always wonder. I'd always doubt myself." Her thumb stroked his lips and he felt the need to add, "I'm sorry I wasn't up front about who I was. But I needed you to see me without the curtain of money between us. I needed you to see me clearly. Can you understand?"

She drew him down to her for a long, sweet kiss, the tenderness of it slicing through to his core. It made his knees weak and his gut lift. And he knew instinctively that she did. She understood.

She broke away first and dropped her hand from his cheek. "So what now, my knight-in-a-shiny-Jaguar? Are you taking me home?"

"Oh no," he said, leading her forward. "I have something else planned for you." He opened the car door and helped her inside. When she was safely settled he rounded the car and slipped into the driver's seat.

He grinned at her. "Something really, really special."



## Chapter Twelve

Carter led her through the lobby of the Royal York Hotel. Her feet alternately padded across plush carpeting and clipped across polished marble. Crystal chandeliers had been dimmed for the late evening hours, and the solicitous staff spoke in hushed tones befitting the hour.

"A hotel room?" she asked as he led her to the elevator bay. "You reserved us a room?"

The polished brass doors slid open and they stepped on. Carter pushed a button and wrapped her in his arms for the long ride up. "Not just a room, my dear." He grinned. "A penthouse suite." He sealed his mouth to hers for a quick, deep kiss. "I booked it before I left my mother's."

He'd left her gasping for breath. "How very...un-spontaneous of you, Mr. McCrea."

"Exactly."

The elevator slowed and the door opened. They stepped out into a lavish elevator bay.

The bouquet of lilies on the glass and marble table was taller than Lee, its tips brushing against the crystal tear drops of the chandelier above. Gilded mirrors adorned the walls, alongside Renoir prints and brass sculptures. "Wow," she said. "I've never been up here before."

"You ain't seen nothin' yet." Carter led her down a hallway to a solid oak door at the far end. He pulled out his card key, and hesitated.

"Carter?" she asked. "What is it?"

He stared at the card clutched so tightly in his fingers. "I just need you to know that I'm not proud of myself."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

He lifted his gaze to hers. "I hate the fact that I stayed with Sylvia as long as I did. In a way I was using her, and I'm sorry for that."

"I don't think you were using her." She squeezed his hand. "I think you were...confused."

He shook his head. "I fell into a rut, and it was just too easy to stay there rather than fight my way out. It didn't help that I started dating her just after I moved out of the house and had decided to make it on my own." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I had so much new stuff to deal with. Rent and bills and bosses. It was all so strange to me, and Sylvia was familiar. She was..."

"Safe."

"Yeah." He nodded, apparently relieved. "Safe."

"And I'm not safe."

He beamed. "No. You're definitely not safe." He swiped the card and stepped inside. "At least not from my mother."

Lee's laughter caught in her throat at the vision that assaulted her eyes.

Mahogany and leather, marble and slate. Soaring ceilings and a fireplace she could stand up in. Every surface gleamed, and it smelled faintly of lavender and roses. Candles flickered everywhere and bouquets of flowers graced every corner.

She blinked in wonder. "When? How?"

"I confess," he said timidly, "I dipped into my trust fund for this one. I told them what I wanted and paid the hotel to set it up for me."

"Oh," was all she could think to say before he led her further, deeper into the fantasy.

She followed him to a set of French doors inlaid with intricate stained glass. He pushed through and they found themselves in the bedroom.

Despite the heat outside, the room was cool, and a fire crackled lazily in the small marble fireplace. Water gurgled in the Jacuzzi tub in the corner, and a bottle of champagne and two crystal flutes chilled in a bucket beside the bed.

*The bed.*

Lee stepped forward, unable to believe what her eyes were telling her.

The white satin sheets had been turned back. They'd been folded neatly at the foot of the enormous king size mattress, revealing an expanse of red. She reached out tentatively and grasped a handful of delicate petals. She lifted them to her nose and breathed deep.

"Rose petals," she whispered. "The bed is covered with rose petals."

Carter shrugged. "Pretty corny, eh?"

She closed her eyes, inexplicably battling tears. "No. Not corny at all."

She felt him kiss her eyelids, each in turn, before whispering, "Can I make love to you?" He kissed her cheeks. "Slowly and sweetly?" Her nose. "Without fear of interruption or scandal?" A whisper of lips across lips. "Can I lay you down on a bed of roses?"

She could hear the smile in his voice, so wasn't surprised to open her eyes and find his lips curved and his eyes twinkling.

She could think of nothing more profound than a slow nod.

He shrugged out of his jacket and let it fall to the floor before reaching for the buttons on her shirt. He undid one, and then another. "Do you want to bathe first?"

She shook her head.

Her shirt fell open and he traced the curve of her rib cage. "Later?"

A nod.

"Okay," he said as her skin shivered at his touch. "Whatever you want." His fingers brushed the bottom edge of her bra and then descended to explore her navel. She watched in energy-charged silence as he bent his head and kissed it. His tongue flicked at her skin, in and out of her navel, sending her tummy rolling and her heart skipping.

Heat settled in her belly and began to spread out to her limbs.

"I love this spot, right here." He'd traced a line across her belly, found her hip bones that peeked out above the waist of her low-riding jeans. And now he was nibbling on them.

"Hey," she said on a giggle. "That tickles."

"Should I stop?" His hands skimmed around and cupped her buttocks, squeezed. His tongue and teeth continued to torment her.

"Um." She sucked in a breath, struggled to form words. "I...I don't know."

"How about this?" He moved up to her breasts.

She watched as he cupped them in his palms, scraped a thumb across the lace. She felt her nipples strain beneath the fabric and wished he'd get on with it.

"Impatient?" he asked, apparently having read her mind.

"No," she lied.

His chuckle told her that he knew the truth, but she was relieved when he unsnapped the front closure and both bra and shirt fell from her shoulders.

He trailed his fingers down her chest, cupped her breasts and admired. "God, they're beautiful."

"They're small," she argued, suddenly self-conscious.

"They're perfect." And then he bent his head to sip at them. His mouth closed over each nipple in turn, sucking and teasing and playing until she thought she'd go mad.

She became aware of his scent. A spicy fragrance that made her think of tropical nights and crashing waves. She sank her fingers into his hair in a desperate attempt to anchor herself to him, and hopefully to the ground. "Carter, please."

And then she was falling.

She landed softly, sending up a colorful spray of petals and fragrance. The petals fluttered gently down, settling on the mattress, adorning her skin.

She smiled up at him. "You pushed me."

"Guilty." He was undoing his shirt. "I've always wanted to do that."

"Really?" She scooped up a handful of petals and allowed them to trickle

from her fingers. "What else have you always wanted to do?"

He gave her a hooded look. "Ask me again sometime."

He reached the last button and suddenly she realized she was neglecting her duties. She lifted a hand weakly from the mattress. "I should undress you."

"Don't worry." The shirt fell to the floor and he reached for the button on his trousers. "You'll get your turn." The pants slipped from his hips and he stepped out of them. "You'll get lots of them."

He didn't shed his briefs. She supposed he was trying to preserve the mystery.

That made her smile.

He lowered himself to the mattress, crawling over her on all fours until his face was even with hers. He straddled her, his chest hovering above her, his breath warm on her face.

She ran her fingers across the muscles of his abdomen, pleased to feel the tiny shivers that followed her touch. He smiled and then he lowered his mouth and kissed her. Gently, sweetly, at first, and then harder. His tongue took command of hers, his mouth devouring her.

His body pressed her into the mattress. He was heavy, deliciously so, and the mattress giving. She felt the hard ridge of his erection through his briefs, through her jeans, and the blood flooded to her groin. Moisture soaked her panties.

When at last he broke the kiss she was panting, her heart thudding with urgency.

She reached for the snap of her jeans. "I need to get these off."

He laughed, pushed her hands out of the way, and obliged her, tugging the snug denim down past her thighs. Her panties, however, remained and she was about to reach for them when he stopped her.

He pushed her knees apart and knelt between them, pressing his lips to the damp wedge of satin. His tongue laved at the material and she squirmed beneath him. The ache was exquisite, the pressure sweet. Torturous. She wanted more and arched her hips in search of it.

He sneaked a finger in through the leg opening and touched her clit. Just brushing across the surface, teasing her with agonizing gentleness until at last he slipped his fingers inside her, pressed her clit with his thumb, and massaged her toward climax. She ground herself against him shamelessly, the shudders racking her body and the walls of her sex contracting around his fingers.

When the waves subsided, she lay there for a moment, wasted and spent, but he had no intention of letting her rest.

He tugged and the last bit of flimsy material came away in his hand.

"Jeez," she said on a groan. "At this rate you're going to have to buy me all

new lingerie.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “No problem. I can afford it.”

He reached for the waistband of his briefs but she grabbed his wrists. “My turn.”

In a skillful movement that surprised her as much as it did him, she flipped him over onto his back and straddled him, grinding herself against his cock that strained at the cotton.

“Christ,” he groaned. “You’re killing me.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.” She bent low and pressed a kiss to his lips, her nipples brushing across the fine hair on his chest. She kissed him eagerly, hungrily, threaded her fingers through his hair and took command of him as best she could.

But then he was gone. Carter grasped her by the waist and dragged her lips away, maneuvering her forward until he could feast on her breasts.

“Hey,” she wailed. “No fair. You’re stronger.”

“Too bad,” he mumbled around a mouthful of flesh. “All’s fair, you know.”

“Oh.” She wanted to drag herself away, but the things he was doing to her sent tremors coursing down to her toes. They were tantalizing, better than champagne bubbles.

At last she found the strength to push him away and smiling, she reached for his briefs. “Lift,” she ordered, since she simply wasn’t strong enough to maneuver him.

He raised his hips as commanded and she quickly removed his briefs, added them to the pile of rumped remnants.

He moved to sit up but she launched herself at him and plowed him back onto the sheets, crushing more petals and sending up a fresh waft of fragrance.

“Hey,” he said through a grin. “I don’t think that’s—”

“All’s fair,” she said over his groan of delight. She’d begun massaging him, starting at his balls and working her way to the tip. “Remember?”

“Mmm.”

She bent low and, with only the tip of her tongue, traced a similar path. Base to tip and back again.

“Lee,” he whispered. She was pleased to see his skin flush and the sweat bead on his chest, fascinated by the bunch and flow of his abdominal muscles as he writhed beneath her.

“Yes?” she asked, tickling and scratching at his balls. “What is it?”

“I want...”

“You want what?” She took him in her mouth but only for a moment, teasing him like he’d tormented her. “Beg for it, Carter. I want you to—”

He sat up, grabbed her shoulders and threw her to the bed beside him, but to her surprise he didn't turn to face her. Instead he pulled her in, her back snug against his chest, his cock straining between her thighs.

He nibbled on the back of her neck. "Open up, babe," he breathed. "Let me in."

She parted her thighs and, his palm flattened against her stomach for leverage, he eased inside her, inch by agonizing inch, until she felt the fullness of him straining, throbbing.

She closed her eyes and pressed herself against him, drawing him deeper. His hand skimmed over her belly and parted the swollen lips of her sex. He played with her a little at first, but it didn't take long for the urgency to grow.

He massaged her in time with his thrusts, driving her up toward ecstasy and then easing off, all the while nibbling at her shoulder. Whispering in her ear.

Because she needed to do something other than grip at the sheets, she glided a hand down his arm, tracing the sinews and hard, ropy muscles until she reached his hand. She cruised over his knuckles and followed his fingers to her center.

"Oh," he ground out, his teeth scraping across her skin. "That's good."

He allowed her to lead him. With his larger, broader hand over hers, he followed her movements, learned from them as she found her own rhythm.

"Christ, that's amazing." His thrusts accelerated and she massaged harder, faster. The pressure built, slowly, steadily, in an agonizing crescendo that left her breathless and sweating. Just as she was about to peak she grabbed his hand and forced his fingers down onto her clit, grinding his hand against her as the wave broke over her.

She bucked against him and screamed out something unintelligible, pulsating against his hand, convulsing around his cock.

He gripped her tightly around her waist with one arm, pressed the flat of his other palm against her mound and drove himself into her, plundered her over and over until suddenly he stopped, shuddered. And lay still.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carter trailed a finger down Lee's arm and his breath fluttered over her skin. Despite the warmth of his body still spooned up against hers, she shivered.

"Are you cold?" asked Carter. "We could get into the Jacuzzi."

"No. Not yet." She snuggled in closer. "I'm fine."

He kissed her shoulder. "I wanted to pamper you tonight."

"The rose petals, the champagne, the hotel room..." She sighed deeply. "I

think you succeeded.”

“Oh, I’m not near done.”

“You’re not?”

“Nuh uh.” He nudged her away, scooted back off the bed. “Lie on your tummy.”

“What?”

She lifted her head to see him reach for a small gift basket that sat on the edge of the tub. “Just do it.” He flashed her a grin. “Please?”

She frowned, but decided to trust him. Who said no to a little extra pampering? She rolled over onto her belly and the moment her head touched the mattress, gave in to the urge to close her eyes. She heard the crinkle of cellophane and the pop of a cap.

“Atta girl,” cooed Carter as he climbed onto the bed and straddled her hips. “Just close your eyes, relax and let me do the work.”

“And what work would that be?”

In answer he poured a dollop of oil into the small of her back and proceeded to work it into her skin.

“Oooh.” She groaned. “A massage.”

“Do you mind?”

“Well...I suppose it’s okay. If you’ve got your heart set on it.”

“That’s big of you,” he said, chuckling. His hands cruised along her spine, his thumbs pressing deep in search of knots and tension. She groaned again when he found a particularly nasty spot between her shoulder blades and worked it. His fingers kneaded the muscle in small, tight circles until the knot unraveled, and her heart unfurled just a little bit more.

“Feel good?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

“Mmm. Good doesn’t quite cover it.” His hands moved lower, massaging her hips and the small of her back, the upper curve of her ass.

“What scent is that?” she asked, surprised that she was able to form coherent sentences. She was so relaxed, formless and shimmering—like liquid gold.

“Vanilla. I thought maybe you had enough of the floral theme.” His thighs were warm against her sides, and gradually she became aware of his cock, growing hard and thick along the crease of her ass. Her sexual awareness began to stir.

“Oh really?” she purred. “Does it *taste* like vanilla, too?”

“Hmm. That’s a good question. Why don’t I check and see?” He slid backward until he was straddling her legs and his cock nudged the juncture of her thighs. He leaned down and drew his tongue across one trembling cheek and then the other. “Mmm.”

“What does that mean?” She felt a little breathless. “Does it have a flavor?”

“I’m not sure. I think I need to add a little more to be sure.” The sheets rustled as he reached for the bottle, and then she felt him drizzle the oil over her skin and along the cleft of her ass. His touch was gentle, the oil warm and fragrant as he spread it over her skin and kneaded the muscles of her buttocks.

“You’ve got an incredible ass, Lee. Have I told you that?” His thumbs pressed into her cleft and worked the oil deeper.

“M-m-maybe.”

He brushed the outer edge of her anus and she squirmed in delight.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. “Don’t you like that?”

“Oh no. I like it, all right.”

“How about this?” He pushed her cheeks apart and she felt his tongue flick at the sensitive skin. “Just like I thought,” he breathed. “Better than vanilla ice cream.”

His cock was throbbing against her thighs, the dampness of their mutual excitement mingling on the sheets. She drew her knees in and shifted her hips upward, seeking more of whatever he was offering. In response he slid one oil-coated thumb deeply inside her ass.

She dug her fingers into the sheets, pressed her hips backwards, against his touch.

“Jesus, Lee.” He pushed his thumb deeper, touched her clit with his other hand, and she felt herself open to him. “Can I fuck you like this? Is that what you want?”

She only nodded, unable to find the strength to speak.

He withdrew his thumb, gripped her hips and lifted, maneuvering her until the tip of his cock pressed against her anus. The room echoed with the heavy rasp of their breathing as he eased himself inside her and kneaded her clit with his fingers.

“Christ.” He eased himself deeper. “Sweet Christ.”

She closed her eyes and accepted, forced herself to relax and allow her body time to adjust. The pressure was exquisite, a subtle discomfort that shifted softly toward pleasure. And beyond.

He withdrew and eased inside again, the movements soothed by oil and arousal. Each stroke of his cock, and every touch of his fingers caused the ache to grow, the need to build.

And then his hand was gone. With his cock buried deep inside her, he abandoned her clit, leaving her wet and wanting.

“Carter?” she pleaded. “What are you doing?”

She sensed him reaching for something and turned her head to see, but too



late. He touched her again and her breath turned to fire in her lungs.

"Oh God." His fingertip was vibrating against her clit. Pulsing. Throbbing.

"Oh, Jesus." No. It wasn't his finger. It was – "Ohgodohgod. *What is that?*"

His touch was merciless, relentless, and when he spoke his voice turned thick. "That basket came with all sorts of goodies. Do you approve?"

*Approve?* In response she ground herself against him, accentuating his touch, feeding the frenzy of his thrusts, and sending wetness sluicing down the insides of her thighs.

He pressed the vibrator more firmly against her clit and the rush of blood to her center was overwhelming. The climax was vibrant and powerful, the pleasure bursting through her so intense she could barely breathe.

The tightness of Carter's grip on her hip told her just how much of an effect her orgasm had on him.

He cried out, his body tensed, and a moment later they both collapsed in a damp, sated heap atop the sheets.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee lay in the Jacuzzi, head resting on the porcelain edge, eyes closed as the bubbles fizzed around her. Her wet hair was plastered to her skull and little beads of perspiration flecked her face. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips glistened with moisture.

God, she was beautiful, thought Carter. And she was all his.

Very carefully he filled a flute with champagne and set it on the ledge beside her.

"Hey you," he said, palming her breast and remembering...

"Yeah?" Her eyes fluttered open. "I must have dozed there for a minute."

He forced himself to stop touching her, leaned back and regarded her critically. "How do you feel?"

She smiled, a slow, lazy smile. "Tired. Happy. Sore. Satisfied."

"Well used?"

She nodded. "That, too."

"Would a little bubbly help?" He nodded toward the flute. "I just poured it and it's good and cold."

"Sure." She wriggled her way to an upright position and reached for the glass. "I think –"

Her hand stopped in midair. She leaned forward, squinted at the bottom of the glass. "There's something in there."

"Oh?" he asked, sipping nonchalantly from his own glass. "Is there?"

She glared at him out of the corner of her eye. "Carter? What are you up to?"

"About six-one."

"Very funny." She picked up the glass and peered down at it from the top. "What is it?"

He rolled his eyes, unable to keep the stupid grin off his face. "Find out for yourself. Sheesh. I can't do *everything*."

"It's red."

"It's no strawberry, I'll tell you that much."

She granted him a withering look before carefully pouring the contents of the glass out through her fingers. She caught the mystery object and lifted it to the light.

The little hitch in her breath tugged at his gut. God knew why, but he'd been worried. What if she didn't like it? What if—

"Oh Carter," she breathed. "It's beautiful."

The marquis-cut ruby glowed in the muted candlelight—red as angel's blood, sparkling like the stars.

"Not as beautiful as you."

She shook her head, smiled shyly. "Stop it."

"Put it on," he said. "It's yours."

"But where did you get it? What does it mean? I don't understand—"

He pressed a finger to her lips and leaned in close. "It was my grandmother's. After you left I told my mother how it was going to be, and I said if she wanted to keep me as a son she'd have to live with it. She said if I was bound and determined to have you, I may as well give you this ring. It's an heirloom. She thought it would make it...official."

Her eyes went wide. "Official? Is this an—"

"No," he said hurriedly. "I didn't mean that. I mean, I'm not ready for an engagement party and all the rest yet. Maybe soon, but not yet."

She shrugged, her confusion plain. "I don't get it."

"It's an official welcome, I suppose." He picked up the ring and slipped it onto her right ring finger. Perfect. "It's a peace offering from her. A sort of a welcome into our home, and into my life."

She lifted her hand to the light and admired.

"And it's supposed to show everyone how I feel about you."

She blinked those big brown eyes and he watched helplessly as a tear spilled out and slipped down her cheek.

"I did tell you I loved you, right?" he said. "I didn't forget that part."

“No.” She shook her head and brushed away the tears. “You didn’t forget.”

She floated over to him and wrapped herself around him, those milky breasts pressing against his chest, her thighs latched around his waist.

“But I think I did.” She planted a good, solid kiss on his lips and whispered against his cheek, “I love you, too, Carter McCrea. God knows why, but I love you, too.”

### **About the author:**

Nikki lives in a small town in Ontario, Canada. In the midst of the chaos that comes with raising three small boys, working part-time as a lab tech in a hospital blood bank, and caring for her ever-adoring husband, she dreams up her stories. Nikki's work is an eclectic combination of romance, mystery, suspense and humor with characters that have plenty of room to grow. To learn more about her and her work visit her at [www.nikkisoarde.com](http://www.nikkisoarde.com).

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